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## Culture and attitude play a key role in child sexual abuse

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The Mkombozi Centre for Street Children works with children and youth who live or spend time on the streets without adult care. During the course of its work over the past 10 years, Mkombozi has encountered hundreds of children who are being sexually abused on the streets, and/or who claim to have run away from home to escape (sexual, physical and emotional) abuse. Despite this reality, the fact is that school authorities, local government and parents continue to deny both the scale of the problem and its implications for individual children's psychosocial and educational development.

Recently, Mkombozi conducted Participatory Action Research (PAR) in 10 schools in Kilimanjaro Region to determine the causation of primary school dropouts and truancy. A key finding has been that the sexual abuse of children is occurring both within and outside the school environment and that this abuse plays a role in migration to the streets. In Majengo suburb, for instance, where children are often abused by secondary school students, local workers and male parents, there was a massive (472%) increase in the number of children migrating to the streets from this community between 2003 and 2005.

### Case study: "Child #1" (9 years old)

Child #1, a Majengo Primary student, was sexually abused by students from the neighbouring secondary school. He was taken to the secondary school by one of his primary school peers - a boy who would receive money for bringing him to the secondary school and who would also be sexually abused. In general, Child #1 was abused 6 times during a visit to the secondary school by different boys, and he would receive approximately 600 shillings in return. Child #1 admitted that there are younger and smaller boys from the nearby Mwereni Primary school who live in Majengo and are brought to the secondary school for the same "work". Child #1 and the other primary school boy would carry pieces of cloth with them, which they would use to clean themselves after the abuse. Once home, he was able to shower before either of his parents returned home. In fact, Child #1's abuse went undiscovered for some time, since his mother works late each night and his father returns home only on Monday evenings. Unfortunately, when his teacher finally explained to his parents what was happening, the child was beaten and threatened by his father - his father said he would kill him if he ever participated in the abuse again. Child #1's mother also beat him when she learned what was happening.

Although many authors advance the argument that child sexual abuse is a recent phenomenon and have blamed the apparent rise in its occurrence to the proliferation of modern, Western values, there is little empirical evidence for or against this view (Lalor, 2004). As such, consideration must be given to the important, alternative standpoint that the apparent rise in child sexual abuse has more to do with a lack of knowledge among child protection professionals and society in general and the lack of child protection structures to detect, record and treat child abuse victims (Ibid, 2004, p.13).

In keeping with this alternative perspective, Mkombozi believes that it is necessary to understand the social and cultural factors that contribute to and propagate child sexual abuse in Tanzania in order to construct and implement the most appropriate measures for intervention and prevention. This further concurs with the arguments of Pierce and Bozalek (2004) and Lalor (2004), who argue for the development of a clear understanding of popular and professional definitions of child abuse in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mkombozi agrees that inconsistencies in the definitions of child abuse may be inhibiting the development of child protection initiatives in Tanzania. Additionally, on the basis of its own research and experience, Mkombozi suggests that culture plays an important role in attitudes and practices towards children. As such, Mkombozi concurs with Korbin (2002) that much work needs to be done to understand how culture is involved in child abuse and how it can be used for prevention and intervention of the same. To date, Mkombozi has learned that abuse and neglect are more likely in cultures that: (1) resist family planning and thus have an abundance of unwanted children; (2) focus on the child's biological parents as the only available caretakers; (3) minimise the fathers' involvement in child rearing; and (4) disconnect families from the community (Rohner & Rohner in Berry, Dasen & Saraswathi, 1997, p.382).

Overall, Mkombozi believes it is critically important at this point to understand the extent to which Tanzanian thinking and actions are serving to compromise interventions in, and prevention of, cases of child sexual abuse in Tanzania. To date, there is no empirical evidence to document Tanzanian attitudes, perceptions, practices and intervention measures regarding child sexual abuse and how these factors differ from internationally constructed child protection policies regarding child sexual abuse. In fact, Mkombozi is currently seeking funds for a research project that will examine the cultural implications that impact child abuse prevention. Research into the nature of and attitudes towards child sexual abuse in Tanzania is needed to kick-start a process of breaking down the particularly tough cultural taboos and associated unwillingness to openly discuss child abuse. The current reluctance to address the issues is inhibiting access to information, education and transparency of the issue of child sexual abuse -- in turn, appropriate interventions (if any) in cases of child sexual abuse are being prevented (CSC, 2002).

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