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Vulnerability of Internally Displaced Children to Sexual Abuse During Climate-Change-Related Disasters in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: A Social Work Perspective

Molly ShayamanoDepartment of Social Work, Walter Sisulu University,
Eastern Cape Province, South AfricaORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3353-2823>

Abstract

The increasing frequency, intensity and severity of weather-related disasters across the globe, including South Africa, has profound impacts on the affected communities, forcing them into internal displacement. These disaster-induced displacements have raised significant concerns regarding the safety and well-being of children, as they are the most vulnerable group during such events. Grounded within the Ecological Systems theory, which posits that children's exposure to abuse and exploitation can be explained by a complex interplay among five systems, this study discussed how the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems contribute to children's vulnerability. This study aimed at exploring the vulnerabilities of internally displaced children to sexual abuse, highlighting the factors that heighten risks. Secondary sources were used to collect data for the study, which was then analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the vulnerabilities of internally displaced children to child sexual abuse and exploitation within the Eastern Cape province in South Africa are driven by the disruption of family and community structures, poor living conditions in the temporary shelters, breakdown of child protection systems and economic instability. The study emphasised the need for social workers to be proactive in establishing and implementing measures to safeguard internally displaced children and ultimately reduce their vulnerability to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Keywords

Child sexual abuse, Climate change disasters, Eastern Cape, Internally displaced children, Vulnerability

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The frequency, severity and intensity of disaster outbreaks is increasing at an alarming rate globally (Chapungu & Nhamo, 2021), resulting in significant harm to the ecosystem. This increase in disaster events is attributed to climate change, as a substantial portion of these occurrences is directly linked to climate change impacts. In 2023, a total of 399 disaster events were recorded across the globe, affecting approximately 93.1 million people (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters [CRED], 2024), and 240 of these disasters were linked to climate change phenomena. Such disaster events disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, particularly those in developing countries, posing severe damages to the environment, infrastructure, animals, people's health and livelihoods, and in extreme cases, loss of life.

As these extreme weather events, such as droughts, heatwaves, floods and cyclones, become more frequent and severe due to climate change, the affected communities are increasingly disrupted, leading to internal displacement. Cazabat (2024) conceptualises internal displacement as the forced movement of people from their homes or communities, either temporarily or permanently within their country's borders due to conflict, violence or disasters. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2023), disaster-induced internal displacements account for a significant portion of all internal displacements globally. In 2022, there were over 60 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), with 32.6 million people being displaced due to climate change and its related disasters (IDMC, 2023), indicating that disasters account for more than half of the world's displacement statistics.

In South Africa, about 62 000 disaster-related internal displacements were recorded in 2022 (IDMC, 2023), and children are among these IDPs. According to Jegede, Yeakula, Ater, Nare and Fengu (2022), South Africa has experienced and will continue to experience significant climatic abnormalities resulting in more frequent and severe weather-related disasters that force the affected communities into displacement. For instance, the 2022 floods in KwaZulu Natal province in South Africa displaced more than 40,000 people into temporary shelters within the province (United Nations in South Africa, 2022). As climate change continues to exacerbate disaster risks, many people, including children, will remain vulnerable to displacement. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2023) estimated that approximately 43.1 million children were displaced globally due to weather-related disasters. This has impacted the security and safety of these children, exposing them to conditions that are detrimental to their well-being. Several research studies have linked internal displacement to increased violence and abuse of children (Agrawal & Kelley, 2020; Thurston, Stöckl & Ranganathan, 2021). At the time of writing this paper, there were reported floods that affected other provinces but the most affected is the KwaZulu Natal province of South Africa.

Youssef and Wangle (2022) posit that IDPs are often placed in temporary shelters or camps, which are hostile environments characterised by lack of privacy and security. In these settings, children, as one of the most vulnerable populations, face heightened risks of abuse and exploitation due to the dire living conditions that increase their vulnerability to potential perpetrators. The temporary shelters are often overcrowded places with limited access to basic services and adequate infrastructure (The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024), exposing internally displaced children to child sexual abuse and exploitation as children will be sharing living spaces with adults who may be potential perpetrators. UNICEF (2023) argues that internally displaced children, particularly girls are often forced into early marriages, sexual abuse and forced marriages as parents try to alleviate their economic woes. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (2020) argues that children face heightened risks of violence, abuse and exploitation during disasters compared to other age groups. Consequently, as climate change continues to drive displacement and instability, the vulnerability of children to child sexual abuse and exploitation is likely to rise significantly.

Research shows that child sexual abuse has become a critical issue globally with cases of child sexual abuse increasing at an alarming rate (Keikabile, Matlakala & Mapaling, 2024). In South Africa, child sexual abuse has become a significant social issue adversely affecting children (Masilo, 2019). The occurrence of disasters escalates the risks of child sexual abuse due to the chaotic situations created by such events (Seddighi, Salmani, Javadi & Seddighi, 2021). Some studies have attributed the increased risk of child sexual abuse during humanitarian emergencies to weakened child protection systems and insufficient child abuse preventative mechanisms (Tirivangasi, Nyahunda, Mabila & Zingwena, 2021). To this end, this paper is necessitated by the need to understand the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of internally displaced children to child sexual abuse. The paper seeks to answer the question of how the vulnerabilities faced by internally displaced children during climate-change-related disasters in South Africa contribute to their increased risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation, emphasising the urgent need for social workers to develop, implement and strengthen protective measures to safeguard children during emergencies. Social workers play an essential role in offering relief measures to individuals, families, groups, and community members affected by floods, and these relief measures include but are not limited to the provision of temporary shelters as well as food and psychosocial services. It is the argument of this paper that it is important to reconsider how natural disasters trigger the vulnerability of children to become victims of sexual abuse. This is considering the shelters provided to the victims of floods are communal, and as such, the normal family setting is disrupted; thus, strangers have access to children.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by the Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977), which provides a framework for understanding an individual and how multiple interconnected systems impact them. The framework can be adopted in the assessment of risks and protective factors (Sabri, Hong, Campbell & Cho, 2013), thus making it fundamental in this study to assess the vulnerabilities of internally displaced children to child sexual abuse. Based on this framework, children's vulnerability to sexual abuse can be explained by a complex interplay among the micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems. Each of these nested systems shapes the overall environment in which children live, significantly influencing their vulnerability to abuse. Using this EST, the researcher aims to explore the multifaceted factors that contribute to the vulnerability of internally displaced children to sexual abuse during disasters, examining how interactions across the five systems – micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems impact their experiences and risks.

Martinello (2020) posits that each of the systems within the ecological system theory contributes to the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse. The microsystem relates to the interpersonal relations of individuals within their immediate environment, such as family and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). During disaster events, family structures are often disrupted, with children being separated from their families, which may expose the children to abuse. Khan (2011) argues that children who lack appropriate adult supervision, care and protection are at higher risk of being sexually abused. The absence of a supportive microsystem leaves children vulnerable and without the necessary safeguards that typically protect them from harm. Martinello (2020) believes that the family is an important element in children's lives as they play a critical role in the prevention, identification and reporting of child sexual abuse. Therefore, disruptions in the child's microsystem may increase exposure to potential abusers.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) depicts the mesosystem as the linkages or relationships between two or more settings surrounding the child, for example, the relations between the home and school or community. Schools and communities often offer a protective environment for children; however, in disaster situations, schools may become non-functional. This may exacerbate the children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation since they will be idle. Mudavanhu (2014) posits that disasters destroy school infrastructure, which results in children not going to school, and this may lead to early marriages for the affected children, particularly the girl child.

In addition, the ecosystem refers to elements of the environment beyond the immediate system (Sabri et al., 2013). Bronfenbrenner (1977) explains that the exosystem comprises linkages between two or more settings, with the individual not being at the centre of at least one of the microsystems. In disaster situations, the breakdowns in the exosystem may have a significant negative impact on children. For instance, disasters often lead to changes in livelihoods, which can result in financial instability for the household. As a coping mechanism, parents may feel pressured to marry off their children to alleviate the economic burden. Chikoko and Chihya (2023) posit that most girl children are susceptible to early marriages in the face of climate change, particularly droughts, as a means of reducing the number of dependents to support.

At the macrosystem level, broader belief systems, cultural and economic contexts, and knowledge bodies significantly influence an individual's development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The shared community beliefs or cultural norms play a significant role in shaping the experiences of children during emergencies. In some communities, sexual abuse victims face stigmatisation and are often blamed for their abuse. This fosters a culture of silence, where the victims are reluctant to report abuse due to fear of being shamed and blamed. This worsens in disaster situations due to the breakdown of child protection systems.

Lastly, the chronosystem highlights the impact of time on each of the systems (Martinello, 2020). Bronfenbrenner (1994) explains the chronosystem as the change or consistency in the characteristics of an individual and further argues that this change or consistency can also be considered in terms of the environment in which the individual lives. In the context of disasters, the chronosystem highlights changes to the environment, family structure and economic conditions. In the context of this study, these changes occur in terms of the children's place of residence as the children are forced to leave their homes in temporary shelters. This displacement often increases the children's exposure to child sexual abuse risks.

Furthermore, disruptions in any of the systems – micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono systems can result in adverse effects for children. In the context of disasters, children face heightened risks of sexual abuse because of instability in each of the systems because of such crises. The utilisation of the Ecological Systems Theory lens in this study offers a holistic understanding of the multifaceted dynamics that shape the vulnerability of internally displaced children to sexual abuse during disaster events. Based on this theory, these vulnerabilities emanate from a complex interplay of the five systems discussed above. By holistically understanding such dynamics, interventions can be developed to address the vulnerabilities emanating from all levels and improve child protection during disasters.

METHODOLOGY

This study is underpinned by a qualitative research approach using secondary data collection methods. Data was collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports and government reports. Reports and articles that met this study's inclusion criteria were reviewed, and relevant information that answered the study questions was extracted and used to support arguments. The inclusion criteria for the sources were clearly defined, where articles published between 2017 and 2024 were considered to allow the use of recent information. Additionally, articles focusing on child sexual abuse during disasters in the Eastern Cape province were included in this study. The inclusion and exclusion criteria involved multiple stages to maintain the scientific rigour of the study. Databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus and JSTOR were used. The key search words included child sexual abuse and disasters, displaced children, child exploitation during disasters, climate change and child sexual abuse, and the impact of flooding on child welfare. Titles and abstracts were reviewed, and full papers of relevant articles were downloaded and evaluated for inclusion in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the study findings. The findings were categorised into several themes: demographic vulnerability, economic vulnerability, structural vulnerability, institutional vulnerability and social vulnerability. These themes emerged from the analysis of grey literature and peer-reviewed articles.

Demographic vulnerability

Gender

While all children are affected by disaster events and experience increased vulnerability because of displacement, girls are disproportionately at high risk of child sexual abuse in such circumstances. This is because families marry off their young daughters for financial relief. Additionally, girls are placed at risk of sexual abuse due to the living conditions within the temporary shelter, where they must share living space with many families under one roof. In 2022, following the flood disaster that affected the Eastern Cape province, men, women, and children were not separated in the temporary shelters but remained in one hall (Parliament Monitoring Group, 2022). This living arrangement increased the girl child's exposure to risk, including the potential for sexual abuse. The Parliament Monitoring Group (2022) further argues that

children who had lost their parents and caregivers were also accommodated in the temporary shelter, sharing sleeping space with men, which exposed the girls to sexual abuse as there were reports that children were raped within these spaces. This finding cements Sloand et al. 's (2017) argument that disasters place adolescent girls at increased risk of being sexually abused because of their gender. Keikabile et al. (2024) also believe that a girl child is more vulnerable to sexual abuse compared to a boy child. However, this does not mean that boys are not also vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.

Economic vulnerability

Economic instability

This study revealed that disasters often destroy people's sources of livelihood, resulting in economic instability for the affected families. As a result, the disaster victims and survivors often resort to drastic measures to curb their financial difficulties. Families displaced following disaster events often lose their belongings, pushing them into poverty. As a coping mechanism, some families resort to marrying off their daughters. In the Eastern Cape, the Department of Social Development Annual performance plan (2024) indicated that the province is prone to weather-related disasters that destroy the natural environment. This significantly impacts the food security of families that rely on the natural environment for survival. These impacts perpetuate existing vulnerabilities, affecting children living in poverty-stricken families, who end up in child marriages. Chikoko and Chihiya (2023) have shown that economic hardships during disasters often leaves families stranded and resorting to extreme measures such as forcing children into child marriages. These child marriages are adopted as a short-term coping strategy in response to the income shocks necessitated by climate change and its related disasters (Pope, McMullen, Baschieri, Philipose, Udeh, Diallo & McCoy, 2021).

In addition, several studies have linked climate change-related disasters to child marriages, highlighting that disaster occurrences result in an increase in the prevalence of child marriage cases in the affected communities (Pope et al, 2021; Datzberger, Howard-Merrill, Parkes & Iorfa, 2024), which can be attributed to the economic hardships brought about by disasters. These child marriages are acts of violence and abuse against the affected children. However, the situation of child marriages during disasters is notably different. Corno, Hildebrandt and Voena (2020) argue that the occurrence of drought in India led to a decrease in cases of child marriages by 4%. This shows that cultural differences play a part in either increasing or decreasing the vulnerability of children to abuse and violence in emergencies.

Furthermore, disaster situations expose children to abuse and exploitation, with the perpetrators exploiting their vulnerabilities, often coercing children into abusive situations in exchange for necessities such as food and school supplies. These are extreme situations where adults manipulate children due to their vulnerable circumstances. This phenomenon was also noted in a study conducted by Chikoko and Chihiya (2023) in Zimbabwe following a drought event in Bikita, with girl children being sexually abused and impregnated in exchange for food. This is an indication that starvation and hunger are likely to increase the vulnerability of children to abuse and exploitation.

The Ecological Systems theory underpinning this study posits that system breakdowns shape children's development and well-being, and disruptions in any of the systems may result in instability. In this instance, families face economic instability due to disruptions of people's sources of livelihoods. As a result, child marriage is seen as a coping mechanism to deal with the economic hardships associated with disaster occurrences.

Structural vulnerability

Insecure shelter and living conditions

During disaster situations, people are sometimes forced to leave their homes and communities for places of safety. Mostly, the displaced individuals will be housed in camps, temporary tents, schools or community halls, where the living conditions are dire. These living conditions create an environment conducive for perpetrators to lure children and sexually abuse them. In 2024, the Nelson Mandela Metro in the Eastern Cape experienced devastating floods, causing significant damage to infrastructure and leading to the displacement of the affected households (South African Government, 2024). As a result of this displacement, the victims were placed in temporary relocation facilities in community halls (South African Government, 2024). Studies have shown that the living conditions in these temporary relocation facilities are not conducive (Jegede et al., 2022; Atim, 2022), placing children at heightened risk of sexual abuse.

In addition, some families would be housed in temporary facilities for longer periods, which further exacerbates the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse due to the overcrowding in these facilities. During the 2022 floods in the Eastern Cape and KZN provinces, people were still living in temporary facilities four months after the disaster events (Parliament of South Africa, 2022). In many instances, these temporary housing facilities are schools, churches or community halls, forcing more than one family into an open space under one roof, which is unsafe for children. This situation exposes children to abuse as they will be sharing living space with many families, who may sometimes be strangers. The perpetrators may be among those they share the living space with. This is consistent with the findings by Azad and Khan (2015) in Bangladesh, which found that children displaced by disasters are placed at risk of molestation and sexual abuse due to the dire living conditions in the temporary shelters where children are forced to share beds with extended relatives, who may be potential perpetrators.

Institutional vulnerability

Breakdown of Child Protection Services

During disaster events, there will be a breakdown in the existing child protection services within communities. This study established that the institutions responsible for child protection services may be overwhelmed or non-functional during disasters, thus, increasing the vulnerability of internally displaced children to abuse and exploitation. In 2022, the flood disasters that occurred in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal displaced many families leaving them in urgent need of psychosocial support services. During this crisis, the Department of Social Development was overwhelmed and struggled to provide adequate assistance to disaster victims due to a shortage of social workers available to render these essential services (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). In such chaotic situations, some individuals may take advantage of the absence of social protection services to abuse children.

Social vulnerability

Disruption of family structures

Disasters often disrupt the existing family structures. Children either get separated from their parents or become orphaned. These family structures are often the sources of child protection; thus, their breakdown or disruption increases the vulnerability of children to child sexual abuse. The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2022) noted that there were children orphaned by the 2022 floods in the Eastern Cape. These children were living in shared temporary shelters, which exposed them to increased risk of sexual abuse and exploitation as they had no parents to protect them. This concurs with the arguments of Keikabile et al. (2024) that children with absent parents are more vulnerable to child sexual abuse and exploitation due to the potential perpetrators having unlimited easy access to the children. They further argue that perpetrators often target children separated from their families to groom and abuse them.

In addition, Keikabile et al. (2022) also argue that orphaned children are at an increased risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation because the children will be exposed to different relatives or caregivers. In African contexts, the extended family is often considered one of the key structures in protecting and raising children. However, this situation may expose children to potential perpetrators as there will be no immediate family members to protect the children.

The Ecological Systems Theory underpinning this study posits that the home environment or family, where primary relationships are established, plays a significant role in the well-being of children (Asad et al., 2013). Given that children rely on the microsystem for support, protection and stability, the destruction of these family structures following disaster events may leave children vulnerable to child sexual abuse. During disaster events, families may lose their homes and become displaced, forcing them to live in temporary shelters, which exposes them to living conditions that threaten their safety and well-being. In some instances, children are separated from their families or even become orphaned. In line with the Ecological Systems theory, this study argues that disturbances within the microsystem perpetuate internally displaced children's vulnerability to child sexual abuse and exploitation because of the living conditions within the temporary shelters.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

This study's findings are likely to compel social workers to continuously engage in environmental issues to support the families and communities they serve. As climate change-related disasters continue to occur, the social work profession must be proactive in establishing and implementing measures to safeguard those displaced by these events from child sexual abuse and exploitation. Social work practitioners should strengthen child protection mechanisms during disasters through the establishment of child-friendly spaces and be able to respond effectively in emergency situations by prioritising the safety and well-being of children.

Furthermore, disasters are complex events that create intricate challenges that threaten the safety and well-being of children. Given the complexity of disasters and displacement, social workers cannot work in silos but need to be part of a multidisciplinary team to develop sustainable child protection interventions that address the vulnerabilities of internally displaced children. Social work practitioners can play a critical role in linking affected families with financial support programs, which will reduce the financial pressures that expose children to abuse and exploitation. Programs aimed at strengthening family coping mechanisms and providing access to livelihood opportunities for internally displaced people should be prioritised as they are likely to help reduce children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

In addition, social workers should assume the role of advocates for the prevention of child marriages and take the lead in protecting children, particularly those internally displaced by disasters. The findings indicate that internally displaced children may likely face double vulnerability due to the combined impacts of being displaced and being forced into early marriage. As such, social workers should raise awareness within IDPs about this harmful practice. By raising awareness of child protection issues, social workers can help create a safer environment for internally displaced children in the aftermath of disasters.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the vulnerabilities of internally displaced children to child sexual abuse. The findings reveal that children displaced by disaster events face multifaceted vulnerabilities – demographic, economic, structural, institutional, social and cultural vulnerabilities. These displacement-driven vulnerabilities contribute significantly to the heightened

risks of sexual abuse and exploitation faced by internally displaced children. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires calls for a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening economic and social support systems for internally displaced persons. The Eastern Cape province is susceptible to climate change-induced disasters, which exacerbate the risks of internal displacement. As these disasters continue to occur within the province, it is critical for social work practitioners to adopt proactive measures that prioritise the safety of vulnerable children, particularly those displaced by disasters. Such measures may include educating children and families on emergency preparedness and strategies to protect children during emergencies, establishing child-friendly spaces in displacement sites, and facilitating multi-disciplinary collaborations in responding to child protection issues during disasters.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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