An exploratory study on the risk factors to child abuse in primary schools in Kajiado County- Kenya

Findings of a formative research
INTRODUCTION:
According to the World Health Organization, “Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power”. “Child sexual abuse is evidenced as an activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person”(ECSA-HC, 2011). Child abuse is classified into three: sexual, physical and emotional. Whilst neglect includes the failure to provide care and nurturing to a child. Children are vulnerable to different forms of abuse across multiple settings within the community, at home, and in the broader society (ECSA-HC, 2011).

OCCURRENCE OF CHILD ABUSE
Child abuse and neglect happens everywhere, and across all social groups. Literature indicates that child abuse is mostly committed by persons well known to the child(Allen, 1998). These include siblings, parents, teachers, neighbors, and peers. Child abuse and neglect can have a profound impact on the child’s physical and mental health, well-being and development and by extension, on society (Bailey et al., 2007; Butchart et al., 2006; Dorsey et al., 2012; van der Kolk & Courtois, 2005). Exposure to abuse has been documented to have an impact on children’s behavior in the long term (Bailey et al., 2007). It also results in immediate physical or emotional harm or threat of harm to a child, in addition to affecting the child’s social, emotional, and cognitive abilities.

CHILD ABUSE WITHIN SCHOOL SETTINGS
The school has been identified as one of the settings where violence occurs (Pinheiro, 2006). It is the place where children spend most of their time outside the home. Child abuse within the school setting and violence experienced by school-age children has been documented in Kenya. The violence against children (VAC) study (GOK, 2012) indicated that 21.4% females and 20.3% males encountered the first incidence of sexual violence in school whereas 22% girls and 32% boys had their first experience of sexual violence at home as reported by 18-24 year olds. The Kenyan Government has put in place measures to help protect children from abuse. However, children continue to experience violence in schools as indicated by results of the Kenya national survey on violence against children. Findings showed that females and males aged 18 to 24 who experienced any type of unwanted sexual touching prior to age 18 most often reported that the first incident occurred in school. Furthermore, it also indicated that teachers accounted for 99.9% and 96% of perpetrators in positions of authority responsible for inflicting physical abuse on girls and boys respectively including; punching, kicking, whipping or beating with an object.

STUDY RATIONALE:
In line with this, LVCT Health and SOWED Kenya undertook a formative study on child abuse in Kenya primary schools. This formative study therefore sought to explore the types and forms of child abuse, manifestations of risk factors that increase vulnerability to abuse, and the role of parents and teachers in preventing child abuse in primary schools in Kajiado County. The study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the types and forms of child abuse in primary schools in Kajiado County?
- How do risk factors that increase vulnerability to child abuse manifest in Kajiado County primary schools?
- What is the role of parents and teachers in preventing child abuse?

METHODOLOGY
This qualitative exploratory study was implemented in Kajiado County. Four public primary schools, two urban and two rural, were purposively selected as study sites. Ethical review and approval was given by the African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF) Ethics and Scientific Review Committee prior to the commencement of the research. In-depth interviews were conducted with 76 students, 17 teachers, 21 parents, 4 community stakeholders and 13 Government officials between March and June 2014.
KEY FINDINGS

Forms of abuse: Key forms of abuse experienced by children as described respondents included corporal punishment, threats and harsh words, sexual exploitation, exploitation for economic gain, and neglect. However, use of corporal punishment in form of kicking, slapping, caning, harsh treatments was found to be most common

A male 14 year old class 8 student stated, “We are beaten, I have never seen any other punishment, mostly is caning.”

Risk factors to abuse: These included exposure to and use of drugs by students, lack of safe playing fields in schools, witnessing of parental related violence, long distances between home and school. Other factors included limited time parents spend with their children as illustrated below:

- “My father comes home at 10 pm” (13 year old male class 6, student)
- “ I don’t like it when my mother is not around” (14 year old male class 6 student)

In addition, most of the parents interviewed were females who were often sole providers for the needs of the family, due to them being widowed, separated or divorced from their partners. As such, children from some of these homes were expected to support in raising money. Some children were found to engage in sex for food, or support their parents in selling goods. In some instances children were forced to miss school to support their parents in their businesses. This was more pronounced in the urban settings although in the rural areas, especially in the pastoral community, some children would miss school to look after livestock.

Traditional harmful practices, such as “moranism”, female genital mutilation and child marriage are common in this region, and increase vulnerability of girls to abuse.

Limited skills by teachers in managing the large classroom sizes: The large number of students per class was attributed to the introduction of the free primary education scheme resulting on teachers inability to give individualized attention to the students.

Effects of corporal punishment: Physical punishment in some instances resulted to bodily harm and psychological harm; instilling fear in the students with some students running away from school. According to one of the parents: ‘There is a teacher who beats them too much till the children run away. Right now as soon as the children see the teacher, they act like they have seen a doctor. They drop their school bag and run back home. Even recently they ran away from this school, just by seeing the teacher. Because they have been beaten and beaten till the children are scared. Even some children say they want to go to another class or go back to nursery.’ Female parent

Perpetrators of abuse: According to students interviewed, children are in most instances hurt by their teachers and/or fellow students while in school. One 14 year old male class 7 student affirmed being abused by a teacher. ‘I was hit by the math’s teacher, he usually come ask us difficult questions, when you fail to answer you are hit on the head. I started feeling dizzy, my head started aching”. While at home abusers include parents, siblings, other children and neighbours. All respondents indicated that parents and caregivers hurt children. According to one parent, her child confided in her of a child in school who was raped by the father; while another woman informed her of a man who rapes his child, he leaves the wife in bed and goes to the child” One parent indicated that “in this community the people who spoiling children are the adult, old men”. Other parents blamed the abuse of children to their peers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Holistic and comprehensive approaches are required by government and stakeholder to facilitate prevention of child abuse during a child’s formative years.

- More research is needed to better understand not only the magnitude of sexual exploitation by and of adolescent boys, but also the context in which such behavior occurs.
- Also required is a better understanding of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse, particularly in the context of the finding that nonconsensual first sex is largely perpetrated by known persons, including relatives, and whether it is sexual experimentation among age-mates, or coercion by an adult.
- Evidence shows that children who lack healthy parental supervision, or who are continuously exposed to hard discipline and aggression by their parents are at a higher risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence in their adulthood (United Nations Children’s Fund, 2012). Hence need for diversified prevention strategies.

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