






Exploring the influence of absent father figures on the sexual behaviours of male orphan learners in rural schools

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Abstract— This study explores the absence of fathers' influence on sexual abuse among female learners at rural communities in Zaka South district. The absence of fathers in the lives of children could influence the behaviours among male orphan children. This study employs a qualitative approach, utilising a case study research design. Eighteen participants were purposively selected to ensure balanced representation across gender, expertise, geographical location, and age. Two focus group discussions were conducted for data collection, including one with learners with disabilities and another with adults. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The finding indicates that the absence of a paternal presence profoundly affects the emotional and behavioural development of male orphans, often resulting in maladaptive behaviours that can escalate into sexually abusive actions. This study recommends establishing mentorship programmes to connect male orphans with positive male role models, which may reduce maladaptive behaviours and foster healthier interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Absent fathers, Male orphans, Rural school, Sexual aggression

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE absence of fathers in the lives of children has been increasingly recognised as one of the significant factors influencing various behavioural and psychological outcomes in male children (Adeugo et al., 2020). Studies indicated that paternal absence in male orphans has garnered attention, and it has been potentially correlated with aggressive behaviours, including sexual violence against female peers (Patel et al., 2020). Wylie et al. (2022) indicated that children raised in father-absent homes are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems, including increased aggression and propensity for violence. This concern could be explained in rural educational settings, where social norms and limited access to mental health resources may exacerbate these issues, leading to heightened risk of sexual abuse among vulnerable populations (Alex-Petersen et al., 2022). Dynamics of father absence are complex and multifaceted, particularly in rural contexts where traditional family structures may be disrupted by economic hardship, migration, or health crises. Studies have shown that male orphans often experience profound emotional distress stemming from the loss of paternal figures, which can manifest in maladaptive behaviours, including sexual aggression (Ashraf et al., 2022; Chitiyo, 2017). In rural schools, where peer interactions are frequent and often unmonitored, these behaviours can have dire consequences for female classmates, who may become targets of abuse. Lack of paternal guidance may leave these boys without appropriate role models, leading them to adopt harmful behaviours as a means of coping with their trauma (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017).

In many rural communities, traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, and boys may feel pressured to conform to hyper-masculine ideals that valorise aggression and dominance (Gunhidzirai

& Tanga, 2020). This cultural backdrop can create an environment where male orphans, lacking paternal guidance, may resort to sexual violence as a misguided expression of masculinity. The intersection of these factors highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions that address both the emotional needs of male orphans and the safety of their female peers (Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018). Despite a growing body of literature on father absence and its associated risks, there remains a significant gap in research specifically examining the correlation between absent fathers and sexual abuse of female peers by male orphans in rural schools. Furthermore, while some studies have documented the prevalence of sexual violence in rural schools, few have explicitly linked these incidents to experiences of male orphans and their absent fathers (Maepa, 2021; Ogan, 2021). For instance, a study conducted in South Africa found that boys who grew up without fathers were more likely to engage in violent behaviours. Yet, it did not explore the specific context of sexual abuse against female peers (Patel et al., 2021). This lack of targeted research underscores the need for a comprehensive examination of how father absence influences behaviours of male orphans and the subsequent impact on their female classmates. Implications of this research are profound, as understanding the relationship between absent fathers and the sexual abuse of female peers can inform the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies. Such initiatives could include mentorship programs that connect male orphans with positive male role models, as well as educational campaigns aimed at promoting healthy relationships and consent among learners (Patel et al., 2021).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the United States of America, Pratibha and Mathur (2016) highlight that children from father-absent homes demonstrate elevated rates of externalising behaviours, including violence and sexual

aggression. Furthermore, Ogutu (2020) indicates that boys raised without paternal figures are more prone to engage in risky sexual behaviours and perpetrate violence against women. These findings suggest that the absence of a father figure may significantly contribute to the normalisation of aggressive behaviours, potentially leading to increased incidence of sexual abuse among peers (Ogutu, 2020). However, a notable research gap exists regarding specific dynamics of these behaviours among male orphans in rural contexts, such as Zaka South, where socio-economic and cultural factors may uniquely shape the experiences and behaviours of these children. In Britain, Salihu (2019) reports that children lacking paternal involvement are at a heightened risk of developing behavioural problems, including aggression towards peers. While this research underscores the detrimental effects of father absence, it largely overlooks the intersection of orphanhood and sexual abuse among male orphans. The focus on urban settings limits the applicability of these findings to rural contexts, such as Zaka South. This neglect presents a critical research gap, as rural socio-economic conditions and cultural norms may significantly influence male orphans' behaviours and the prevalence of sexual abuse against female peers. This study aims to fill this void by examining these unique dynamics in a rural Zimbabwean context.

In China, Sirgy and Lee (2018) indicate that children left behind by migrant parents often experience behavioural issues, including aggression and emotional distress. While this study provides valuable insights into the effects of parental absence, it does not specifically address the phenomenon of sexual abuse perpetrated by male orphans. The lack of focus on the dynamics of sexual violence in this context represents a significant research gap, especially in rural settings where traditional norms and expectations may influence behavioural outcomes. Nigerian research has documented the adverse effects of father absence on child development, revealing that boys from father-absent homes are more likely to engage in violent behaviours (Ogan, 2021). The prevalence of sexual violence in Nigerian schools is a growing concern; however, the role of male orphans in perpetrating such violence remains inadequately explored. Existing literature primarily focuses on the experiences of victims rather than the behavioural patterns of male orphans (Ogutu, 2020). This study seeks to address this gap by investigating how the absence of fathers influences these boys' likelihood of engaging in sexual abuse against female peers, particularly in rural contexts where social structures and cultural practices may exacerbate these issues.

In Botswana, Mothusi and Mothibeli (2019) found that orphans often contend with social isolation and behavioural issues, which can predispose them to aggressive behaviours. However, the specific correlation between the behaviours of male orphans and the sexual abuse of female peers has not been thoroughly examined. This gap is particularly relevant in rural areas like Zaka South, where cultural norms may further complicate these dynamics. In South Africa, the phenomenon of father absence is prevalent, with studies indicating that children without fathers are at a higher risk of experiencing emotional and behavioural problems (Reza & Bromfield, 2019). Research has shown that boys who grow up without involved fathers are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviours and engage in sexual violence (Salihu, 2019). However, much of the existing research has concentrated on urban settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these issues manifest in rural contexts, particularly among male orphans. This study aims to address this gap by examining the specific behaviours of male orphans in Zaka South and their implications for female peers, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on father absence and its consequences.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, originally formulated by John Bowlby, serves as a foundational framework for understanding emotional and behavioural outcomes of individuals, particularly in relation to their

early caregiving experiences (Gasse, 2020). Halpern and Perry (2016) posited that the quality of attachment formed during childhood significantly shapes an individual's social and emotional health throughout their life. The theory delineates a spectrum of attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant, each of which is characterised by distinct patterns of behaviour and emotional responses resulting from the caregiver's responsiveness (Herrero et al., 2023). Secure attachment fosters a sense of safety and trust, enabling individuals to engage in healthy relationships. In contrast, insecure attachments often stemming from neglect or absence can lead to maladaptive behaviours, including aggression and relational difficulties.

In the context of this study, which explores the relationship between absent fathers and the sexual abuse of female peers by male orphans in rural Zaka South, Zimbabwe, Attachment Theory provides critical insights into psychological dynamics at play. The absence of a father figure can severely disrupt the formation of secure attachments, leaving male orphans vulnerable to developing insecure attachment styles (Santer et al., 2021). Research suggests that children who lack stable paternal figures often grapple with feelings of inadequacy and abandonment, which can manifest as aggressive behaviours toward peers (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). For instance, male orphans, deprived of paternal guidance, may resort to exerting power over their female peers as a misguided means of asserting their identity and compensating for their emotional deficits (Ferraro et al., 2019). This maladaptive behaviour is particularly concerning in educational settings, where power imbalances may culminate in incidents of sexual abuse.

Moreover, socio-cultural and economic context of rural Zimbabwe exacerbates these challenges. The interplay of poverty, limited resources, and societal expectations often heightens emotional turmoil experienced by male orphans, further increasing the likelihood of violent behaviour (Walper et al., 2020a). Studies have shown that boys raised in father-absent households are more inclined to exhibit aggressive traits, as they may lack positive male role models to emulate (Thor, 2016). Consequently, such behaviours can perpetuate cycles of violence, undermining the safety and well-being of female peers in these rural settings. The justification for employing Attachment Theory in this study lies in its capacity to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive the behaviours of male orphans in the absence of paternal figures (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). The emotional ramifications of such absence extend beyond individual experiences, influencing broader social dynamics, including the prevalence of violence and sexual abuse (McLanahan, 2009). Therefore, attachment Theory offers a robust framework for examining the correlation between absent fathers and behavioural patterns of male orphans, highlighting the critical need for interventions that cultivate secure attachments.

IV. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the influence of absent father figures on the sexual behaviours of male orphan learners in rural schools.

V. METHODS

Research approach

The qualitative methodology is particularly suited for this investigation as it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena, such as the dynamics of father absence and its implications for behaviours and relationships among adolescents (Salihu, 2019). This approach acknowledges that reality is socially constructed, emphasising the importance of context and subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research design

The study employed a case study approach, which is particularly effective in exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life context (McLanahan, 2009). Firstly, case studies allow for an in-depth examination of specific instances, providing rich qualitative data that

can reveal insights that broader quantitative studies might overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Secondly, this method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the unique dynamics at play within the selected context, enabling researchers to capture the intricate relationships between various factors influencing the situation (Vukoicic, 2017). Lastly, case studies are beneficial for generating hypotheses and informing future research, as they provide a detailed exploration of cases that can serve as a foundation for broader investigations (Thor, 2016). By focusing on a single primary school chosen by participants for its centrality, the study was able to analyse the educational environment comprehensively, while considering the local socio-economic factors that affect the community.

Participants

The study involved 18 participants who were purposively selected based on specific criteria, including gender, expertise, and geographical location. The participants included two male learners and two female learners. Additionally, two teachers provided insights into the school environment and the dynamics between learners, while two police officers contributed to an understanding of the legal and societal implications of abuse. One official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education offered broader perspectives on educational policies and their impact on learner welfare, highlighting systemic issues related to father absence and abuse. One village head, as a community leader, provided contextual insights into local norms and values regarding fatherhood and abuse, influencing societal attitudes and behaviours. Two school development committee members shed light on institutional responses to abuse, including the implementation of policies and the allocation of resources. At the same time, two nurses and two counsellors discussed the health and psychological aspects of abuse. Finally, two representatives from organisations working with abused children enhanced the understanding of support systems available for victims, identifying gaps in resources and intervention strategies. This diverse participant pool ensured a comprehensive exploration of the issue from multiple perspectives, enriching the data collected and allowing for a more robust analysis.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through two focus group discussions, one with learners and another with adult participants. Focus group discussions are particularly effective in qualitative research as they facilitate interaction among participants, allowing for the emergence of collective views and deeper insights into shared experiences (Shava et al., 2019). The discussions were structured to encourage open dialogue about participants' experiences and perceptions regarding father absence and its correlation with sexual abuse (Shava et al., 2021). This format also allows for the exploration of sensitive topics, as participants may feel more comfortable discussing personal experiences in a group setting where they perceive shared understanding and support, a notion supported by Vukoicic (2017). This method aligns with the study's aim to uncover nuanced perspectives on the complex interplay between absent fathers and the sexual abuse of female peers (Dewi et al., 2023).

Research sites

Zaka South, located in the Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe, is primarily a rural area characterised by its vulnerability to severe droughts, resulting in poor agricultural yields and limited economic opportunities. The lack of industries exacerbates the high unemployment rates, leading many fathers and males to leave the region in search of better job prospects in Masvingo town, other urban centres across Zimbabwe, or even abroad in the diaspora. This migration has a significant impact on family structures and community dynamics, as those who remain often struggle with the challenges of subsistence living in an environment marked by climatic unpredictability and economic hardship. These economic pressures further strain the social fabric of Zaka South, as families face the dual challenge of maintaining their livelihoods while coping with the absence of male family members who seek employment elsewhere. The study was conducted at one primary school near the growth point. The

school has a borehole for water, solar-powered electricity, and is easily accessible to participants due to its centrality and proximity to the main road. The school development committee and the school head granted permission for the research team to contact this school.

Data analysis

The data collected from the focus group discussions were thematically analysed, employing a widely used qualitative analytic method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within the data, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it enables the organisation of data into meaningful categories that reflect the participants' experiences and perceptions. Thematic analysis also provides flexibility, enabling the researchers to engage with the data in a manner that is both inductive and deductive, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the emerging themes (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). This method not only highlights prevalent themes but also allows for the exploration of subtler narratives that may be equally significant in understanding the broader context of father absence and its consequences (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2019).

Ethical considerations

Participants were assured that their identities and responses would remain confidential, which is crucial in sensitive research involving abuse (Gasse, 2020). This assurance is vital for fostering trust and encouraging candid discussions during focus groups. All participants provided informed consent, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. This process was carefully explained to all participants, emphasising their autonomy and the voluntary nature of their involvement (Kara & Sümer, 2022). Participants were also informed about the study's objectives, which helped to establish trust and transparency in the research process. These ethical considerations are crucial in qualitative research, particularly when working with vulnerable populations, as they help protect participants and ensure the integrity of the research process (Leopold, 2018).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographic results

Table 1: Biographic results

Participant	Age	Number
Male learners	13-15	2
Female learners	14-15	2
Male Teachers	30-43	1
Female teachers	30-40	1
Male Police officer	20-30	1
Female Police officer	20-30	1
Village head	50-60	1
Female school Development Committee member	55-67	1
Female school Development Committee member	55-67	1
Male nurse	30-40	1
Female nurse	30-40	1
Female Counsellor	35-40	1
Male Counsellor	35-40	1
Male NGO officials	30-35	1
	35-45	1
	40-45	2

Psychological and social implications of Father Absence

These results revealed that the psychological and social consequences of absent fathers on male orphan learners could be a factor shaping their behaviours towards female peers at rural school settings. The excerpt of a male orphan learner could explain the following,

"Growing up without a father, I often feel lost. I find myself trying to assert dominance over others, especially girls, to compensate for that emptiness. It is

like I am trying to prove I am strong, but it ends up hurting those around me" (Participant 4).

On the other hand, the female learner provided insights into the emotional landscape of her male peers, noting a pattern of bullying and intimidation.

"Many of the boys act out because they are hurting inside; they do not know how to express their feelings, so they resort to aggression. It makes us feel unsafe, and we often walk on eggshells around them" (Participant 1).

Additionally, the village head articulated the broader implications of father absence on community dynamics.

"These boys are searching for a father figure, but in the absence of that guidance, they often become aggressive. Their behaviours can turn predatory, and this creates a culture of fear among girls. We need community initiatives to fill this gap and provide mentorship" (Participant 6).

Moreover, the police officer shared his experiences with cases of sexual abuse involving male orphans.

"I have seen firsthand how the lack of a father can lead boys to seek power through violence. They often target girls, feeling that this is their only way to exert control. It is a tragic cycle that needs intervention" (Participant 4).

Furthermore, the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) official discussed the importance of psychological support for male orphans.

"These boys are suffering in silence, and without proper counselling and emotional guidance, they misdirect their pain onto others. We need programmes that address their mental health and teach them healthy ways to cope" (Participant 9).

Moreover, the female teacher shared her observations from the classroom, noting that the aggressive behaviours of male orphans disrupt learning.

"When these boys act out, it affects the entire class, and they need role models to help them navigate their emotions. However, without that guidance, they often lash out. It is disheartening to witness" (Participant 7).

Additionally, the Member of Parliament discussed the legislative framework required to support male orphans.

"We must recognise that father absence leads to serious social issues, including violence and abuse it is our responsibility to create policies that provide support systems and protect vulnerable children" (Participant 11).

Lastly, the female parent expressed her fears regarding her daughter's safety, considering the behaviours exhibited by male orphans.

"As a mother, I worry about the influence these boys have on my daughter and their pain often manifests as aggression, and it puts her at risk. We need to work together as a community to support these boys and ensure safety for our girls" (Participant 6).

The data above, collected from participants, reveal different findings, the significant psychological and social ramifications of father absence on male orphans, particularly regarding their interactions with female peers in educational settings. A male learner articulated his internal struggle stemming from his father's absence, stating,

"Growing up without a father, I often feel lost. I find myself trying to assert dominance over others, especially girls, to compensate for that emptiness" (Participant 2).

This sentiment illustrates a complex interplay between vulnerability and aggression, suggesting that the absence of a paternal figure may lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms (Reza & Bromfield, 2019). Such behaviour aligns with Bowlby's Attachment Theory, which posits that secure attachment figures provide emotional regulation and a sense of safety (Pratibha & Mathur, 2016). The absence of a father figure may disrupt this attachment process, leading to identity confusion and compensatory aggression (Patel et al., 2021).

Similarly, a female learner observed a pattern of bullying among her male peers, noting,

"Many of the boys act out because they are hurting inside" (Participant 15).

This finding aligns with existing literature that associates father absence with increased aggression and externalising behaviours in boys (Ogotu, 2020). The cycle of pain and violence not only affects the aggressors but also creates an atmosphere of fear among female

learners, emphasising the pervasive impact of these dynamics in educational contexts (Ogan, 2021). The village head identified broader community implications, stating,

"These boys are searching for a father figure, but in the absence of that guidance, they often become aggressive" (Participant 4).

This perspective emphasises the significance of community initiatives in offering mentorship and guidance, as research indicates that such support can mitigate the adverse effects of father absence by promoting resilience among young people (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022).

A police officer recounted experiences with male orphans involved in cases of sexual abuse, asserting,

"The lack of a father can lead boys to seek power through violence" (Participant 7).

This observation highlights a tragic cycle where the quest for control manifests as aggression towards vulnerable individuals, particularly girls (Maepa, 2021). Studies indicate that boys who experience father absence are at a higher risk of engaging in delinquent behaviours, including sexual aggression (Kanjanga & Chiparange, 2015). The NGO official emphasised the necessity of psychological support, stating,

"These boys are suffering in silence" (Participant 12).

This assertion is supported by research indicating that emotional guidance is crucial for males who have experienced father absence, as it can prevent the misdirection of pain onto others (Kabonga, 2020).

Furthermore, a female teacher noted that the aggressive behaviours of male orphans disrupt learning environments, stating,

"When these boys act out, it affects the entire class" (Participant 2).

This finding reaffirms the idea that the absence of role models can lead to behavioural issues that compromise educational outcomes, aligning with Bowlby's theory that secure attachments foster positive social interactions (Jakaza & Nyoni, 2018). The Member of Parliament highlighted the need for systemic support, asserting,

"We must recognise that father absence leads to serious social issues" (Participant 10).

His call for legislative action reflects a growing recognition of the need for policies that address the challenges faced by male orphans, reinforcing the idea that community and governmental support are essential in mitigating the effects of father absence (Gunhidzirai & Tanga, 2020). Lastly, a female parent expressed her fears regarding her daughter's safety, stating,

"We need to work together as a community to support these boys" (Participant 17).

This narrative highlights the interconnectedness of community welfare, underscoring the need for proactive measures to ensure the safety of all children (Chitiyo, 2017).

The discussion of the above data from participants underscores the profound impact of father absence on male orphans, particularly in shaping their psychological profiles and social interactions. The male learner's admission of using aggression to mask vulnerability reflects Bowlby's assertion that secure attachments are essential for healthy emotional development (Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017). When these attachments are absent, children may resort to maladaptive behaviours as a means of coping with their emotional pain. This finding aligns with contemporary research indicating that father absence can lead to increased aggression as a compensatory strategy (Ashraf et al., 2022). The observations of the female learner about the bullying behaviour of her peers highlight a cycle of pain that perpetuates itself in school environments (Alex Peterson, et al., 2022). Male orphans' inability to articulate their feelings leads to aggression, which in turn creates a hostile atmosphere for female learners (Adaugo et al., 2020). This cycle underscores the need for interventions that promote emotional literacy among boys, enabling them to express their vulnerabilities without resorting to violence.

The village head's insights into community dynamics emphasise the importance of mentorship for male orphans. Research indicates that positive male role models can provide the guidance that these boys often lack, enabling them to navigate their emotional landscapes more

effectively (Rahil et al., 2020). Community initiatives focused on mentoring could play a pivotal role in breaking the cycle of aggression and promoting healthier social interactions (Jansen et al., 2018). The police officer's observations about the correlation between father absence and aggressive behaviours point to a broader societal issue (Davison et al., 2016). The tendency of fatherless boys to engage in violence as a means of exerting control can lead to severe consequences, including criminal behaviour (Morgan et al., 2017). Interventions aimed at addressing these behaviours must consider the underlying emotional issues that drive such actions (Chikuvadze, 2020).

The emphasis on psychological support from the NGO official highlights a critical gap in the resources available to male orphans. Programs focused on mental health and emotional regulation are essential in preventing the misdirection of pain and aggression towards others (Chidarikire & Chikwati, 2024). Research supports the notion that therapeutic interventions can significantly alter the trajectories of young males who have experienced father absence (Philippe et al., 2021). The female teacher's concerns about classroom disruptions due to aggressive behaviours of male orphans underscore the necessity of creating supportive educational environments (Moura & Aschemann-Witzel, 2020). Bowlby's theory suggests that secure attachments foster better social behaviours and learning outcomes, indicating that educational institutions must integrate support systems that nurture emotional intelligence among learners (Vollmer et al., 2019).

The call for legislative frameworks by the Member of Parliament reflects a growing awareness of the systemic issues arising from father absence. Comprehensive policies aimed at supporting families and providing resources for male orphans can mitigate the adverse social consequences identified in the findings (Daniels et al., 2020). Finally, the concerns expressed by the female parent resonate with the broader theme of community responsibility. Ensuring the safety and well-being of all children requires a collaborative approach that involves parents, educators, and community leaders working together to support vulnerable populations (Davison et al., 2016). Consequently, the findings underscore the necessity for a multifaceted approach to address the psychological and social implications of father absence. Through applying Bowlby's Attachment Theory, we can better understand the complexities of these issues and develop targeted interventions that foster healthier emotional and social outcomes for male orphans.

Contextual factors

The results showed that contextual factors within rural schools could shape the dynamics of power and vulnerability between male orphans and their female counterparts, particularly focusing on incidents of sexual abuse.

Firstly, the female learner described the environment in rural schools as one rife with inequality.

"There is a clear power imbalance, and the boys often feel entitled to assert themselves over girls, and this leads to uncomfortable situations. It feels like the girls are always on guard" (Participant 10).

Secondly, the male learner echoed the sentiment about inequality, discussing how societal norms dictate behaviour.

"In our culture, boys are taught to be dominant, and this pressure makes it hard for us to treat girls with respect. I see my peers crossing lines they should not, and it is troubling" (Participant 13).

Thirdly, the male village head acknowledged the role of community expectations in shaping behaviours.

"We need to address the cultural norms that allow this kind of behaviours to persist, and if we do not change the narrative around masculinity and power, these issues will continue" (Participant 18).

Fourthly, the female police officer discussed the challenges of addressing sexual abuse in schools.

"Many cases go unreported because girls fear retaliation, she noted, and the boys often feel they can act without consequences, which creates a dangerous environment. We need stronger laws and community support to protect these girls" (Participant 2).

Fifthly, the male NGO official pointed to the lack of resources in rural schools as a contributing factor.

"Without proper education on consent and respect, the cycle continues, and we must implement programs that educate both boys and girls about their rights and responsibilities" (Participant 8).

Sixthly, the male teacher shared his experiences observing the dynamics in his classroom.

"There is a noticeable difference in how boys and girls interact, and boys often feel they can dominate discussions or even intimidate their peers. We must foster an environment where everyone feels safe to express themselves" (Participant 16).

Seventh, the female Member of Parliament emphasised the legislative responsibilities in addressing these issues.

"We must create policies that not only protect girls but also educate boys about respect and equality, and it is about changing the narrative and ensuring that everyone understands the importance of consent and mutual respect" (Participant 13).

Lastly, the male parent expressed concern about the influence of peer pressure on young boys.

"I worry that my son might feel the need to conform to harmful behaviours to fit, and we must teach our children about empathy and respect from a young age" (Participant 5).

The generated findings from data collected from participants revealed significant insights into the power dynamics and vulnerabilities experienced by male orphans and their female counterparts in rural schools. Female learners articulated a pervasive sense of inequality in their educational environment. One participant stated,

"There is a clear power imbalance, and the boys often feel entitled to assert themselves over girls, and this leads to uncomfortable situations. It feels like the girls are always on guard" (Participant 13).

This observation aligns with recent findings by Rahill et al. (2020), who noted that power inequalities in educational settings often lead to increased anxiety and fear among marginalised groups. A male learner reflected on societal norms that dictate gender behaviour, indicating that

"In our culture, boys are taught to be dominant" (Participant 16).

This sentiment echoes the work of Chidarikire and Chikwati (2024), who argue that hegemonic masculinity perpetuates harmful behaviours and reinforces power imbalances between genders. The male village head emphasised the role of community expectations in shaping behaviours, stating,

"We need to address the cultural norms that allow this kind of behaviour to persist" (Participant 12).

His insights resonate with the findings of Litchford et al. (2020), who highlights the necessity of community engagement in transforming harmful gender norms.

Moreover, the female police officer highlighted the challenges faced by victims of sexual abuse in schools, noting that

"Many cases go unreported because girls fear retaliation" (Participant 9).

This observation is supported by the work of Chitiyo (2017), which discusses the silencing effects of fear on victims and the need for supportive reporting mechanisms. A male NGO official pointed to the insufficient resources in rural schools, stating,

"Without proper education on consent and respect, the cycle continues" (Participant 3).

This aligns with recent studies by Davison et al. (2017), which advocate for comprehensive educational programs that address consent and respect among youth. The male teacher observed noticeable differences in learner interactions, stating,

"Boys often feel they can dominate discussions or even intimidate their peers" (Participant 6).

This perspective is consistent with the findings of Fielding-Singh (2017), which suggest that classroom environments have a significant influence on learner participation and the development of equitable dynamics. The female Member of Parliament emphasised the

importance of policy in addressing these issues, declaring,

"We must create policies that not only protect girls but also educate boys about respect and equality" (Participant 4).

This aligns with the advocacy of feminist scholars like Munyaradzi and Mweli (2025), who emphasise the importance of intersectional approaches to policymaking. Lastly, the male parent expressed concerns about peer pressure on young boys, noting,

"I worry that my son might feel the need to conform to harmful behaviours" (Participant 11).

This highlights the critical role of parental guidance in shaping attitudes and behaviours, as supported by research from La (2018), which shows that parental involvement significantly influences children's socialisation regarding gender norms.

The discussion from this study provides a nuanced understanding of the contextual factors that contribute to power dynamics and vulnerabilities within rural school settings, particularly through the lens of Attachment Theory as articulated by John Bowlby (Elliott & Bowen, 2018). The reported power imbalances suggest a disruption in secure attachments that Bowlby posited are essential for healthy interpersonal relationships. The fear expressed by female learners indicates a lack of secure attachments not only to their peers but also to the educational environment, which should foster safety and support (Adeugo et al., 2020). The male learner's acknowledgment of societal expectations reflects the internalisation of hegemonic masculinity, which can be detrimental to secure attachment styles. Alex-Petersen et al. (2022) reveal that boys often adopt maladaptive behaviours to align with cultural expectations, leading to relational difficulties and reinforcing power imbalances. The male village head's call for community-led initiatives underscores the importance of fostering secure attachments within the broader community context. Bowlby's theory suggests that community support structures are vital for developing healthy attachments among children, which can counteract harmful cultural norms (Gunhidzirai & Tanga, 2020).

Furthermore, the challenges highlighted by the female police officer regarding unreported cases of abuse speak to the need for secure attachment figures in educational settings who can provide support. Jakaza and Nyoni (2018) emphasise that creating safe environments where victims feel comfortable reporting abuse is essential for fostering secure attachments. The male NGO official's call for educational reforms on consent is crucial, and Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that education can play a pivotal role in shaping secure attachments and fostering healthy relationships (Kabonga, 2020). Programs that educate both genders on respect and consent are necessary to foster environments conducive to secure attachments (Kanjanga & Chiparange, 2015). The male teacher's observations regarding classroom dynamics reflect the importance of equitable practices in fostering secure attachments among learners. Maepa (2021) suggests that inclusive classroom environments foster learners' sense of belonging, which is essential for developing healthy attachments.

The female Member of Parliament's emphasis on policy highlights the need for systemic changes that align with Bowlby's assertion that societal structures impact attachment security. Policies that promote gender equality and respect are crucial for fostering secure attachments among young people (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). The male parent's concerns about peer pressure illustrate the critical role of familial attachments in shaping behaviours (Ogan, 2021). Bowlby's theory emphasises that secure attachments formed within the family context can mitigate the adverse effects of peer pressure and promote healthier interpersonal relationships (Ogutu, 2020). Therefore, the findings highlight the complex interplay of contextual factors that influence power dynamics and vulnerabilities in rural schools. Through the application of Attachment Theory, it becomes evident that fostering secure attachments through community engagement, educational reforms, and supportive policies is crucial for addressing the challenges identified in this study.

VII. CONCLUSION

The exploration of the correlation between absent father figures and the propensity for sexual abuse among male orphans towards their female peers in rural schools of Zaka South, Zimbabwe, reveals a complex interplay of psychological, social, and contextual dynamics. The absence of a paternal presence profoundly affects the emotional and behavioural development of male orphans, often resulting in maladaptive behaviours that can escalate into sexually abusive actions. Research indicates that these behaviours are exacerbated by the socio-economic vulnerabilities inherent in rural educational settings, where power imbalances are prevalent and frequently go unchecked. Consequently, the relationship between father absence and the sexual abuse of female peers is not merely a matter of individual pathology; it is deeply entrenched in the socio-cultural fabric of the community. To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed. First, implementing comprehensive psycho-social support initiatives tailored for male orphans is essential to address the emotional and psychological ramifications of father absence. These programs should focus on fostering healthy relationships and promoting empathy towards female peers.

Additionally, developing and executing educational awareness campaigns in rural schools can help educate learners about gender dynamics, consent, and the impact of sexual abuse, engaging both male and female learners to cultivate mutual respect and understanding. Specialised training for educators and school staff is also crucial, enabling them to recognise signs of abuse and understand the psychological needs of male orphans, thus fostering a safer educational environment. Furthermore, fostering community involvement is vital for addressing the issue of absent fathers and their repercussions. Workshops and dialogues aimed at redefining familial roles and responsibilities can cultivate a sense of community accountability. Advocacy for policies promoting the welfare of orphans and vulnerable children is equally important, including the establishment of frameworks that support the reintegration of paternal figures, when possible, and ensure that children have access to protective services and resources. Lastly, encouraging ongoing research and monitoring of the situational factors contributing to sexual abuse in schools is necessary. This should include longitudinal studies that track behavioural changes in male orphans as interventions are implemented. By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders can effectively work towards mitigating the adverse effects of father absence and reducing instances of sexual abuse among vulnerable populations in rural Zimbabwean schools.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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