



Review

Choice of Non-Disclosure as Agency: A Systematic Review of Non-Disclosure of Sexual Violence in Girlhood in Africa

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Abstract: Africa is home to 308 million girls below the age of 18 of whom at least 50% have experienced sexual violence, despite the existence of international treaties as well as pan-African and national policies aimed at eliminating violence. Past studies on sexual violence against girls have focused on the consequences of violence and the experiences of survivors, including the fact that most violence is not disclosed. Some studies that attempted to outline barriers to the non-disclosure of sexual violence do not acknowledge the agency of survivors, thereby indirectly portraying them as passive victims of these barriers who need protection by adults. The available studies have not analyzed ways in which the survivors' choice not to disclose can be understood as a form of agency. This systematic review was conducted, therefore, to examine the causes of non-disclosure of violence from the survivors' point of view. Findings show that often when girls choose not to disclose sexual violence, they are strategically protecting themselves from further abuse and harm, such as physical punishment for talking about sex, forced marriage, threats of death, etc. The findings of this review have implications for research, policy, and programming. For example, more child-focused methods should be used to further study the non-disclosure of sexual violence.

Keywords: sexual violence; agency; girlhood; choice of non-disclosure



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1. Introduction

Africa is home to over 20% of the world's children, out of which 308 million are girls below the age of 18 [1], most of whom deserve a better childhood. Research by Hillis et al. [2] revealed that at least 50% of children aged 2–17 years in Africa experienced violence in the year prior to their study. Violence against children (VAC) has been receiving global attention over the past decades, with various efforts in place to combat it [3–5]. It features in Article 19 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child [6] and the United Nations' 2030 agenda for sustainable development target 16.2 [7], which focusses on ending all forms of VAC. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child, which was adopted in 1990, requires states to ensure that children are protected from all forms of abuse (Article 16) and sexual exploitation (Article 27) [8]. The African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child developed Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children, as a strategy to protect children from violence [9]. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has a rich child-focused civil society and national specific policies and strategies aimed at protecting children, adolescents and females from violence. Unfortunately, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), COVID-19 has disrupted violence prevention and response services for at least 234 million children in West and Central Africa and for 121 million children in East and South Africa [10]. African children, therefore, continue to endure violence of all forms, including sexual violence and its consequences. It is estimated that the first sexual experience for 40% of African girls is forced, yet most of them are excluded from sexual and reproductive health services, including access to contraceptives and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases [11].

Sexual violence in this paper refers to rape (unwanted sex with a stranger), forced sex (unwanted sex with an acquaintance), defilement (consensual sex with a minor), sexual

abuse, female genital mutilation, and related acts or behavior. Although sexual violence is criminalized in all African countries, prosecution of perpetrators is normally dependent on its disclosure or reporting to the responsible authorities. Most studies on sexual violence tend to lump women and girls together and analyze them as a single demographic category [12–14]. There are studies that have focused on sexual VAC and/or girls, but most have examined its impact [15] and children's experiences [16,17]. Academic discourse on sexual violence, therefore, has historically centered on its implications in terms of mental health, physical harm, emotional and physical development, etc. [12,13,18–20]. Within this discourse, non-disclosure and under-reporting, therefore, are often pathologized. Research on sexual violence in childhood has centered on experiences of survivors while highlighting that both formal and informal disclosure are either missing or delayed [21–23]. For example, according to Williams [24], most incidents of sexual violence against girls in Rwanda were never addressed in a culture where adolescent girls are encouraged not to report abuse. Of the fourteen cases of sexual abuse documented in the study by Aderinto [25] in Nigeria, only two reported the case to police, and one went for treatment in hospital. Although violence against children is largely unreported [26], there are some studies that provide an overview of the statistics of its prevalence and magnitude. Together for Girls, a global partnership to end violence against children, has conducted national household surveys in 10 African countries that provide ground-breaking data on violence against children [3]. These surveys analyzed data that were anonymously collected from young people aged 13–24 and are significantly guiding the discourse on disclosure and non-disclosure.

A number of past studies [27–35] indeed investigated barriers to disclosure, but most of these were conducted outside SSA. For example, according to Sable et al. [28], sexual violence between acquaintances is unlikely to remain reported. A study conducted in the Netherlands [29] found that assault at the survivor's home and a slight age difference between the perpetrator and the survivor were causes of non-disclosure. Additionally, rape is unlikely to be reported if the survivor had taken alcohol or drugs before the incident [30]. Hansen et al. [31] note that most rapes happen under circumstances favoring disclosure (e.g., in an alcohol-related context, in a familiar location, or when the perpetrator is an acquaintance). Limited attention has been paid to interrogating the magnitude and causes of non-disclosure in Africa, except in academic discourse addressing sexual violence in humanitarian contexts [12,13,18–20,36]. In such contexts, sexual violence against girls is not reported or chastised and is indirectly perceived as a natural occurrence [37] for many reasons, including breakdown of reporting and justice-seeking mechanisms. Worse, the current discourse on sexual VAC and young people is based on adult-centric research and theorizing. Policies and programs to address sexual VAC are informed by conceptualizations of children as silent victims who need to be protected from abuse by adults, even when adults lack a consensus on what constitutes violence [38]. The field of Sociology of Childhood [39–42], which focusses on the social construction of childhood, has been advancing the view of children as social actors rather than vulnerable victims who passively accept circumstances. It critiques the developmental psychology construction of childhood as a mere stage of development in which irrational, immature, vulnerable children are socialized to acquire the traits of the mature, competent, rational adult. According to James and James [42], young people do not passively accept situations as if they lack agency. Giddens [43] describes agency as the ability of individuals to make independent choices, regardless of the social structural constraints. Agency is constantly evolving [44] and is culturally laden [45]. Therefore, it differs from context to context and is not universal. Agency is relational—it is exercised based on people's interactions with others [46]. The relationships between adolescent girls and their care givers, community members, and the perpetrators of violence therefore influence their agency and choices. Young people sometimes choose to disclose what happened in pieces. They might relate full details at a later stage in this process, depending on their interpretation of the demeanor of the recipient or how things unfold [47]. Consequently, problematic aspects of disclosure and non-disclosure may not only be influenced by the incident, but also how disclosure

unfolds. This observation suggests that they are making a ‘calculated’, strategic choice. They are exercising their agency based on their interactions with whoever is receiving this information.

Based on research on children in Australia, Mason and Falloon [38], contend that children exercise agency through choice. According to Staller and Nelson-Gardell [48] (p. 1423) “children receive, process, evaluate, and react to information based on how adults respond to them”. McElvaney et al. [49] describe non-disclosure or withholding a secret as a form of activity. Within this activity, the child is an active agent who has to navigate tension between the wish to disclose or not to disclose [23]. Existing literature is missing analysis of how non-disclosure, as a matter of choice, can be understood as a form of agency. In this article, I follow the cues of the Sociology of Childhood to contend that adolescent girls have agency, which they exercise in diverse ways within the limits of their unique socio-political and cultural contexts. They are capable of making choices and decisions and acting independently on those decisions. The literature was reviewed based on primary research on sexual violence with participants below 18 years of age. In the review, the choices of survivors (not their parents) not to disclose sexual violence are analyzed. The next sections of the paper cover the results, discussion, methods, and characteristics of the studies included and conclusions.

2. Results

The findings of the review of 25 studies (see Table 1) revealed numerous reasons why sexual violence among girls in Africa is unreported and/or undisclosed. These include conceptualization of violence; relationship with the perpetrator; ineffective justice-seeking processes; sexual-violence-related stigma; threats; and/or blackmail.

Table 1. Characteristics of included studies.

| Author | Study Title | Country | Participants | Research Approach | Data Collection Methods |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. Aderinto [25] | Sexual abuse of girl child | Nigeria | - Girls - 18–20 years - Key informants | Qualitative research | - Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with girls - IDIs with key informants |
| 2. Banwari [50] | Poverty, child sexual abuse and HIV in Transkei region, South Africa | South Africa | - Five female participants aged 13–20 | Retrospective qualitative study | - Physical examination - Interviews |
| 3. Capri [51] | Madness and Defence: interventions with sexually abused children in low-income South African community | South Africa | - Girls aged 8, 9, 12 | Ethnographic research | Direct observation of survivor + social worker interactions |
| 4. Chishugi and Franke [52] | Sexual abuse in Cameroon: A four-year-old girl victim of rape in Buea case study | Cameroon | - 1 girl aged 4 years and her mother | Case study | Interaction with survivor and mother |
| 5. Collings [53] | Professional services for child rape survivors: child-centered perspective on helpful and harmful experiences. | South Africa | - Female child rape survivors aged 5–12 years | Qualitative research | Focused interviews |
| 6. Ebuonyi et al. [54] | Implications of Silence in the Face of Child Sexual Abuse: Observations from Yenagoa, Nigeria | Nigeria | - 2 girls below 15 years | Case report method | Analysis of hospital sexual abuse cases |
| 7. Embleton et al. [55] | “Once you join the streets you will have to do it”: sexual practices of street children and youth in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya | Kenya | - 25 participants living and working on the streets aged 11–24 | Qualitative research | In-depth interviews and FGDs |
| 8. Kasherwa and Twikirize [56] | Ritualistic child sexual abuse in post-conflict Eastern DRC: Factors associated with phenomenon and implications for social work | Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) | - 9 children (gender not indicated) - 13 parents - 19 key informants | Exploratory qualitative study | Unstructured interviews and FGDs |

Table 1. Cont.

| Author | Study Title | Country | Participants | Research Approach | Data Collection Methods |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------|---|-------------------------------|---|
| 9. Le Mat [57] | “Sexual violence is not good for our country’s development”. Students’ interpretations of sexual violence in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia | Ethiopia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 14 male students and 11 female students (age 14–18 in grade 9 or 10), - Teachers - Sexual reproductive health professionals | Qualitative research | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Semi-structured, in-depth questions, and open ended questions - 29 interviews, 4 focus groups - “Open coding” was used to find data |
| 10. Lees [58] | Local narratives of sexual and other violence against children and young people in Zanzibar | Tanzania | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth (aged 15–24 years) - Parents of survivors of sexual violence - Key informants | Qualitative research | In-depth interviews and FGDs |
| 11. Mayeza et al. [59] | Normalizing violence? Girls and sexuality in a South African high school | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 33 girls aged 15–17 | Qualitative research | FGDs, in-depth interviews |
| 12. Mathews et al. [60] | Exploring Mental Health Adjustment of Children Post Sexual Assault in South Africa | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Girls aged 8–17 - Caretakers | Grounded theory | In-depth, semi-structured interviews |
| 13. Mathews et al. [61] | A Psychosocial Understanding of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure Among Female Children in South Africa | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Girls aged 8–17 - Caretakers | Grounded theory | In-depth, semi-structured interviews |
| 14. McCleary-Sills et al. [62] | Gendered norms, sexual exploitation and adolescent pregnancy in rural Tanzania | Tanzania | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 82 girls aged 12–17 - Nurses - Parents | Qualitative research | Participatory learning and action (PLA) activities |
| 15. Mulumeoderhwa [63] | ‘A girl who gets pregnant or spends the night with a man is no longer a girl’: Forced marriage in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo | DRC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 56 boys and girls 16–20 | Qualitative research | FGDs and individual interviews |
| 16. Mwanukuzi and Nyamhanga [64] | ‘It is painful and unpleasant’: experiences of sexual violence among married adolescent girls in Shinyanga, Tanzania | Tanzania | Married girls aged 12–17 | Phenomenology | In-depth interviews |
| 17. Nyangoma et al. [16] | Child Sexual Abuse and Situational Context: Children’s Experiences in Post-conflict Northern Uganda. | Uganda | 43 children aged 6–17 | Qualitative research | Individual interviews |
| 18. Nyokangi and Phasha [65] | Factors Contributing to Sexual Violence at Selected Schools for Learners with Mild Intellectual Disability in South Africa | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 16 participants (11 female, 5 male) aged range 16–24 years - 1 school nurse - 1 social worker | Multiple-case research design | Interviews with learners, school nurse and social worker |
| 19. Phasha [66] | An alternative placement as an effective measure for easing negative consequences of child sexual abuse | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 22 participants (11 White, 6 mixed race, 5 Black). - Aged 16–23 - Majority lived out of home in welfare institutions | Qualitative research | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-depth interviews with adolescents - FGDs with teachers |
| 20. Phasha [67] | Educational Resilience Among African Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse in South Africa | South Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 22 participants (11 White, 6 mixed race, 5 Black) - Aged 16–23 - Majority lived out of home in welfare institutions | Qualitative research | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In-depth interviews with adolescents, - FGDs with teachers |

Table 1. Cont.

| Author | Study Title | Country | Participants | Research Approach | Data Collection Methods |
|---|---|--------------|--|----------------------|---|
| 21. Sharkey [68] | Through War to Peace: Sexual Violence & Adolescent Girls. in Sexual Violence in Conflict & Post-conflict Societies | Sierra Leone | - 15 adolescent girls who had either experienced or witnessed sexual violence | Qualitative research | Observations and interviews |
| 22. Thupayagale-Tshweneagae et al. [69] | Patterns & dynamics of sexual violence among married adolescents in Zimbabwe | Zimbabwe | - 15 married girls aged 15–19 years | Qualitative research | Semi-structured interviews |
| 23. Wangamati et al. [70] | Post-rape care services to minors in Kenya: are the services healing or hurting survivors? | Kenya | Two case studies | Qualitative research | - Review of health records - observations—in-depth interviews - informal conversations with service providers and guardians |
| 24. Wangamati et al. [71] | Communities’ perceptions of factors contributing to child sexual abuse vulnerability in Kenya: a qualitative study | Kenya | - Children in and out of school - Teachers - Community leaders | Qualitative research | FGDs |
| 25. Williams et al. [24] | ‘It isn’t that we’re prostitutes’: Child protection & sexual exploitation of adolescent girls within & beyond refugee camps in Rwanda | Rwanda | - 87 boys (12–17 years) - 79 girls (12–17 years), - 36 parents - 7 key informants | Qualitative research | - 10 FGDs - 6 FGDs - With parents and caregivers - Key informant interviews |

2.1. Conceptualization of Violence

According to the participants of a study conducted in Ethiopia, perpetrators of sexual violence that do not include penetrative sexual intercourse get away with it [57]. Girls in Tanzania differentiated between ‘rape’ and ‘forced sex’. Rape is perceived as undesired sex with a complete stranger or with whom they had no existing relationship, while forced sex occurs with a known person such as a neighbor, boyfriend, or classmate [62]. Girls who engaged in sexual relationships were not in a position to control when they would have sex. Thus, ‘forced sex’ is more likely to be unreported than rape. Such constructions of violence are rooted in gender norms that determine whether or not survivors can report a violation [24]. Non-disclosure of sexual violence can be, therefore, partially attributed to unfavorable societal constructions of what constitutes violence. Thus, when some girls do not disclose violence, they are conforming to cultural conceptualizations of violence as a coping mechanism. This finding supports the observations of Mason and Falloon [38], who also noted a general lack of consensus on what constitutes sexual violence. The cultural conceptualization of violence is important here because it might influence a survivor’s choice to disclose forced sex. Survivors sometimes choose not to disclose violence when they are unsure that what happened fits the sociopolitical stereotypical conceptualization of “real rape” [31] (p. 44) or ‘reportable rape’ as a strategy to restore normalcy to their lives. The findings of this study show the existence of a cultural approach to justice that demands that survivors of sexual violence report and get their narratives validated by the powers that be. However, survivors chose not to disclose since they are aware that the social-cultural context is characterized by a general lack of consensus on what constitutes sexual violence.

2.2. Relationship with Perpetrator

Apart from barriers due to conceptualizations of violence, the relationship with the perpetrator is important. A study conducted in South Africa found out that 75% of perpetrators were known to the child (acquaintances, family members, friends), but only half of the children disclosed the incident to relatives, friends, other adult mentors, or police instead of a caregiver [61]. The same research found that children who quickly disclosed

(within 24 h) were usually those sexually assaulted by a stranger. The few who disclosed weeks or months later were assaulted by a family member. Children who were assaulted by family members and who disclosed did so after being prompted by parents who noticed physical changes or other signs [60]. Cases of known assailants that are reported usually result in serious lacerations requiring immediate medical intervention. Chishugi and Franke [52] describe a case of sexual violence against a four-year-old girl whose mother knew the perpetrator but declined to identify. Research conducted in Uganda [16] and South Africa [72] found that children whose parents were separated were more prone to violence and were unlikely to disclose. In Nigeria, girls assaulted by caregivers (e.g., fathers, uncles) or partners of their mothers (stepfathers) were likely to choose not to disclose [25]. According to Lees [58] and Masehela and Pillay [73], sexual violence involving a family member is usually resolved amicably, sometimes involving parents receiving financial compensation at the family level. Another barrier to the disclosure of sexual violence is forced marriage [62]. Girls who are forcefully married have no grounds to report since the perpetrator is endorsed by the survivor's family [50], and they have no right to question or report the incident [64]. In Nigeria, some of the survivors who disclosed were punished for experiencing the sexual violence; as Aderinto noted, "She told her mother about it and when her father got to know, he drove both her and her mother out of the house" [25] (p. 2573). This review shows that forced marriage was one of the punishments given to girls for being sexually violated [69].

2.3. Street Culture That Normalizes Rape

The review found that living on the street not only exposes girls to the risk of sexual violence from male peers, but also makes it difficult to report by default. Young girls living on the street in Kenya have no option of reporting because rape is part of the street culture, in which older male youth get sex from younger girls in exchange for protection from gang-rape or even money [55]. Therefore, since street context does not favor reporting, some girls might choose to endure being in an undesirable sexual relationship with one person as a strategy to protect themselves from gang assault. According to Oduro et al. [74] girls living on the street live with a daily risk of rape since they sleep in open places. The males on the street use forced sex as a strategy/tool to 'discipline' girls who are perceived to be arrogant. When girls choose not to report and instead exchange sex for their security instead of reporting, this can be understood as agency and not lack of action.

2.4. Institutional Contexts Unfavorable for Disclosure

This review found that disclosure is hampered by institutions where perpetrators in power positions make it difficult, if not dangerous, for girls to report incidents. For example, within school settings, girls who are violated by teachers rarely report it because of school cultures in which teachers cannot be challenged [57]. In some post-conflict African contexts such as Sierra Leone, being enrolled in school indirectly exposes adolescent girls to sexual violence risk [68]. In South Africa, the mere existence of a school increases the prevalence of VAC in the community [75]. According to Masehela and Pillay [73], some survivors do not disclose because reporting an assault can lead to punishment from the teacher, including worsening grades and public humiliation. Research by Mathews et al. [60] found that a participant was assaulted by a police officer, which further confirms that the relationship between survivor and perpetrator can potentially impact the decision of whether or not to disclose. In these power relationships, when survivors choose not to disclose, they are not acting passively. They are exercising their agency to protect themselves from consequences ensuing from reporting a more powerful person (uncle, teacher or police officer).

2.5. Ineffective Justice Seeking Processes

Some African contexts are characterized by a general lack of concern about the phenomenon of sexual violence against adolescents and females because of its pervasive magnitude [21]. Lack of trust in the legal systems and judicial services due to high dis-

missal rates and low prosecution rates has been featured in several studies as a reason for non-disclosure [65]. Research conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo among girls aged 13–19 found that survivors agreed with parents never to report due to negative experiences with the justice system [56]. Both girls and parents in the DRC noted that they did not receive help after reporting due to corruption. Chishugi and Franke [52] associated the under-reporting of sexual violence with police inaction and low enforcement of existing laws in Cameroon. The ineffectiveness of justice-seeking processes sometimes leads to evolvment of informal systems of settling sexual-violence-related disputes by exchanging money or goods, especially in cases where the perpetrator is a family member [58,65]. In Kenya, some survivors' families resort to out-of-court settlements, with community elders serving as arbitrators because of poverty [76]. Research conducted among girls living in refugee camps in Rwanda found that ineffective justice-seeking mechanisms, coupled with a stigma-related "culture of silence," were key reasons for non-disclosure [24] (p. 163). In Kenya, adolescent girls who survived sexual violence or exploitation did not feel safe enough to receive counselling or any other support, since their concerns were either ignored or not taken seriously [70]. Although ineffective justice-seeking mechanisms play a role in promoting non-disclosure, the choice not to disclose can be interpreted as a form of agency. When girls choose not to report violence because of mistrust in the system, they are not passively accepting consequences, but instead are exercising their agency to protect themselves from further harm. Although most of the reviewed studies reported negative experiences of survivors with justice-seeking processes, research by Collings [21] found positive experiences of survivors with police and health care providers.

2.6. Sexual Violence-Related Stigma

Survivors' poor experiences with justice-seeking processes are partly attributable to sexual violence-related stigma or cultural discomfort associated with discussing sexual matters [24]. African traditional cultural values and beliefs have silenced discussions about sex and sexual relationships, which to date remain a preserve of adults in most African societies [65]. Hence, instead of obtaining justice, reporting sexual assault can attract punishment from parents for discussing sexual matters [73,77]. Consequently, rape (assault by a stranger) and forced sex (known perpetrator) are highly stigmatized [25,57,73]. In Nigeria, parents/guardians are generally interested in seeking treatment for injuries sustained but unwilling to involve law enforcement authorities because of stigma associated with sexual violence [54]. Some studies, e.g., [63,69,78] have reported forced marriage as a result of rape and pregnancy-related stigma. Seff et al. [79] noted that marriage after forced sex was a common occurrence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hence, while the non-disclosure of sexual violence is associated with cultural values that stigmatize and mute forced sex, by choosing not to disclose, girls are acting strategically to protect themselves from further abuse and harm from within their own families. As various studies [25,57,73,77] show, being sexually assaulted or reporting assault can attract punishments such as corporal punishment, being banned from home, forcefully married, etc.

2.7. Blaming and Threats/Blackmail

Another example of choice of non-disclosure as form of agency can be found in survivors who experienced threats and/or blackmail. Some survivors make a decision not to disclose to protect themselves from further abuse or to protect other family members. Mayeza et al. [59] revealed that school girls in South Africa were scared to report because they would either be blamed, not believed, or the perpetrator would receive a minor punishment such as being suspended from school for five days. After suspension, the girl who reported then faced higher risk of being assaulted as punishment for reporting. Studies conducted in Nigeria [25] and South Africa [50] show that perpetrators threatened to kill the girls if they disclosed. Relatedly, Mathews et al. [61] and Nyokangi and Phasha [65] confirmed that some survivors do not disclose for fear of being killed, scolded, blamed, punished, and not believed. The literature shows that parents/caregivers are notorious for portraying disbelief and mistrust, which compels the few children who disclose to confide

in a friend or trusted teacher, but rarely do they disclose to parents [62,65]. In South Africa, some girls who experienced disbelief from parents relocated to social welfare settings as a way of dealing with the consequences of violence [66]. Female adolescent survivors of violence are sometimes blamed for “dressing inappropriately” and “enticing men with their developed bodies” [61] (p. 647). Survivors were also blamed by teachers and police [67]. In some African cultures, fathers blamed the survivors’ mother for their daughters’ assault, which is interpreted as a sign of poor parenting [61]. Besides blaming and fear, Banwari [50] described a case of double-barreled sexual violence due to blackmail, as quoted below:

“I was raped, or will I say used. One distant uncle of mine has been having sexual intercourse with me since he brought me from home. One day, the junior brother of his wife caught us in the act and he threatened to report to the sister unless I allow him to have his way, i.e., have sexual intercourse with me. I allowed him because I dread the sister, who is very wicked. Since then, I have been doing it with the two of them. It is painful, I do not know whom to tell, I only want to run away from home and go back to the village and stay with my parents” [p. 257].

The above is an example of non-disclosure due to intersection of blackmail and the need to protect children from potential additional consequences of having sexual relations with a married man. The literature generally shows that disclosure of sexual violence that happens at the survivors’ home is hampered by threats by perpetrators who also obviously wield more power than the girls who were violated. The literature shows that when girls are blackmailed and threatened to not disclose, the choice to comply is a form of agency that enables them to protect themselves and their family members.

3. Discussion

Past studies on sexual violence against girls have noted that while sexual violence in SSA is a common phenomenon, most cases are not reported or disclosed [22,23,53]. Although past studies mention non-disclosure, they remain on the periphery of academic discourse on sexual violence, while survivors’ experiences are prioritized. This systematic review was underpinned by Sociology of Childhood [39–42] to analyze these barriers from the point of view of survivors and not caretakers. In conducting this review, qualitative studies conducted on sexual violence against girls below 18 in SSA were identified. The studies revealed reasons why girls who experience sexual violence do not report it, despite the existence of favorable national and pan-African policies to protect children from all forms of violence.

The reviewed studies were based on qualitative research, but there were variations in terms of study participants. A key inclusion criterion was participants below 18 years of age, although some of the included studies also involved parents and key informants. Although the reviewed studies were conducted in 12 African countries, South African studies dominated the sample. The studies used adult-centric methods. For example, they either used focus group discussions or in-depth interviews (facilitated by adults) to collect data from children. Although collecting data from children is important, it is possible that the studies’ findings would have been richer if they had employed more child-focused methods of collecting data, such as youth peer-to-peer methods [80] wherein adolescents collect data from peers.

This study revealed numerous reasons why sexual violence among girls in Africa is unreported and/or undisclosed. These include the conceptualization of violence; the relationship with perpetrator; ineffective justice seeking processes; sexual violence-related stigma; and threats and/or blackmail. The findings of the reviewed studies indirectly suggest that by not disclosing sexual violence, survivors are passively accepting their circumstances. Although there is a logic in the recommendations to disrupt power relations that underlie the non-disclosure of violence, it should be noted that by choosing nondisclosure because of the consideration of potential negative consequences, survivors are exercising agency. Their choice not to disclose is a form of agency. The findings support the work of Mason and Falloon [38] who contended that children exercise agency through

choice. This review's results show that girls who choose not to disclose sexual assault are aware that disclosing would lead to negative consequences such as forced marriage [62,69], physical punishment [25], being excommunicated from home [57,73,77], and gang rape [55]. The systematic review revealed that some girls in South Africa chose to flee their homes to social welfare settings to avert potential trouble due to having reported violence [65]. This review's findings agree with Staller and Nelson-Gardell [48] who observed that children's reactions to adult's behavior are based on how they (children) predict adults' responses to them. Although discourse on the non-disclosure of sexual violence portrays survivors as passive victims who need protection from adults, an analysis of the literature shows that by choosing not to disclose, in some cases, survivors have taken to protect themselves from further harm. This analysis supports the view that non-disclosure is a form of activity [22,23]. Hence, choice of non-disclosure of sexual violence is a form of agency.

The findings of this review suggest that some African adolescent girls constantly experience and navigate sexual violence-related injustices. Despite the hidden nature of violence against children, I concur with the WHO's INSPIRE framework [5] and with taking a holistic approach to tackling the intersectional barriers to non-disclosure, which include oppressive norms and values embedded in pervasive adult privilege.

4. Materials and Methods

A systematic review is a kind of literature review that systematically identifies, critically analyzes, and synthesizes existing evidence to answer a pre-defined research question [81]. This study began with a review of the previous studies on sexual violence in order to define the research question. This was followed by a WorldCat search using the terms 'sexual violence against girls', 'rape', 'defilement', 'child sexual abuse', AND 'Africa'. The search generated 27,808 records, out of which 1283 studies were imported into a Covidence platform for systematic reviews [82] based on their titles. The imported records were assessed for inclusion using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework [83] using the Covidence software. After excluding 162 duplicate records, abstracts of the 1121 remaining studies were screened for relevance, from which 950 were excluded because they were irrelevant based on their content. Each of the remaining 171 studies was reviewed for purpose, design, methods, demographic composition, and geographical location. In total, 25 studies, as shown in Figure 1, fulfilled the eligibility criteria.

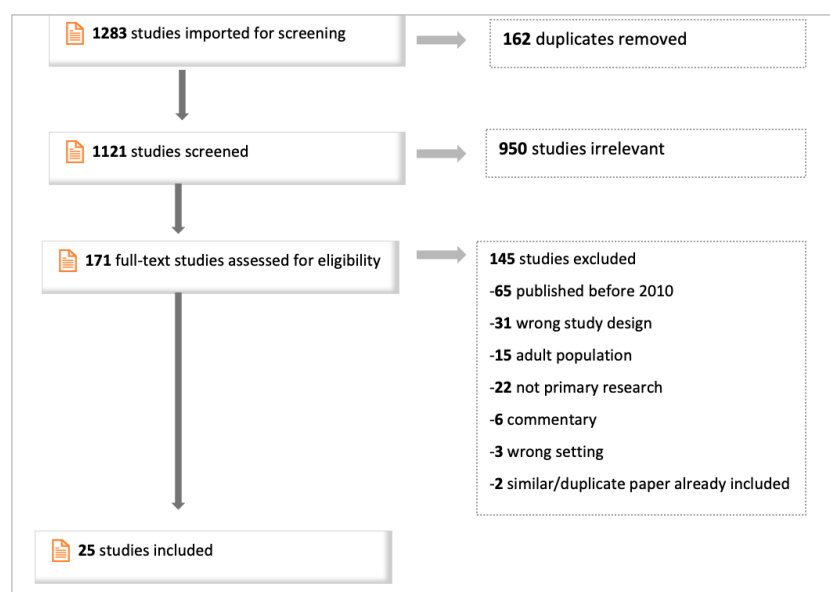


Figure 1. Prisma flow.

Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed studies based on primary qualitative research conducted on (or including) girls aged between 0 and 18 years living in SSA. Studies whose participants were above 18 were included, provided that the sample included girls aged 18 and below. The exclusion criteria were studies published pre-2010, studies exclusively conducted on people aged 18 or older, and outside SSA. Additionally, commentaries, opinions, reviews, and quantitative studies were excluded as they were not anticipated to be useful in addressing this study's key question. Quantitative studies were excluded due to this study's focus on the breadth and depth of disclosure and non-disclosure rather than statistics and statistical relationships. The reasons for non-disclosure, which were identified in the selected studies, were compiled and analyzed against the previously reviewed studies.

5. Conclusions

Sexual violence against girls has been researched, but survivors' disclosure of violence deserves more attention in research, policy, and programming. This systematic review synthesized peer-reviewed qualitative studies conducted on sexual violence against girls in Africa. To my knowledge, this is the first systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on qualitative studies focusing on girls below 18 years in SSA. The girls' decisions to strategically endure or cover up violence were made to protect themselves and their family members as a form of agency. All of the studies reviewed used adult-centric methodologies, and this presents a huge gap in the literature. Future research could consider using survivors as knowledge co-creators in order to further understand the barriers to disclosure from the survivors' point of view. There is a need for strategies to empower survivors to not only protect themselves from secondary abuse, but also to access the necessary sexual and reproductive health services when needed.

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