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Child sexual abuse in Mexico City: a descriptive, qualitative study

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a major global public health concern, yet very few studies of CSA exist in poorer countries. Mexico is no exception: almost no research about CSA exists and services tackling CSA are extremely limited. This study provides a descriptive profile of unwanted sexual contact in childhood in Mexico City, and its social context, with the overall objective of raising awareness of the problem and increasing understanding of its nature. During in-depth interviews with 152 young people, 33% of women and 18% of men disclosed personal experience of CSA. Participants were not selected for experiences of CSA. Expectations about gender roles shaped their experiences, willingness to disclose in childhood, and the effects of any disclosure. Abuse was maintained by social and family relationships and notions of respectability that impeded disclosure and action to prevent and end CSA.

Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a key global public health issue. It has both immediate and long-term adverse health consequences (Djeddah, Facchin, Ranzato, & Romer, 2000), yet its magnitude has only recently begun to be understood. The World Health Organization (WHO) now recognizes child abuse as a major public health concern requiring urgent research into the social and family contexts within which abuse occurs (WHO, 1999). Who is perpetrating abuse? What types of abuse are occurring? Are there common characteristics of abuse that might point to routes for intervention? Documentation is also crucial to raise the profile of CSA among stakeholders including policy makers, professionals working with children, and among parents and children.

Research on CSA has been carried out almost exclusively in rich countries and even there, any in-depth research tends to be conducted with special groups of children or survivors where abuse has already been identified (Gold, Hughes, & Swingle, 1996; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003). We need to broaden our focus to include poorer as well as richer countries if we are to tackle this global problem adequately.

Child sexual abuse has been defined in a number of different ways, including as follows:

“the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person” (WHO, 1999, p.15)

This definition is hard to use in practice. For example, it may be difficult to determine whether or not a child is “developmentally prepared”. Some argue that any sexual contact between a child

and an adult is abusive because children cannot give meaningful consent (Olafson, 2002). This argument, however, still relies on definitions “child” and “adult”, which may vary from society to society. When perpetrators are young themselves the question becomes still more difficult.

An alternative approach is to seek more general information about sex acts in childhood. To some extent this removes the cultural bias introduced by imposition of external concepts of maturity, or of acts that are acceptable or unacceptable. This latter approach is used here and is described further below.

This paper uses qualitative techniques to explore experiences of CSA in Mexico City: a context in which very little research exists and where services to address CSA are extremely limited (Lieberman, pers. comm.-a). In Mexico, sexual intercourse with anyone under the age of 12 is considered to be rape (Article 266 of the Penal Code, Juárez & Gayet, 2000). It is extremely difficult to find any published information about CSA in Mexico, and information that exists appears in potentially unreliable newspaper reports. From these we learn, for instance, that police reports record around 42 percent of all reported sex crimes in the capital to have been against a minor (under 18) (Baltazar, 2002; Cuenca, 2002); they also estimate that only 10 to 20 percent of child abuse cases of any type are detected (Medellín, 2002), implying even fewer cases of CSA come to light.

This study aims to provide a descriptive profile of unwanted sexual contact in childhood and its social context, with the overall objective of increasing understanding of the nature of CSA in a low-income population in Mexico.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project on young people’s sexuality in low-income areas of Mexico City, and a sexual health program targeted at these areas (Mexfam’s Gente Joven program – for further detail see Marston, 2004). Methods included ethnographic research by the

author, involving 13 months of participant observation and key informant interviews in the main study site, San Lorenzo, Iztapalapa: a low-income area in the east of the capital typical of low-income areas of the city. In addition, 152 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 66 men and 86 women recruited from schools, community groups and friendship networks in various parts of the city. Inclusion criteria for these interviews were: age between 16 and 22; from a low- or very low-income household (defined by geographical location); unmarried. Interviewees were both in and out of school, and “hard to reach” groups such as gang members and those living in squatter settlements were represented. Deliberate screening for heterosexual experience meant that most (114) had had at least one experience of vaginal intercourse (61 women, 53 men). Not all interviewees were sexually experienced, because to protect confidentiality we could not publicize our recruitment criteria and some interviewees were therefore found at interview to be sexually inexperienced. Approximately half of the interviewees had been exposed to the Gente Joven program in the year before the interview. The other half had had no contact with the program. Participation in the program had no discernible effect on CSA in this study and will therefore not be discussed further here.

Male and female interviewers were recruited locally (age range 20-27) and were from similar social backgrounds to the interviewees. Confidentiality was paramount and was the major concern to the interviewees. The purpose of the study and the interview process, including confidentiality, was explained verbally and in writing, and verbal consent was obtained for the interview and for its tape recording. Written consent forms were not collected because of the interviewee concerns about confidentiality. Interviewers were selected for sensitivity and non-judgmental attitudes and underwent intensive training, much of which dealt with ethical issues, to ensure that their work was sensitive and respectful. They were closely supported and monitored throughout. Additional

measures included referrals to appropriate services for interviewers and interviewees where necessary. Further details are available from the author.

The in-depth interviews were one to four hours long, and covered topics including families, friendships, sexual experiences and knowledge. CSA was not the main focus, yet many interviewees spontaneously mentioned their experiences, or disclosed them in response to the question “In your childhood, did anyone do anything sexual to you that you didn’t want them to, or did anyone make you do anything sexual to them that you didn’t want to do?”. The question was deliberately phrased so that the interviewee could simply say “no” or “yes” if they did not wish to give more information. The in-depth approach allowed rapport building so may have helped interviewees open up to the interviewer. Thematic analysis was conducted using interview transcripts in Spanish triangulated with the participant observation data, and information from unstructured, informal interviews conducted throughout the fieldwork period. Quotations here were taken from transcripts of the recorded interviews and translated for use here by the author. The overall results were informed by all of the data sources. All names have been changed.

Results

Social context of the study

In Mexico City there is a strong patriarchal *macho* culture, where gender roles are highly polarized (Marston, 2001; Paz, 1961). In the families of the young people in the study, obedience to parents was usually emphasized, and the external appearance of respectability of a household was very important. Young people reported that sexual behavior and sexuality topics were rarely discussed openly. This was particularly true in terms of discussion with children. Many young men and women reported only learning about sexuality topics at puberty, through discussions with friends.

There is a sexual double standard where men experience social pressure to be (hetero)sexually active while common discourses of sexuality place a high value on virginity for women (Amuchástegui, 1998; Marston, in press). Consequently, women who have sexual contact before marriage risk being perceived as worthless or as *cualquieras* (anybody's). For men, on the other hand, sexual intercourse, specifically penetration, is a crucial element of masculinity. By contrast, being penetrated is shameful and emasculating (see also discussion in Szasz, 1998). Men in the study were called *maricón* (the penetrated partner in anal sex between men) when they were not being manly enough. For both men and women, control of how and when sexual contact occurs is very important: women are expected to allow sexual contact only under very specific circumstances (within a stable, loving relationship) and for men sexual contact with other men is highly stigmatized (Marston, 2001; Marston & Juarez, 2003).

Experiences of sexual abuse in childhood: a profile

Table 1 shows the numbers and proportions of interviewees reporting sexual contact in childhood. Over a quarter of the interviewees reported these experiences (women 33%, men 18%).

Table 2 shows the perpetrators, types of contact experienced, location of event, age at onset of each episode, and whether or not abuse was disclosed in childhood. In some cases, the interviewees were reluctant to be specific about their experiences and it is possible that "touching" (for example) could include a number of different sexual acts. Ages at onset of abuse episode range from 4 to 13 years. Some episodes lasted a number of years.

Most perpetrators were family members, family friends, and neighbors; the majority of the experiences occurred in "safe" spaces such as the family home, or in the homes of family friends (women 64%, men 67%). Perpetrators' ages were often unknown, but over half (55%) of the interviewees reported that the perpetrator was young (up to early 20s). Three men reported sexual contact with women.

Most interviewees said they did not disclose the abuse in childhood (women 50%, men 67%).

Gender and unwanted sexual contact in childhood

The above figures present an overview of the levels of unwanted sexual contact experienced by interviewees in this study. This section will examine the experiences in more detail.

Social constructions of gender, and consequent expectations of masculine and feminine sexual behaviors appeared to play an important role in experiences of sex abuse in childhood: as described above, women were expected to resist sexual contact and a woman's physical integrity is traditionally very important for her social value. The social requirement that women resist sex may help explain why women and not men frequently reported fear of being blamed, and feelings of guilt about their experiences.

Carmen: I had a guilty conscience because how could I have let that happen if I knew it was wrong? That sort of thing. (22 year old woman talking about experience at age 5)

Women also very frequently reported feeling ashamed and embarrassed (*pena*), and some also report feelings of inferiority because of the event:

Elizabeth: [I didn't tell my parents because] I was ashamed* [...] It was torture for me because I couldn't tell anyone and get it off my chest. [...] I felt inferior. [...] I felt lower than the other girls... (20 year old woman, virgin, talking about experience at age 8)

**pena*

Women interviewees very commonly described how they felt about the experiences and their abusers using the words "*asco*" (disgust) or "*odio*" (hatred). They also made links between their childhood experiences and subsequent sexual life. Leticia for example links CSA to her fear of sex:

Leticia: He sent my brothers to get tortillas and shut all the doors [...] he called me and sat me on his lap and afterwards he took me to the bed and tried to kiss me, and I started

to cry and his member was touching me and that made me feel really sick/disgusted* and from then on I started to be scared of sex. (15 year old woman, virgin, talking about experience at age 10)

**asco*

Even if not stated explicitly, the idea that sex abuse in childhood has damaging effects in later life was commonly implied in the women's narratives. In particular, the concept of trauma was widely invoked, so much so that some women mentioned it specifically to deny that it applied to them. Alicia for example explains:

Alicia: [...] well, look, I wasn't left traumatized but it does make me feel sick*, like disgusted* just remembering it and I thank God that nothing worse happened.

[...] Interviewer: Has it affected your relationship with your partner?

Alicia: No not at all. [...] With my boyfriend [...] I don't get scared but yes, I'm afraid because I've seen people like that who've told me "I'm afraid because so and so happened to me". How can I put it? It hasn't affected me, what happened.

[later] Interviewer: With your friend, did you tell her what happened with the man?

Alicia: You know what, no. I didn't think... I didn't think it was necessary and when I talk about it, it makes me want to cry and makes me feel really sick/disgusted*. So that's why I didn't. No. (16 year old woman, virgin, talking about experience in childhood, age not stated)

** asco*

Occasionally, the interviewees describe their experiences directly in terms of the social status of women in Mexico. For instance, Clara was sexually abused by her uncle over a period of five years from age four. She connects her experiences to the status of children in the society, and describes her feeling that her value as a person was intrinsically linked to her virginity.

Clara: These stupid values saying that a child can't do anything, that a child doesn't know anything, isn't useful for anything and doesn't have value in this society. It was one of the things that worked against me back then. If only I'd known then I could have complained and said what was happening to me. I couldn't speak out.

[...] They tell you that virginity is this or that, [they tell you] if anyone touches you, then you're dirty and worthless. So I had a lot of complexes and felt extremely guilty.

[...] I thought: if I decide that I won't let [the abuse] happen any more, then he's going to do it to my sister. I don't want it to happen to her, and anyway, *if I'm not worth anything any more and if I'm nobody, then at least let it just be me and not her.* [...] Because I believed what they told me back then, about virginity, and I thought that I wasn't a virgin, even though there hadn't been penetration. (22 year old woman, talking about experience beginning age four, emphasis added)

Not only did women report feeling diminished in value as women by experiences of CSA, but men's masculine identity appeared also to be affected by their experiences of sexual abuse by other men. During the study, young people frequently asked us for advice. Two men came to us separately and told us they were afraid that they were homosexual. Questioning revealed that they were not sexually oriented towards men, but that they had been raped by men in childhood and were concerned that their experiences defined their subsequent sexual orientation.

The men did not mention guilt or shame. They described their reactions in terms of more "masculine" responses such as anger. For instance, at age seven, Ernesto was raped by his 17 year old cousin. Ernesto's father had raped the cousin's mother and Ernesto thinks he was raped in turn as revenge for what his father had done. Unlike the women interviewees, Ernesto does not blame himself for what happened: rather he identifies both his cousin and his father as responsible.

Ernesto: It makes me angry, sad, resentful. Angry because I didn't know why it was happening and sad at the same time because he did it. And resentment because of what my father told me after I grew up [about raping Ernesto's aunt]... (21 year old man, talking about experience at age 7)

Men talking about early sexual experiences with women express themselves differently from those talking about CSA by men, speaking about the events as though they were simply a part of life, or a joke. All of the women concerned were themselves young, which may also reduce potentially negative aspects of the experience. José Antonio talks about his experiences with his aunt. He was around five and she was around 10 years old.

José Antonio: I always struggled to get them to love me, you know, my father's family have never loved me and well, I was looking for a way to please them, you know. And my aunt, well that way I thought that I was pleasing her. I don't remember it very well [...] but I did it voluntarily, so that they would appreciate me [...] I thought that it was okay and well, I tried one way or another to please them, you know, please the whole family. (19 year old man, talking about experience at around age 5)

Later in the interview, however, when the interviewer asks whether anyone has ever pressured him into sex, he says: "No – apart from my aunt". It is not clear to what extent the experiences with women were unwanted, although there is no indication that the experiences were pleasurable as such. Certainly there is more ambiguity in the stories about women perpetrators than there is in stories about men, where the experiences are exclusively described as negative.

While women's early sexual experiences were all with men and were almost universally constructed as negative in their narratives, there are rare exceptions to the blanket statements of disgust and hatred, illustrated by the case of Alejandra:

Interviewer: When you were a child, did anyone do anything or make you do anything sexual that you didn't want?

Alejandra: Er... yes, well, I can't remember whether I didn't want it as such (laughs), well, that's what I've asked myself: what if actually I wanted it? [...] One time was [when I was five] with a boy around 17 years old, and he told me if I lay down with him, just lay down with him, he would give me some balloons. And I remember that I lay down with him, you know, and he caressed me, but he didn't undress me [...] I remember afterwards when I saw him... I mean I didn't want to go alone to his house any more or anything because it was embarrassing/shameful*: not that I hadn't wanted to, that I felt bad, but that my mother might end up finding out (21 year old woman, talking about experience at age 5)

**pena*

Alejandra mentions shame, but explicitly links this to fear of her mother finding out, and not the event itself, and indeed seems to tell the story in a way more akin to the men's stories about their experiences with women: as part of life.

Barriers to reduction of child sexual abuse

Several related factors contributed to the maintenance of CSA in this setting. First, adults failed to communicate adequately with children about sexual abuse. Some of the interviewees reported that when they were children, they were not clear about what constituted appropriate or inappropriate behavior of adults. As indicated above, talk of sexuality was considered unsuitable for young children and information was often deliberately kept from them.

Cuauhtémoc: He raped me and er... well, I didn't know... it was only when I was more grown up that I started to realize that it was rape. [...] He told me lots of things, like look, you're going to like it, you should try it, that he had done it with lots of people and that

they feel nice and that it doesn't hurt and endless things like that and so well, I got excited* and to start with I said no but then I said yes for the same reason of not knowing.

(20 year old man talking about experience at age seven)

**me calentó la cabeza*

The interviewees said they often had no information about abuse, sometimes did not know where to turn for help, and in some cases that when they disclosed episodes of abuse, they were not believed.

Second, children were afraid to ask for help, either because of guilt, or fear of reprisals. In many cases the abuser threatened the child personally, or threatened to attack their siblings.

Third, disclosure was sometimes a worse option for the child than the original abuse. Very frequently, even if abuse was discovered, adults failed to act, or acted against the interests of the child. One interviewee, Xochitl, reported that there was a conspiracy of silence in the family about the abuse she suffered:

Xochitl: I used to say to my mum "I don't want to be with my uncle, because he does things to me" and she'd say "you're mad – you're a stupid girl. How could you think that of your uncle..." She never paid any attention to me, she used to make me go [to the uncle's house]. I think that my grandmother [the uncle's mother] realized. I know my grandmother realized, but it suited her not to say anything... I don't know why, but my uncle convinced my grandmother to tell my mother to let me sleep at their house [...] and he used to have me there all night. (22 year old woman talking about experience beginning at around age four)

Female victims were sometimes accused of provoking the abuse. Noemí, for example, reported that she was raped at age five by a neighbor. Her parents discovered she was bleeding from her

vagina and took her to a doctor, after which they asked her what had happened and went to speak to the rapist, a man of about 20 years old.

Noemí: My father said [to me]: “it’s your fault” [...] and well that boy, I think he made up that I’d provoked him, that I seduced him. Now that I’m a bit older I realized – at age five how could I possibly have seduced him? [...] My dad never believed me. He believed what everyone else said, and... well. I heard him tell them that it was my fault, but that my mother was more to blame because she’d left me alone and because she hadn’t known me well enough and if I was capable of doing that aged five, what could they expect of me when I got older? (18 year old woman talking about experience at age five)

Again, it appears that social demands that women resist sexual activity and retain their physical integrity played an important role in Noemí’s treatment by her family once the abuse had been discovered. The idea of girls’ responsibility for their own abuse was also manifest in some women’s reports that they were accused by family members of not disclosing earlier because they had enjoyed the abuse.

Even if the abuse was stopped for one particular child, almost no interviewees reported attempts to prosecute the offender. Noemí and of Xochitl, mentioned above, said that no action was ever taken against their abusers. The importance of maintaining an appearance of respectability was frequently cited as a reason for failure to act on reports of abuse occurring within the family:

Claudia: They didn't report him because what would people say? What would they think?

[...] No... they never did anything about it. (22 year old women, talking about experience at age five)

Sometimes, when abuse was discovered, the consequences were even worse for the victim than before. Edith reported regular sexual assaults by her uncle from age eight to age thirteen. Two years after the abuse began, another of her uncles found out what was happening:

Edith: He [the second man] said that if I didn't do the same with him, he would tell my mum, and so it happened like a chain. [...] They used to touch me, and they used to do it together. (20 year old woman talking about experience from age eight)

In some cases, adult intervention appeared to help the children concerned. Jorge reported being raped by his uncle on a number of occasions when he was five years old. His uncle's mother eventually realized what was happening.

Jorge: [My uncle's mother] reported [my uncle] to the police and [also] had him beaten up. [...] She threatened him: if he touched me again, this time, she'd get him locked up. And she threw him out of the house. (19 year old man talking about experience at age five)

In one case, it seems that simple prevention messages were effective. Carmen remembered a television advertisement when she was approached in her father's workplace by one of his colleagues at age five:

Carmen: He wanted to do something to me. He said "look carefully because I'm going to show you something" and then he told me to take my clothes off and at the time there were these adverts saying "watch out"* , so I realized, covered myself up and ran out of there...[...] I remember I ran out, shouting "they want to rape me! They want to rape me! That man wants to rape me!" I told absolutely everyone you know? Because they used to

say “tell whoever is nearest you, or who you most trust”, and well, I did it. I didn’t even know what it meant, but there you go. (16 year old woman talking about experience at age five)

**comerciales de mucho ojo*

Discussion and limitations of the study

The study is limited in that it was qualitative, restricted to low-income Mexico City, and the sample was non-random: we cannot obtain an estimate of levels of abuse in the general population. The young people interviewed were not selected for having had experiences of sexual abuse, nor were they selected from a group with a particular social “problem”. Nevertheless, a very large number of cases were reported, despite the sensitive nature of the topic, suggesting that the problem is widespread. One of the few organizations working to educate children and parents about CSA in Mexico City, Yaocíhuatl, found that typically 20 to 30 percent of mothers attending their workshops disclose having experienced such abuse in childhood that was never reported to the authorities (Lieberman, pers. comm.-b; Sánchez, 2003), a level similar to that observed in the present study. To obtain more accurate estimates, a larger, quantitative study is required.

The sensitive nature of CSA may mean that reports contain inaccuracies. For example, it has been suggested that reports of “one experience” might, in fact, refer to repeated abuse (Roberts & Taylor, 1993). No formal interview yielded reports of abuse from biological fathers, but other young people in the course of the study disclosed father-daughter abuse. It is possible that some interviewees reporting abuse by uncles, cousins, or others here may be concealing fathers’ identities. In addition to these factors, sexual abuse in infancy and very early childhood is likely to be invisible in this type of study because respondents’ memories of events at these ages are unlikely to be clear. This fits with the fact that reported ages of abuse in this study started at four or five years.

As in other studies, female interviewees reported far higher levels of abuse than male interviewees (e.g. Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994; Halpérin et al., 1996; Olsson et al., 2000). Much of this difference is likely to reflect genuinely higher levels of abuse among girls but the degree of difference may be exacerbated by a gendered reporting bias because men may be less willing to disclose abuse than women. There may be more stigma attached to having been the victim of sexual abuse for men than for women because of its link with lack of control and incompatibility with constructs of masculinity. As noted in other studies, when the perpetrator is a man, the further stigma of homosexuality is added (Crosson Tower, 1989; La Fontaine, 1990; Schultz, 2001). As we have seen, men's narratives about their experiences of abuse by other men tend to emphasize a separation between their identity as children and out of control, and their identity as men, having regained control.

Conclusions

This study, the first to my knowledge of sexual abuse in a general population in Mexico, suggests that sexual abuse in Mexico City is widespread, and that experiences of abuse are linked to prevailing gender norms: women reported feeling guilty and responsible for the abuse, while men reported feelings of anger.

Strangers in public spaces represented a relatively rare danger, at least in comparison with male relatives and family friends, a trend that has also been observed in the Yaocíhuatl programme (Sánchez, 1999). For both men and women, even a single experience of sexual contact that does not fit with the socially accepted form can negatively transform perceptions of self, self worth and even gender identity: men who were raped were worried they were homosexual, while women reported believing that they no longer had value as women because they were not virgins.

Communities and families maintain sexual abuse of children. Children in Mexico City are socialized to defer to adults and they learn that disobedience is punished. They are not taught to

distinguish between permissible and non-permissible adult behavior and so are not in a position to defy the abuser. It is not surprising, then, that children may not recognize abuse as such. Children's status also means that adults frequently do not attempt to listen to their opinions, and may disregard their disclosures of abuse.

Schultz (2001) argues that taboos about child sexual abuse act to perpetuate the social conditions in which such abuse can take place.

“The common response is to be appropriately horrified by the admission of sexual victimisation and initially profess shock and support, then further alienate these survivors through poorly concealed distaste and misunderstanding... [Perpetrators] are punished by law and silenced by a society that does not want to admit its role in creating – and encouraging – their deviance” (Schultz, 2001, p.169)

As reported in other settings (e.g. Blagg, 1989), women who were abused were frequently seen as responsible and tainted by their association with such a socially unacceptable crime, which also placed the respectability of the family in jeopardy. For both women and men, the strong influence of gender discourses in the study setting appeared to contribute both to the failure to disclose abuse, and also the failure to act on disclosure, allowing abusers to continue their exploitation.

Child sexual abuse in Mexico City is widespread and is not being addressed adequately at present. At the very least, we need to educate children, parents and the wider community to raise awareness of the problem and to advise on appropriate responses if abuse is discovered (WHO, 1999). Reduction of abuse will not be possible without concerted community, government and individual action.

Table 1 Proportions of interviewees who experienced sexual abuse in childhood, by sex of respondent and category of abuse.

	Women (N=86)		Men (N=66)	
	Percent	N	Percent	N
Multiple abusers	7%	6	0%	0
Repeated abuse from one abuser	16%	14	8%	5
One incident	9%	8	11%	7
Total reporting abuse	33%	28	18%	12

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