

Using a Multisectoral Approach in Tackling Child Sexual Abuse: Lessons from a Zimbabwean Case Study

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is one of the prevalent social ills that affect children in Zimbabwe. In response to the problem of child sexual abuse and the need to mitigate its adverse effects, Zimbabwe established the Victim Friendly System. The Victim Friendly System is a multisectoral forum made up of social workers, medical doctors, nurses, the police force and role players within the justice system such as magistrates, prosecutors, counsellors, educationists and psychologists. These professionals offer distinctive but complementary interventions to child survivors of child sexual abuse. This paper discusses the merits and lessons gleaned from using the Victim Friendly System as a multisectoral forum to tackle child sexual abuse. In researching this phenomenon, the study adopted a qualitative approach and data were collected from 38 participants and 4 key informants selected using theoretical and purposive sampling respectively. A total of 300 court files of child sexual abuse cases were also reviewed. The findings that emerged from the study show that a multisectoral approach to dealing with child sexual abuse provides the benefit of integrated service delivery. Improved outcomes for victims of sexual abuse as well as streamlined, effective and efficient operations for organisations that form part of the Victim Friendly System were also evident. This notwithstanding, the paper also discusses some areas of concern that could potentially affect how the Victim Friendly System multisectoral arrangement works. The lessons that emerged from the study provide some insights that are useful in informing guidelines for multisectoral arrangements.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, social work, multisectoral forum, VFS, role players, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a significant global challenge in both magnitude and consequence (Walsh et al. 2015). Zimbabwean children and their ecological environments are not spared from the social ill (Birdthistle et al. 2011; Chitereka 2012). There is consensus among many scholars (Hansen and Tavkar 2010; Mendelson and Letourneau 2015; Muridzo 2018; Stoltenborgh et al. 2011; Zollner, Fuchs, and Fegert 2014) that CSA is associated with a host of adverse short-, medium- and long-term medical, legal, psychological, behavioural and socio-economic outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, physical harm, trauma and shame.

The University of Edinburgh, Childline Zimbabwe and UNICEF Zimbabwe (2016) observe a global shift towards the adoption of multisectoral responses to CSA. Multisectoral responses to CSA use a systems approach to CSA interventions as an alternative to the more traditional “issues approach” which arguably result in fragmented responses to the negative effects of CSA. Similarly, Moylan, Lindhorst, and Tajima (2015) recognise the growing use of multisectoral responses in the provision of health, legal and emotional support to survivors of sexual violence. In the same vein, scholars such as Finkelhor (1997) note the benefits of a multisectoral approach to CSA.

Realising the potential benefits that accrue from the use of a multisectoral approach in the management of CSA, the Zimbabwean government in collaboration with civic organisations established the Victim Friendly System (VFS)¹ to provide coordinated medical, social, psychological and legal CSA prevention services (Chihambakwe and Chisaka 2016; Judicial Service Commission 2012). Muridzo, Chikadzi, and Kaseke (2018) describe the VFS as a basket of coordinated various medical, psychological and legal CSA services designed to manage CSA interventions in Zimbabwe. Based on the findings of the study that explored the phenomenon of CSA in Zimbabwe, this paper discusses advantages of utilising a multisectoral approach in the management of CSA from the viewpoint of Zimbabwe’s VFS role players. The growing argument for the adoption of using multisectoral approaches to the management of CSA and the magnitude of the problem warrant an interrogation of the operations and some of the advantages of utilising multisectoral forums, from the viewpoint of Zimbabwe’s VFS role players.

Zimbabwe’s Victim Friendly System

The Judicial Service Commission (2019) describes the VFS as a national set of measures designed to ensure the protection and active participation of sexual abuse

1 The VFS is a multisectoral forum in Zimbabwe that consists of statutory and non-statutory organisations which provide services to survivors of CSA.

and violence survivors through a multisectoral approach that offers medical, social, psychological and legal services. Recognising the need for detailed, agreed upon, collaborative, linked and specific roles, each institution and professional within the VFS are guided by an agreed upon protocol (Finkelhor 1997). Bound by a signed protocol, government departments and civil society organisations commit to the provision of participatory survivor, friendly and timely interventions. The VFS protocol thus sets out minimum standards and key procedures for relevant stakeholders to provide CSA survivor-centred services (University of Edinburgh, Childline Zimbabwe and UNICEF Zimbabwe 2016). In addition to the need to provide survivors of sexual abuse and violence with holistic friendly services, the VFS was set as a way of operationalising national, regional and international declarations and policies on the rights of vulnerable groups, specifically their right to protection from sexual violence, abuse and exploitation (Judicial Service Commission 2019).

Coordination of the VFS is done at national and regional level. The Judicial Service Commission through the office of the Chief Magistrate coordinates stakeholders and implementation of the system. Figure 1 illustrates the distinctive but complementary interventions provided by the governmental and non-governmental role players.

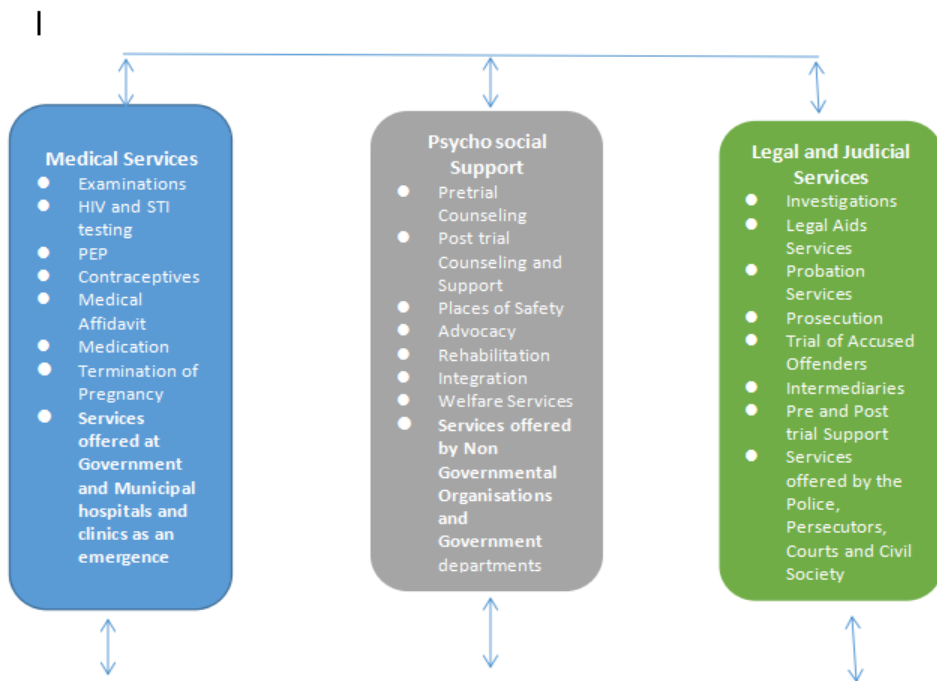


Figure 1: Victim Friendly System, Zimbabwe (Adapted from the Judicial Service Commission (2012))

Figure 1 shows the various services offered by a multiplicity of role players who are part of the VFS structure. Children can access the VFS services at any of the medical, psychosocial and legal levels above. However, given the physiological and medical risks associated with CSA, survivors are encouraged to first seek medical services at government and municipal clinics and hospitals within 72 hours of the abuse. According to Muridzo, Chikadzi, and Kaseke (2018), medical services are aimed at dealing with the physiological effects of CSA. This level reduces the heightened risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections that include HIV (Judicial Service Commission 2012). CSA survivors are eligible to access free post-exposure prophylaxis within 72 hours of the abuse. As shown above, CSA survivors also access services regarding counselling, medical examinations, contraception methods and medication. In addition, medical forensic services that include an application for termination of pregnancy and the completion of a medical affidavit are provided. The second level of services comprises psycho-social services. These services are aimed at dealing with the psychological, social and emotional effects of CSA and the treatment processes. The services offered at this level include counselling services, probation services and welfare services. The services are provided by arms of the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The third set of services is the legal and judicial services provided by the police, courts and prosecutors (Muridzo, Chikadzi, and Kaseke 2018). It is important to note that, regardless of the distinct discussion of each of the services, these services are interlinked and are cross-cutting.

Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

In order to understand and appreciate the multisectoral approach as a response to the phenomenon of CSA, this article adopts the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory sees the children as being located within a system that has various subsystems or levels all of which affect them either negatively or positively (Doyle 2012). Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests five levels within the ecology of a child, and these systems are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. From an ecological perspective, CSA and its management must be understood within a context at the various levels or subsystems within the environments that children live (Messman-Moore and Long 2003). Given the argument that CSA is multifaceted and that it affects CSA survivors and their ecological environments at different levels, multisectoral treatment teams such as the VFS intervene at different levels in the CSA survivors' ecological environments (Calaa and Sorian 2014; Muridzo 2018). Various role players work within each of the components of the system and interact with one another to produce outcomes at different levels for child survivors and their ecological environments (University of Edinburgh, Childline Zimbabwe, and UNICEF Zimbabwe 2016).

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study. This approach was deemed to be appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon and researchers are able to glean insider perspectives from the participants' interpretation of their own social world and social reality (Bryman 2012). Within the qualitative research approach, a case study design was adopted for the study.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

A sample of 38 participants was selected using theoretical sampling. Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Bryman (2016) describe theoretical sampling as a type of non-probability sampling which focuses on the collection and analysis of data based on emerging concepts and themes. Guided by the research objectives, the researchers were directed to new sources of data within the VFS on the basis of data collected and emerging themes as they responded to the research question and objective. The participants were selected from multiple organisations that form part of the VFS. These include among others, the police, courts, NGOs and the medical fraternity. Additionally, four key informants were selected using purposive sampling to provide insights into the workings of the VFS. These informants consisted of a lawyer, an academic, the coordinator of the VFS and one of the pioneers of the VFS who is a senior official within the police force. The key informants were deemed to be necessary since they are an important source of data triangulation (Patton 2002; Yin 2009).

Data Collection Method and Tools

Semi-structured interview schedules were used to guide the data collection which was done by using the interviews. The use of interviews allowed the participants to share their holistic experiences and social realities of working in multisectoral teams. The interviews were tape recorded to enable accurate recording of interviews and to obtain the actual quotations spoken by the participants (Patton 2002; Yin 2009). In addition, a document analysis was also utilised as one of the main methods of gathering data. The documents analysed included minutes of VFS quarterly meetings from 2014 to 2016 and 300 court files that were selected using systematic random sampling. The systematic random sampling was based on selecting every 10th case or file from the existing court files. The data from the documents were useful in corroborating the participants' narratives gathered from the interviews (Creswell 2014).

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a thematic content analysis. A thematic content analysis is a method of data analysis that is primarily concerned with presenting the stories and experiences voiced by the study participants as accurately and comprehensively as

possible (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012), focusing largely on reporting recurrent subject matter from the data transcriptions (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Creswell 2014).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical standards and principles of research. Approval of the study by the Ethics Committee of the University of the Witwatersrand (H15/02/20) and the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe (MRCZ/A/1969) was obtained before undertaking the research. Ethical issues such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, giving feedback to the participants and avoidance of harm were observed.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This research gleaned important lessons from the use of multisectoral approaches in the management of CSA. The lessons identified included the provision of integrated and systematically coordinated responses to CSA, pulling of resources and fostering of role player accountability. These documented strengths are good practices by the VFS that can be emulated elsewhere. The following section presents and discusses the themes that emerged from the data collection.

Multisectoral Forums allow Integrated Responses

One of the key lessons in responding to the phenomenon of CSA is that the use of a multisectoral approach provides integrated services to CSA survivors. Within the VFS, child survivors are assisted by the police, doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists and counsellors who are part of a network that provides survivors with integrated and well-coordinated services. The participants noted that the VFS forum integrates medical, legal, psychological care and preventive services for CSA survivors. Most of the participants explained that through the networking forum participating stakeholders are able to respond to the complex psychological, social, medical and legal implications of CSA on the child and the family, through an integrated approach. The multisectoral nature of the VFS is evident from the following comments by some of the participants:

Victim Friendly System is made up of the police, the judiciary, stakeholders in the protection cluster, education, health, social services. Each ring is serving a particular service. (Participant 7)

When we talk about the Victim Friendly initiative we are saying that it is a one-stop centre multisectoral service. So one stop centre means not necessarily one roof but the stakeholders are in the same geographical area [virtual one-stop centre]. (Participant 8)

The forum enables us to create synergies with strategic partners. ... We cannot work in the area of CSA alone. We need the courts, counsellors, prosecutors, donors,

policymakers and others to be effective. We discuss and try to solve policy and operational challenges. (Participant 22)

Given the documented negative physiological, psychological, legal, social and economic effects of CSA on the child and the family (Hansen and Tavkar 2011), the above narratives suggest that the VFS forum as a multisectoral response to the phenomenon of CSA results in the integration of CSA interventions. This allows for a holistic and pragmatic approach to dealing with CSA cases. Scholars such as Moylan, Lindhorst, and Tajima (2015) observe that a multisectoral approach to CSA responds to the full needs of CSA survivors. An integrated approach to CSA ensures that stakeholders provide the different interventions which target different aspects that affect the child and the family. Similarly, the provision of integrated services is consistent with arguments put forward by Chikadzi and Mafetsa (2013, 493) that,

If people from different professional backgrounds such as doctors, social workers and psychologists work together, it leads to improved outcomes for the service user, while improving the understanding that each professional will have of the complexity of social pathologies that confront service users. This sharpens attention to detail, which allows for a holistic response to helping service users. Such outcomes may not be possible when professionals work in isolation.

Finkelhor (2009) notes that before the establishment of CSA multisectoral forums in the United States of America, professionals and agencies who work with survivors acted independently thereby resulting in duplication of efforts and, in some instances, conflicts among stakeholders. Thus the integration of CSA services by stakeholders working in forums such as the VFS not only brings together different interventions but also eliminates detrimental silo culture. Brown (2012) also supports the use of multisectoral approaches and the integration of services by arguing that service users' care is improved through the introduction of multisectoral forums as professionals share expertise, professional perspectives and knowledge. To this end, the VFS is a welcome initiative that allows for the coordination of services and cooperation among professionals. This in turn benefits service users who find it easy to navigate a structured and coordinated system.

Use of Commonly Agreed upon Protocols

Findings from the study also highlighted the importance of having commonly agreed upon protocols that guide how multisectoral forums respond to the phenomenon of CSA. In this context, protocols are agreed upon minimum standards and key procedures for relevant stakeholders to provide CSA survivor-centred services (Finkelhor 1997; University of Edinburgh, Childline Zimbabwe and UNICEF Zimbabwe 2016). The VFS developed a protocol that clearly defines stakeholders' roles and responsibilities in the forum. Since its inception in the 1990s, the VFS has come up with various editions of the protocol that have been published and revised

(Muridzo 2018). The importance of protocols in multisectoral forums that deal with CSA is evident in the following narratives:

The protocol is a minimum package of what is expected of you as a stockholder in terms of your role in child protection. [Because of using the protocol] We have seen the movement of cases improve. (Participant 17)

We have a protocol that gets all the members of the system together. The protocol also outlines what the vulnerable witnesses and their relatives can expect from each and every other member [of the VFS]. (Participant 26)

The above narratives suggest that protocols reduce potential conflicts between professionals and stakeholders. At the same time, service users are able to quickly understand the complex system of the VFS. Such clarity may be important in putting clients at ease as they get to understand the complex system they will need to navigate. On the other hand, having a protocol allows stakeholders to quickly detect potential gaps in the system and attend to them with the relevant stakeholder. It is through commonly agreed protocols that stakeholders are able to clarify each other's roles, obligations and responsibilities. When stakeholders have clarity regarding their roles and operating procedures, there is a likelihood that it will lead to speedy service rendering and better quality outcomes for service users.

Multisectoral Forums Attract, Pull and Share Resources

From the participants' narratives, it was also clear that using a multisectoral approach when responding to CSA allows stakeholders to be able to attract, pull and share resources. As evidenced in the participants' narratives below, the VFS forum enables participating organisations to be able to attract and share material resources, human resources, information and experiences that can enrich their interventions. The participants noted that it was easier to attract funding as a unit than when working in isolation. The participants also explained that participating organisations are able to provide funding to each other; such funding opportunities would not ordinarily be possible without the collaborative platform. The VFS's ability to attract and pull resources is evident from the following comments by a participant:

Can I also put on the element pulling of resources ... stakeholders actually chip in with some funds or some resources. (Participant 17)

Another participant stated that:

So I could say in a way [name of organisation given] is offering financial support to partners who are already working in the districts and the provinces. If these organisations were not part of the VFS network this kind of support would not have been easier to access. (Participant 16)

Referring to the information and technological support services given to organisations that participate in the VFS, another participant mentioned that:

We are supporting those [VFS organisations], getting services and maintenance of the IT equipment and the CCTV system. We are also helping with the other expenses that they have. (Participant 26)

The above responses highlight the advantage of multisectoral approaches in pulling and attracting resources such as funding, training, intellectual resources, information and skills. Also from the above narratives, it is quite evident that when stakeholders worked together in the VFS, some smaller organisations were able to tap into the relationships which develop with bigger donor organisations that also participate in the VFS to unlock funding opportunities. On the other hand, stakeholders could also collectively contribute towards a particular cause. This pulling of resources enables the sharing of burdens which would otherwise not have been possible if stakeholders work in isolation. Furthermore, it can be said that the VFS provides a common platform for the exchange of ideas, case consultations and sharing of best practices among professionals within the VFS. Through their quarterly meetings, stakeholders are able to gather in one place to review operations, share experiences and learn from each other. This allows them to constantly work on improving the quality of services and to enhance their ability to quickly detect opportunities and respond to potential threats within the system.

Within platforms such as the VFS, vital experiences are shared and practitioners are constantly learning, gaining exposure and in turn enhancing their skills and capacity to deliver improved services. Scholars such as Chikadzi and Mafetsa (2013) support the notion that working within a multi-stakeholder framework enhances skills of staff and enables the sharing of experiences that can lead to improved service delivery.

Enhanced Stakeholder Accountability

Making stakeholders accountable to each other was also identified as another key strength of the multisectoral responses to CSA. The participants explained that working in a multisectoral forum fosters accountability and mutual oversight among stakeholders. The accountability role of the networking forum is also highlighted in files that were reviewed as part of the data collection. In one of the files reviewed in the study, a participating VFS organisation questions the decision of the court and asks for clarity. In one of the case files sampled was a letter dated 22 January 2016, from one of the VFS stakeholders challenging the judicial outcome of a rape case and asking for transcribed records; to facilitate an appeal. The letter reads as follows:

We refer to the above matter, which we have instruction from D who is the aunt of minor child X. Our client tells us that the child was sexually abused by the accused and the accused was acquitted. Our client has approached us seeking advice on the

matter. In order for us to advise her properly we kindly request the court record and the reasons for judgment. (Harare case 89)

The creation of accountability among stakeholders was also echoed by one participant who said that:

We play facilitating, monitoring and evaluation and oversight roles. We do our own review [peer review] of institutions [within the VFS]. (Participant 9)

The accountability strength was also corroborated by a key informant, who noted that,

Stakeholders within the VFS hold each other to account. (Key informant 2)

It is evident from the participants' accounts and the selected case records used that the VFS forum creates an accountability culture among the different VFS role players by making VFS players accountable and answerable to the larger group. Accountability improves service delivery and service quality as organisations are held to account for their roles, responsibilities and mandate as set out in the protocols. The adoption of peer reviewed and collegial services no doubt results in improved services offered to CSA survivors and their families, effective mitigation of CSA effects and improved client satisfactions. All stakeholders within the multi-stakeholder no doubt want to be seen to be pulling their weight given that they will have to account to fellow stakeholders. To this end, working with a multisectoral approach results in improved stakeholder accountability which may not happen when stakeholders adopt a silo approach.

The Need to Guard against Domination by one Role Player

Although the above narratives point to the importance of using a multisectoral response to CSA, the participants cautioned against the domination of multisectoral teams by a single role player. According to the participants, the VFS overemphasised legal outcomes at the expense of the equally important social, psychological and health outcomes such as short- to long-term effects of CSA and outcomes on the child. The participants pointed out that the conviction of CSA offenders is largely taken as an end in itself and not as part of the means towards the end which was the holistic intervention to CSA. The participants identified two levels of domination as domination of the agenda and domination of VFS coordination.

I think a major weakness of the Victim Friendly System is its focus on the court. It now seems like [the VFS is] being dominated by the court system. The Victim Friendly System seems to be concentrating more on the court systems which is actually the final stage of the process. When we go for the [committee] meetings we are only discussing the justice system. I think that is a major weakness of the system. (Participant 6)

Another participant said:

Stakeholders are concerned of the perpetrator being arrested and sent to jail. What about the victim [survivor]? They [stakeholders] forget about the victim. The comprehensive approach comes whereby we continue supporting the victim after the legal system has been concluded. (Participant 5)

The domination of the legal system within the VFS was supported by one of the key informants who said:

We are concentrating on the justice system CSA involve a lot than the response. The challenge is that maybe it is led by the justice system. There is need for the VFS to look at the other facets of CSA. We need to look at the other sectors. (Key informant 2)

Despite CSA being a medical, social, legal and psychological phenomenon that affects survivors and their ecological environments, the selected accounts above point to the potential pitfall of one stakeholder dominating multisectoral forums. It is clear from the above that attention was being directed towards the legal outcome to the detriment of the medical, social and psychological outcomes. Scholars such as Young (1995, 122) identifies this phenomenon of “disciplinary chauvinism” where a certain discipline dominates others within multisectoral forums. Given the importance of each part in a system, domination by one role player or discipline is more likely to compromise other equally important dimensions of a holistic response to CSA.

Conclusion and Implications for Child Sexual Abuse Responses

While the use of multisectoral forums in CSA responses have a downside, the creation of a market place of professional response and ideas to CSA seems to be beneficial given the potential negative effects of CSA. Specific considerations drawn from this study suggest a reaffirmation of the importance of multisectoral CSA interventions for survivors and non-offending family members. CSA has short- to long-term effects on survivors and their ecological environments. The findings from this study suggest that the adoption of multisectoral responses to the phenomenon of CSA potentially benefits child survivors and their ecological environments. The study demonstrates that a multisectoral approach to CSA provides for the integration of services, and allows for the pulling of resources among role players. Despite these potential benefits, the study notes the potential of role players domineering multisectoral forums. It was also learnt that the adoption of protocols helps to clarify roles and eliminate potential conflicts.

Although multisectoral responses to CSA create opportunities, they also produce challenges such as protectionism and policy dissonance. Given the finding that some role players are directly funded by member organisations, this may erode the oversight role. In addition, stakeholders may be conflicted thereby affecting their service

delivery. Given the benefits of working within a multisectoral and stakeholder approach highlighted above, it is imperative that service providers that work within the social welfare sector begin to adopt multi-stakeholder forums when working in areas that require integration of services.

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