

## The Experience of Girl Intra-familial Sexual Abuse Survivors in Addis Ababa: A Qualitative Analysis

Yordanos Tewelde<sup>1</sup> and Emebet Mulugeta<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Any sexual behavior directed towards girls under the age of 18 by a family member or those close to the family is known as intrafamilial sexual abuse. Research conducted in Ethiopia to examine sexual violence against girls discuss the issue without highlighting intrafamilial sexual abuse. In addition, efforts to explore factors and contexts that precipitate these experiences are minimally addressed. This study used a phenomenological qualitative method to investigate the incidence of intrafamilial sexual abuse against girls. Accordingly, an interview guide was employed involving ten survivors of intrafamilial sexual abuse, focusing on what happened, how it happened, when it happened, where it happened, and the factors that exposed them to the abuse within the ecological framework. The findings indicate that multiple factors contributed to the intrafamilial sexual abuse. These factors include individual characteristics such as age and lack of information, microsystem factors such as family relationships, family structure and living condition, mesosystem factors including the girls' isolation, lack of networking, and the family relationships with relatives and the expectations attached, and exosystem factors like parents', especially mothers' work and working situation. In addition, microsystem factors including values given to female children and gender relationships and norms play a part in exposing girls to intrafamilial sexual abuse. Any intervention to address the problem of intrafamilial sexual abuse against girls should consider the various factors operating at these different levels.*

**Keywords:** *sexual abuse, sexual violence, violence, ecological approach, child abuse*

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<sup>1</sup> Gender and Social Inclusion Expert, National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). Email-hahu.tewelde@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor of Psychology, School of Psychology, CEBS, AAU. Email-m.emebet@gmail.com

## **Background**

Child sexual abuse is defined as involving children in sexual activity where the child does not fully understand, cannot give informed consent, for which the child is not physically, emotionally and socially ready to handle, and not in power to protect her/himself (WHO, 1999; Calder, 1999). This may include coercing a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity and exploitation through prostitution or pornographic performances (WHO, 1999). In this regard, a special attention is given to the vulnerability of the child caused by lack of emotional, maturational and cognitive development, and the power imbalance between the child and the perpetrator due to age difference and gender norms (Calder, 1999).

Child sexual abuse is a global concern, and data shows the magnitude of the problem and its seriousness. A meta-analysis conducted by Barth et al. (2013) indicated that according to 55 studies that were conducted in 24 countries, the estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse for girls ranged from 8 to 31 %, and 9 girls out of 110 are victims of forced intercourse. Based on a meta-analysis of studies carried out around the world, Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) reported that the estimated prevalence of child sexual abuse was 127/1000 in self-report studies. The lowest prevalence was found in Asia, 113/1000 for girls and the highest in Australia, 215/1000.

A multi-country national household survey conducted in Cambodia, Haiti, Kenya, Malawi, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe to assess the extent of sexual violence against children showed that the lifetime prevalence of experiencing any form of sexual violence in childhood ranged from 4.4% among females in Cambodia to 37.6% among females in Swaziland. The prevalence in most of these countries was greater than 25.0%. The statistics showed that girls are more prone to sexual violence:

the prevalence for girls was 37.6%, for Swaziland, 32.5% for Zimbabwe, 25.7% for Haiti, and 4.4% for Cambodia (Sumner et al., 2015).

In many parts of Africa, child sexual abuse is a major unrecognized problem with devastating consequences and long-lasting effects that negatively impact physical, social and psychological development of children (Bowman & Brundige, 2014). At the 1999 regional office consultative meeting of WHO entitled “Prevention and Management of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)”, participants from 28 countries representing all the African sub-regions reported that CSA is a serious concern in their respective countries. Although sexual abuse of both female and male children occurs, studies indicate that sexual abuse is more common among girls (WHO, 1999).

According to a report based on statistical analysis of available data conducted by UNICEF, out of the 18 countries included in the analysis, the prevalence rate of forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts for the 13 countries was 10% or more. Except for Nigeria and Sao Tome, a 10% prevalence rate was reported for West and Central African countries. Similarly, a prevalence rate of sexual violence above 10% was found in all countries of Eastern and Southern Africa (UNICEF, 2014).

A retrospective survey conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda by the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) showed that the most frequently occurring forms of sexual violence were verbal sexual violence experienced by 53% of the young women (18 to 24 years) included in the study, and indecent touching was mentioned by 41.8% of them (ACPF, 2006). In relation to rape, ACPF (2006) highlighted that among the sampled young women who experienced sexual violence, about 30% were raped before they reached 18. Girls between the age of 14 and 17 were found to be most vulnerable to almost all types of sexual abuse.

According to ACPF and OAK Foundation (2019), the lifetime prevalence of sexual violence against children varied between 22% and 37.6% for Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Selengia et al. (2020) in their literature review showed that prevalence of child sexual abuse in Africa ranges from 2.1% to 68.7% for females in Tanzania and Ethiopia. They further indicate though the risk of child sexual violence during pre-puberty and late adolescent is higher in both Africa and Asia, pre-pubertal victimization was found to be higher in Africa, in some studies reporting up to 60% of victims of sexual abuse before they reach their teenage. Another study conducted in South Africa revealed that about 33.3% of the girls are at risk of sexual abuse before they reach 17 (ACPF and Oak Foundation, 2019).

A similar pattern is noted in Ethiopia. A study on child sexual abuse using cases reported to Child Protection Units (CPUs) of Addis Ababa Police Commission and three selected non-governmental organizations showed that among a total of 64 cases reported between July 2005 and December 2006, 23% of them were victims of sexual violence. On the average 21 cases of child sexual abuse were reported each month, the majority (19) of the victims being female children. Most of them were abused in their own home by family members or someone they knew closely (Jibril, 2012), which is known as intrafamilial sexual abuse.

A cross-sectional study of female students in selected secondary school in Dire Dawa showed that 48.9% of the female students reported at least one form of sexual abuse. The study further indicated that 19% of them were raped before they reached the age of 15 (Abera et al., 2021). A meta analysis conducted by Mekonnen and Tsega (2024) uncovered that among the 5,979 children included in the various studies, 41.5%

were found to be victims of child sexual abuse, with female children being more likely to be abused.

The majority of the sexual abuse is committed in a family context by a familiar person, someone that the child or their family knows (Jibril, 2012; Gekoski et al., 2016; Kocturka & Yükselb, 2019; Selegia et al. 2020; ACPF & Oak Foundatio, 2019; Mekonnen & Tsega, 2024), which makes it intrafamilial sexual abuse. Intrafamilial sexual abuse is defined as any sexual behavior directed towards girls under the age of 18 by a family member or those who have relations with the family (Yllo, 1993 ). The abuse involved sexual intercourse, touching private parts of the girl or requesting the girl to touch herself, and verbal suggestions or comments to girls that threaten them sexually or otherwise to provide sexual satisfaction for one. Perpetrators are usually family members, including fathers and brothers or close family relations and friends (Dereje et al. 2006; McCrann et al., 2006; Lalor & McElvaney, 2008; Jibril, 2012; Kocturka & Yukselb, 2019).

Intrafamilial sexual abuse is considered to be a major social problem in many societies today, including Ethiopia. Bowman and Brundige (2014) explained that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is an extensive and massively underreported problem in Africa. Because it is a hidden phenomenon, there are no organized data on its prevalence. Statistics covers only the cases that are disclosed by child protection institutions or those reported to law enforcement bodies, giving some indication about the magnitude of the problem. For instance, in Ethiopia, the Association for Women's Sanctuary and Development (AWSAD) 2015 report shows that among the perpetrators of sexual violence against the girls staying in the center, 85% of the violence was perpetrated by family members or relatives. Studies also reveal that the problem exist,

and reporting is on a steady rise throughout the country (Dereje et al., 2006; Jibril, 2012; Teferi, 2014; Berhanu, 2014 & Nuru, 2017; Gebeyehu & Shebabaw, 2014; Mekuria et al., 2015; Abera et al., 2021). However, these retrospective survey-based studies conducted on the issue do not provide more than an overview of the problem (Jibril, 2012).

The survey-based studies conducted on child sexual abuse and intrafamilial sexual abuse, and study of cases reported to the police or admitted to hospitals focus on establishing prevalence and identifying associated factors (ACPF, 2006; Worku et al., 2006; Gorfu & Demisse, 2007; Endashaw, 2008; Mekuria et al., 2015; Le Mat, 2016; ACPF & OAK Foundation, 2019; Selengia et al., 2020; Abera et al., 2021; Mekonnen & Tsega 2024). In addition, these studies focus on sexual abuse of children with no particular attention to intrafamilial sexual abuse except the mention that most of the violences were committed by people familiar to the children including family members. They miss the voices and perspectives of survivors disclosing what happened, how it happened, and the various factors working at different levels to expose the girls to intrafamilial sexual abuse and the theoretical grounding that discusses the factors that operate at different levels to expose girls to intrafamilial sexual abuse. Accordingly, the current study uses a qualitative method to investigate the experience of intrafamilial sexual abuse of female children in Addis Ababa. The study uses an ecological approach to explain the individual and contextual factors that expose them to abuse, from the perspective of the girls themselves.

## **Theoretical Orientation**

Sexual violence is influenced by an interrelated set of factors that operate at different levels (Krug, et al., 2002) whose dealing require a holistic approach. The individuals, both the perpetrator and the victim, the family setting, the culture in which the family is embedded, and the overall societal context play a role in the occurrence and perpetuation of sexual violence (Sidebotham, 2001). Therefore, an ecological approach is used to map the various factors working at different levels. “The utility of an ecological framework is that it can suggest multiple strategies, at multiple levels of analysis...” (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 226).

An ecological approach views violence as an outcome of factors working at multiple levels and explores the relationship between individual and contextual variables (Krug, et al., 2002). The approach has been adopted by different researchers. Belsky’s (1980) model adopted Bronfenbrenner’s theory of the ecology of human development to explain the etiology of child maltreatment discussing factors operating at individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and microsystem. In this context, microsystem is the immediate environment under which the person operates, such as the family, school and peers, while mesosystem constitutes the interactions taking place between the different variables of the microsystem such as family and workplace of parents. The exosystem, on the other hand, is made up of environmental factors that do not have direct presence but affect the development of the individual. The relation between parents’ experiences at their workplace and their interaction with their families is one example of the effect of exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

In their study of risk factors for sexual violence among college students (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2019) employed an ecological approach using the individual,

interpersonal, community and societal layers. Although these studies used different levels of analysis, all of them share the notion of ‘... embedded levels of causality’ (Heise, 1998). As highlighted by Campbell et al. (2009), the central advantage of an ecological model is that it can lead to developing multiple strategies for prevention of and intervention for sexual violence. Accordingly, in this study we used the ecological approach as our analytical framework with the five level of analysis: individual factors, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

## **Methods**

### **Research Approach**

The current study used a qualitative design as it is most appropriate to study complex issues that require exploring and investigating ideas and perspectives of study participants (Creswell, 2009). Among the approaches in qualitative research, the phenomenological design was chosen since it allows a better representation of participants’ views on how they understand their experiences and give meaning to them. Vagle (2014) described phenomenology as a reflective and inductive methodology that explains the meaning people give to their everyday experiences.

We used descriptive phenomenology as our research paradigm because the research questions were concerned with understanding the lived experiences of children who encountered intrafamilial sexual abuse, which this approach is well-suited to examine. It helps to uncover how the children give meaning to the abuse, the exposing factors, and the reaction from others. It brings out the experiences of and the interpretation given by survivors, which is missing in current literature.



### **Participants**

Availability sampling was used to get participants who are survivors of intrafamilial sexual abuse. In this case the situation was favorable since one of the researchers came to know sexually abused children who were beneficiaries of the support given by the NGO she worked for. We used this network to get in touch with survivors and their parents. The counselors who worked in the organization also helped in accessing research participants. This networks and snowballing that started with the children and parents facilitated gaining access to study participants.

### **Instruments**

An interview checklist was developed to collect data from the children. The questions covered a wide range of issues including demographic background, living arrangement, the incidence of sexual abuse, where it happened, when it happened, how it happened, how they reacted to the abuse, how the incident was perceived by family members, reasons for not reporting in time, status of schooling after the incident, and the impacts.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

One of the researchers met the girls who agreed to participate in the study and the objective of the research was explained to them. Informed consent was obtained from parents and foster parents for those who lived at home. The children as well as the individuals responsible for the children at the safe houses gave oral consent for those who lived at safe houses.

Prior to the interview, the children were asked whether they could sit for an interview. Those who were willing to sit for the interview were told that if they found

any of the questions to be upsetting or too difficult, then they should let the researcher know. It was further explained that the information they provide would be kept confidential, and that their names would not be mentioned in the report; instead, pseudonyms would be used. They were encouraged to stop the interview whenever they felt uncomfortable and were also encouraged to add anything that they thought was important. Throughout the interview, the researcher remained sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, which led to the option of changing the subject. An interview with each of the ten survivors lasted for about 45 minutes to an hour.

### **Data Analysis**

Written notes were taken during interviews. In cases where study participants allowed recording, the data was transcribed and compiled soon after completion of data collection. Prior to analysis, we reflected on our notion of intrafamilial sexual assault and the beliefs around it to keep our biases on hold, which is called bracketing (Priest, 2003).

The data was read thoroughly to make sense of it, paying attention to statements that capture the children's experiences. Following this, coding was carried out focusing on each significant statement or phrase to identify themes and patterns. The codes covered the children's background and family status, living situation, the situation of the children at the time of data collection, the situations surrounding the abuse, the sexual abuse, the reaction of the children and those of their families, the impacts the children felt after the abuse. The coded materials were read further and recoded merging similar codes and eliminating others that did not recur (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Themes were identified and most commonly appearing themes captured (Moser & Korstejns, 2018). These included individual factors, family context and relationships

in the family, the expectations from and responsibilities of the family, relation of the family to close and distant relations, parents' work, and the cultural context. The findings were discussed in light of ecological theory. These themes centered around the incidence of sexual abuse the children went through.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings and discussion section presents the background characteristics of the study participants, their experiences of violence, and the discussion of the sexual abuses in the light of ecological approach.

#### **Background Characteristics of Participants**

The children's age ranged from 9 to 17. All except one were below 15 when the abuse took place. Most were born and raised in Addis Ababa, the capital city. All of them lived in Addis Ababa at the time of the abuse. None of them went past secondary school. All the abusers were close family members, including fathers, stepfathers, and uncles (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Participants' Background Information*

Informants	Age at the Time of Abuse	Age at the Time of Study	Education (in Grade)	Place of Birth	Abuser
Mitu	8	9	2	Addis Ababa	Father
Semira	14	16	5	Addis Ababa	Father
Beza	13	17	8	Gondar	Father
Almaz	13	17	6	Dessie	Father
Mulu	15	17	6	Addis Ababa	Stepfather
Hadas	14	15	8	Addis Ababa	Stepfather
Azeb	11	12	2	Dessie	Uncle
Gifti	11	12	3	Addis Ababa	Uncle
Aziza	13	15	6	Butajira	Brother in-law
Tsehay	14	16	Illiterate	Kersa	Cousin

### The Violent Incidents

In all the children's cases, sexual abuse took place in their own home or where they lived at the time, unprotected and powerless. Tsehay lived in her uncle's house working as a nanny to take care of her uncle's newborn baby, and that was where she was abused at the age of 14. She explained:

*It was one of the usual days. I was doing the household chores. While I was making the bed my cousin came from the back and grabbed by hips, I fought and shouted but I couldn't escape, he raped me (Tsehay, in-depth interview, March 20, 2017).*

Similarly, Azeb came from Dessie to Addis Ababa at the age of 10 to live with her uncle helping him with the household chores. He was, in turn, to send her to school. She was raped by her other uncle at home when she was 11.

*I was doing the dishes after I put the baby to sleep. When I heard a song from my hometown on the radio, I went into the house to listen. It was, then, my other uncle who came for a medical treatment who choked me with a pillow and raped me” (Azeb, in-depth interview, March 16, 2017).*

Similar to other studies (Lalor & McElvany, 2008; Mekuria et al. 2015; ACPF & Oak Foundation, 2019; Selengia et al., 2020; Mekonnen & Tsega 2024), in these girls' case, the abuse was perpetrated by family members or close relatives. The culturally expected roles and behaviors of boys and girls differ. Because they are females, most spend a lot of their time at home taking care of household chores (Camfield & Tafere, 2011) increasing the risk of abuse. Studies show that with regard to intrafamilial sexual abuse home is a high risk place for girls (Selengia et al., 2020; ACPF & Oak Foundation, 2019).

Mulu lived with her mother and stepfather after her father passed away. Her mother sold butter buying it from a town called *Sheno*. The incident happened when she was 15, when her mother travelled to get butter. She described:

*He [her stepfather] was a nice guy for the first few months. Eventually his behavior changed not only towards me, but also towards my mom. He nagged her because of me. He constantly undermined me in front of my friends. But what I didn't like most about him was his touching my private parts, which made me feel uncomfortable. ... That day he*

*kept on touching me, and finally he raped me (Mulu, in-depth interview, March 15, 2017).*

Another girl raped by her stepfather is Hadas. He insulted, slapped and mistreated her when her mother was not around, but the worst happened when her mother was admitted to a hospital to give birth to her younger sibling. She said, “He knew my mom was not around and no one would be there; I was a 14 year-old girl when he raped me” (Hadas in-depth interview, April 3, 2017). Studies also demonstrate that in families where mothers and fathers do not live together, the absence of a mother coupled with the presence of a stepfather is a risk factor for girls’ sexual abuse (Collin-Vézina1 et al., 2013).

The other culprits in intrafamilial sexual abuse are fathers. In this study four out of the ten girls were abused by their respective fathers. Almaz was raped by her father when she was 13. She moved to Addis Ababa to live with him upon his request. She explained:

*... one night he came home late and knocked at the door. I opened and we slept on the same bed, as usual. Unlike the other days he touched my private parts and tried to kiss me forcefully, then he raped me. I got pregnant after that incident. (Almaz, in- depth interview, March 16, 2017).*

Beza was also raped by her father at 13. She explained:

*I was born in Gondar and when I turned four, I came to Addis Ababa with my parents. When I was a twelve, my mother went abroad, which left me and my younger sister without a mother. At that time, all domestic chores fell on my shoulder. However, the responsibilities*

*were minor compared to what I experienced. My biological father raped me (Beza, in-depth interview, March 16, 2017).*

At the age of 14, Semira was abused by her father multiple times. “My father raped me more than twice.” (Semira, in depth interview, March 9, 2017). She believes that her mother’s absence exposed her to the abuse. Despite the expectations that fathers take care of and protect their children, in the case of intrafamilial sexual abuse, they are among the individuals that sexually abuse their daughters (Girgira et al., 2014;; Kocturka & Yukselb, 2019).

Gifti recounted that she lived with her grandparents and uncle since her parents got divorced when she was a little girl. That was why she had to be raised by her grandparents until the age of 11, when she was raped by her uncle (in-depth interview, March 17, 2017).

In this study a brother-in-law is among the perpetrators. Aziza was raped when she was 13. She explained,

*I lived with both my parents in Butajjra town. But when I grew up, I started getting sick. I couldn’t even control my hands and legs. As it got more difficult to attend school, I dropped out at grade 6. My sister brought me to Addis Ababa so I could get religious treatment, Tsebel<sup>3</sup>. But sadly, her husband raped me and now I have a son from him ... (Aziza, in-depth interview, March 14, 2017).*

Several factors have contributed to the children’s becoming a victim of intrafamilial sexual abuse, including their age, their lack of connections, their responsibilities at home, their family’s situation, and the socio-cultural context in which

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<sup>3</sup> Holy water Orthodox Christians use to be healed from illnesses.

they live. In addition, the girls were abused by close family members including fathers, whom the girls would not suspect to perpetrates the violence. The next section analyses these factors in the light of ecological approach.

### **Individual Factors**

The first level in the ecological model identifies the biological and personal history factors that an individual has, which makes her vulnerable to violence (Krug, Dahlber, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). In our study, despite the differences in their background, the study participants were all vulnerable to sexual violence. As also indicated in Table 1 earlier, the children were at an age which makes them dependent on and subordinate to adults.

Female children in Ethiopia are disadvantaged from two perspectives. Children in general are expected to obey adults and individuals who are older than themselves, and prioritize the needs of other family members over their own. As children who internalized these values, “They are likely to perceive their needs as interdependent with those of other family members rather than taking priority over them” (Abebe & Kjørholt 2009, 190). Bowman and Brundige (2014) further asserted that in most places of Africa, children hold the lowest rung in the status hierarchy. This is especially true for girls who may be considered as outsiders with the assumption that eventually they would be given to another family upon marriage. Additional to the hierarchical relation which puts all children in a disadvantageous position, female children experience another layer of subordination due to their gender. They are supposed to be quiet and care for the family, and thus spend most of their time at home undertaking chores before and after school (Camfield & Tafere, 2011; Pankhurst et al., 2016; Kebede & Belay, 2020). When the number of male children in the household is more, girls will have



more chores as they have to take care of the needs of all family members, and boys can command girls due to the gender norms (Mesfin et al., 2022). As shown earlier, Tsehay, Aziza, and Azeb were raped at home while carrying out household chores.

The girls practiced what Gilligan (1982) called ethics of care. Their actions and decisions considered the protection and welfare of their family members. Similar to the finding of Dibaba (2007), the children in this study reiterated that they reported or told another person about the problem after a long time, and for some after repeated violence. Beza explained it took her a long time and multiple abuses by her father since her father warned her that if she told anybody he would kill her sister and her mother. Beza explained. “For the last one year, the problems I was facing became my secret for the sake of my younger sister. When it became out of my control, I decided to leave.” Almaz also decided not to tell anybody about the abuse by her brother-in-law, because her whole family depended financially on her sister and her brother-in-law. In addition, her brother-in-law warned her that if her sister found out what happened, she would die from her blood pressure. As Jones et al. (2021) explained filial obedience and loyalty to the family oblige children to keep themselves from talking about the abuse or reporting.

There are also times when the children did not know what happened and had difficulty articulating the sexual abuse, which might have restrained them from talking about it. One of the children in the study explained that she did not know whether it was something to talk about because there was no bleeding and no sign of bruise on her body (Aziza, in depth interview, March 14, 2017). Since sexual matters are not discussed in the family, some children were not aware of what sexual violence meant, they did not know what to do about it when they encountered one. Lack of discussion

about sexuality as one of the factors that exposes female children to sexual violence and a hinderance to address the problem in timely manner has been noted in other studies as well (Gebeyehu & Shebebaw, 2014; Mekuria et al., 2015; McKibbin et al., 2017; Abera et al., 2021).

### **The Immediate Context**

The immediate points of interaction for children that play significant roles in their development include family, schools, and neighborhood, which according to ecological approach are termed microsystem. Since our focus is intrafamilial sexual abuse we give emphasis to the family environment, talking about related structures when relevant.

All the children in our study lived in families where one or both parents were absent: six lived with close and distant relatives, three with their mothers absent, and one with a mother that traveled out of town frequently. According to the data, living without biological parents or a mother is found to be one of the risk factors for female child sexual abuse.

Family structure is the most potential risk factor in child sexual abuse. Children who live with two married biological parents are relatively at lower risk for abuse. The risk increases for children who live with non-biological parents including those who live with stepparents or a single parent (Teferi, 2014; Gebeyehu & Shebabaw, 2014; Nuru, 2017; Adinew et al., 2018; Abera et al., 2024). Similarly, findings from other countries show that children living without either parent are ten times more likely to be sexually abused than children who live with both biological parents (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2011; Lippert et al., 2009).

Six of the children in this study lived with close and distant relatives. Some served as nannies or as a house help, indicating the position they hold in relation to other family members. For example, Tsehay was given to a relative at the age of 12, and after two years she ran away to live with her uncle serving as a nanny. Azeb came to Addis Ababa to help her uncle with domestic work, while her uncle was, in turn, to send her to school. Gifti lived with her grandparents since her parents were divorced. These children living without their biological parents are more prone to various abuses including sexual violence (Gebeyehu & Shebabaw, 2014; Abera et al., 2021).

The girls lived in crowded households, which plays a role in sexual abuse. None of the children had their own bedroom. They slept in a room along with other family members. Gifti explained, “We lived in a small room around Kolfe area, my younger sister and I slept next to our uncle.” Semira also mentioned, “My parents rented one room around Addis Sefer. There was no other room to change our clothes or to prepare food or to sleep. All our activities took place in that same room.” Almaz shared a bed with her father who raped her.

Living in a crowded home due to low income, along with other factors such as living with non-biological families, are microsystem factors that expose girls to interfamilial sexual abuse (Ezekiel et al., 2017). A study by Nuru (2017) explains that children in low socioeconomic status households are three times as likely to be identified as survivors of child sexual abuse. Teferi (2014) also highlighted that in Addis Ababa, most survivors were from Kolfe Keranio, Yeka and Nifas Silk Lafto sub-cities, which are densely populated and families are from lower socio-economic status with poor living conditions.

One of the features of intrafamilial sexual abuse is that, in most cases, both perpetrators and victims live in the same house (Paige & Thornton, 2015), where it is likely to increase threats and revengeful acts against victims in case they intend to report or talk about the abuse. This is, especially, scary for girls who witness violence. Aziza explained that her brother-in-law, the perpetrator, hit her sister in front of her and the neighbors. After he raped Aziza, he explained to her that her sister would die if she found out about the rape. Hadas was always slapped and mistreated by her stepfather which put fear in her. Gifti explained that her mother left because her husband had abused her, which left her exposed to being abused by him. In addition to the fear or threat of revenge, the girls who lived with the perpetrators were more likely to be abused multiple times. Supporting this, studies reveal a number of factors that keep abused girls from reporting. These include lack of information about where and how to report, a need to protect the family, fear or retaliation from the abuser and financial dependence (Mekonnen & Tsega, 2024).

In some cases, the children were not supported by other family members when the violence was reported (Alaggia, 2010; Bowman & Brundige, 2014; Paige & Thornton, 2015). In our study Beza's mother asked her daughter to deny that she was abused when asked by the police, even when she knew what her husband did to his own daughter. Her intention was to save her husband from imprisonment and protect the family from collapsing. In her study of survivors of intrafamilial sexual abuse, Alaggia (2010) also found that, in some cases, mothers were not supportive of their children's attempt to disclose or report the abuse due to fear of disrupting or upsetting the family. According to Bowman and Brundige (2014), in Sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to the denial and disbelief that mothers show upon discovering the sexual violence, they are

themselves likely to be submissive to the authority of their husbands in fear of upsetting the economy upon which the entire family depends.

### **Relations and Connections**

The relations the children and their families have with relatives and friends or the lack of them, as they relate to the incidence of intrafamilial sexual abuse are presented in this section. According to the ecological approach, relations within immediate circles fall under mesosystem. Mesosystem is about the interaction of different factors or structures existing in the microsystem. These include the relation of a family with close relatives, friends, and church. In our study, most of the children did not have much of these connections since, as girls, they had to take care of household chores. Some were required to stay home after school and never to stay late in school or elsewhere. Almaz's father did not allow her to go anywhere except school, and in the absence of a mother, she always felt lonely. Thus, she was not able to tell anyone about the abuse, and when it became unbearable, she left the house. The lack of social relations as a risk factor for violence has been underlined by Jones et al. (2021). They explained that those children who are socially isolated are at a higher risk for violence.

Beza, one of the girls, was abused by her father for over a year, after which the case was reported to the police. She explained that it was too difficult to accept the fact that her father was doing it to her and the fear that others would be skeptic, especially because her father was a priest and respected in the neighborhood. The fear that victims may not be believed has also surfaced as a reason for not reporting in other studies as well (Koçturka & Yuksel, 2019). This fear, in addition to the culture in Ethiopia that places children at a subordinate position, discourages the children from reporting.

Another mesosystem factor in our study that indirectly affected the children's development and welfare was the relation the family and the children had with close and distant relatives, and the expectations attached. In Ethiopian society, children are expected to attend to the needs of parents and other extended family. "Children are often dutiful to family collectives; and kinship systems" (Abebe, 2019. p. 5). There is a feeling of filial obligations to provide support to parents (Tafere, 2015). Sometimes this sense of obligation and the responsibilities taken to attend to the needs of extended family members interfere with one's responsibility to immediate family. In the case of Mitu, her mother had gone for a month to take care of her own mother who was admitted to a hospital when the violence happened at the age of 8. In this situation, her absence exposed Mitu to sexual abuse. As shown in previous studies absence of a mother is one of the risk factors for intrafamilial sexual abuse (Abera et al., 2021).

Another dimension of relationships and responsibilities that exposed the children to intrafamilial sexual abuse is families' consent for their girls to be raised by relatives believing that they would be able to get opportunities for education or work. Four of the children lived with relatives; Azeb and Tsehay lived with their respective uncles, Gifti with her grandparents, and Aziza with her sister. All these girls were vulnerable and were abused by a relative who lived in the same house. Studies support the contention that living without parents is one of the contributory factors for sexual abuse of children (Gebeyehu & Shebebaw, 2014; Mekuria et al., 2015; Abera et al., 2021).

In all the circumstances, the children were not able to interact and communicate easily to have their concerns raised and voices heard. The relationships and communications they and many children in similar studies

had with family members were not favorable either because of inaccessibility or lack of support (Koçturk & Yuksel, 2019; Adinew et al., 2018).

### **Work and Work Situation**

Work and working condition of a parent/parents is one of the factors that impact the lives of children. The interaction between work and family makes one important element of exosystem factors in an ecological approach. These are the factors that do not have direct relationship with the child, but which affect the child's development and the family environment. Like other studies (Koçturk & Yuksel, 2019; Kebede & Belay, 2020), all the children in this study came from low-income families. Some of the fathers were engaged in subsistence farming in the village from which the children came, while others were daily laborers. One was sick and unable to work. Mothers undertook small trades such as selling butter, food, and other small items to earn a living and support their children. The data in the study showed that economic status of families have bearing on sexual abuse against female child.

As mentioned earlier, in all the cases where mothers lived in the family, they were busy working to take care of their families. They were engaged in small businesses away from home, which left their daughters vulnerable as they spend most of their time at home to carry out the household chores. As explained earlier, Mulu's stepfather raped her when her mother went out of town for her small business. Beza's mother was not in the family for a few years while she worked as a housemaid abroad. Beza explained,

*We were living in poverty and my mother decided to go to United Arab Emirates (UAE) to work so that we could be provided better. If we had*

*had money my mother would not have gone and my father might not have raped me (Beza, in depth interview, March16, 2017).*

In this context, work situation of family members, especially that of mothers and the lack of supportive structures in their environment have been contributing factors.

### **Gender Norms**

The cultural beliefs and attitudes that encourage male dominance are part of the gender norms that fall under macrosystem. These may encourage violence through creating a convenient climate for violence and reducing inhibitions. Ethiopia, being a patriarchal society, bestows more power upon men than women whose basic manifestation is family relationship (Kebede & Belay, 2020). A study undertaken among 11 ethnic groups in Ethiopia showed that men participants in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) wanted women to remain at home, bear and raise children, be obedient to their husbands and become good cooks and mothers. They indicated that women should be abided by their culture and tradition, keep low profile and help their husbands in every possible way (Habtamu et al., 2003). This domination by men, which sometimes tolerates violence against women is highly internalized and accepted by members of the society including women themselves. According to Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), 63% of the women surveyed indicated that a husband is justified in beating his wife for reasons such as leaving the house without informing him, neglecting the children, burning food, or arguing with him (CSA, 2016). In this study, Gifti explained that her mother left due to the violence she suffered from her husband making her vulnerable to sexual abuse.



Men always have the upper hand even in matters that affect the entire family, and they are more heard than women and children. Beza's father told neighbors that his daughter might be sexually active and that she was not a virgin, even though he was the one who abused her. She elaborated,

*I spent all my time at church and when I returned home he had told our neighbor that I was not a virgin, and that he suspected I was sexually active, and thus wanted to get me tested to find out if I was virgin or not. I was the only person who knew about what he did to me. No one would believe me because he told everybody that I was indecent (Beza, in depth interview, March 16, 2017).*

None of her family members including her mother believed Beza's side of the story. Other studies also reveal the lack of support from families and stigma in the neighbourhood that victims face for reporting the violence (Alagia, 2010).

Children in the Ethiopian society are highly valued, but they do not take part in decision making in the family, schools and communities at large. The child rearing system is predominantly authoritarian, which implies that parents or guardians of children are overly strict and believe in absolute obedience to authority. Supporting this, Jones et al. (2021) explain the child rearing practices in Ethiopia as repressive accompanied by corporal punishment.

The absence of validation and support from family members, which is influenced by the culture also deprive children of the power to talk about the violence. Beza further explained that despite the sacrifices she made in caring for the family bearing the sexual violence perpetrated by her father, her family did not want to stand by her when she wanted to report. In addition the lack of family support, the possibility of getting the

blame, embarrassment and fear of stigma discourage the children from talking about the abuse or reporting it (Koçturka & Yuksel, 2019; Mekuria et al., 2015). Embarrassment and stigma further isolate the girls depriving of necessary services. Regarding this, one of the participants in this study mentioned, “I don’t want to go anywhere because all my friends heard about my case, so I don’t even want to go to school” (Mulu, in depth interview, March 15, 2017).

In this study, more than half of the children came to report after multiple abuses. What the data show is that in addition to the other factors, the gender norms that place women in subordinate position, and push female children to be reserved and obedient, create a fertile environment for girls’ exposure to intrafamilial sexual abuse and failure to report in case it happens.

## **Conclusions**

Child sexual abuse is a reality in Ethiopia. Retrospective studies mostly conducted on school girls or college students to find out prevalence of sexual violence show a percentage ranging from 23 to 61%. However, much is not known about interfamilial sexual abuse except some reports that come from hospitals, shelters and associations working on the area.

Shifting the focus from prevalence to the lived experience of children who went through intrafamilial sexual abuse, the current study investigated the incidence, the context in which abuse happens, and the various factors that make children vulnerable to intrafamilial sexual abuse within the framework of an ecological approach.

The girls in this study were abused by family members, at their own home.

Fathers, step-fathers, uncles, bothers-in-law, and a cousin were seen as the perpetrators. The children were all young, lacking the information and the ability to articulate what intrafamilial sexual abuse meant, and who did not know what they needed to do when they were abused, or who were unable to report when they were attacked. In the context of the ecological approach, all these characteristics made them vulnerable to violence.

Most of the children lived in homes where one biological parent was missing or with close relatives such as grandparents or uncles. In all the cases they continued living together with the perpetrators, which led to multiple abuses and fear of revenge that prohibited them from reporting. Their homes were crowded with the girls sleeping in one room with a parent, a stepfather, or other males relatives. In one case a girl shared a bed with her father. In some cases family members were not supportive and the girls were discouraged from talking or reporting the abuse. The home environment which makes up the microsystem created a fertile situation for the vulnerability of the girls to intrafamilial sexual abuse and constrained their actions.

The children spent most of their time at home taking care of household chores. Even those who go to school were required to stay home after school. They lacked networks to get information and talk about their problems. The relationship of the family with extended families and the expectations attached made some of the children to live away from the family, either to support extended family members or with the expectation that extended family members would help out the children in their education. Parents' responsibilities to their extended family members took them away from home leaving the girls alone. In all the situations,

the children missed a nurturing social relationship with their close families, age mates and other adults in the sphere of mesosystem that makes an important factor for their healthy development and wellbeing.

The exosystem factors were not favorable either. All the girls lived in poverty, as reflected in their living conditions, and the absence of mothers who engaged in engagement in economic activities that took them away from home, burdened the girls with responsibilities and exposing them to violence. The working situations of parents had a direct impact on the abuses encountered by the children.

The macrosystem, the context, which shapes the values given to female children, their assigned gender roles, and the gender relationship which disempower girls and in women in general played a role in the incidence and perpetration of sexual abuse against the girls. Based on the findings and analysis, a diverse set of factors operating at different levels of the ecology contributed to the girls' vulnerability sustained the practice. Therefore, in order to address the problems of intrafamilial sexual abuse, all factors operating at these different levels of ecology need to be considered.

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