

ECONOMIC STATUS AND PERSISTENT DEFILEMENT CASES IN THARAKA NITHI COUNTY, KENYA

Abstract

Statistics on child abuse revealed that defilement is the most common form of abuse in Kenya. While there are a number of sexual offenses against children, defilement is among the most prominent. This paper explores the effect of economic status on persistent defilement cases in Tharaka Nithi County. The study findings revealed that the need to provide basic needs, assist parents/caregivers in income generation, use of motorbikes to school, and need for money in exchange for sex have greatly contributed to high defilement cases in the study area. The study recommends that the parents need to advance their economic sources of livelihood in order to alleviate themselves from poverty levels and meet the social and basic needs of their families including their children.

Key Words: Defilement, economic factors, child abuse

Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Defilement is any sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 18 years old, whether or not the child consents. According to Sexual Offences Act, 2006 defilement is a crime. Under the Constitution of Kenya, 2010 defilement is a breach of children's human rights (Ojo *et al.*, 2017).

In the global domain, statistics show that 69,184 children in the United States were officially counted as victims of child sexual abuse where at least 12-35 percent of American women and 4-9 percent of American men experienced some form of sexual abuse as children (Miskiewicz, Ramisch, Surjadi & Teeruthroy, 2016; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner & Hamby, 2014). In Uganda, barely a day passes without media reports on cases of defilement, or other forms of sex-related crime against children (Nyangoma, Ebila & Omona, 2019). According to the Violence Against Children (VAC) report (2018) 35.3% of girls and 16.5% of boys experienced sexual abuse in childhood (Ojo *et al.*, 2017). In Kenya, the prevalence of defilement among children is exceptionally high at 55%, (Mutavi, 2016). According to National Crime Research Centre (2020), the defilement rate in Kitui is 3.4%, Embu 3.1%, and Meru 2.1% as compared with Tharaka Nithi county with 7.2%. The statistics show that defilement is a problem in society.

Defilement is often a taboo subject because the public believes that such kind of abuse does not exist or is not prevalent enough to warrant discussion. This, therefore, means that not all child victims and families respond to sexual abuse in the same manner (Mutavi, 2016). Each victim and family have unique reactions to the problem; their responses are influenced partially by the offender relationship and the nature of the abuse (Ojo *et al.*, 2017). When the perpetrator is a stranger or even an acquaintance outside the family, parents are the ones who typically report the offense to the authorities. They initially feel blame and guilt for not having protected their child adequately (Winters *et al.*, 2020). But in the case of incest, the problem may go unreported.

Children who are victims of defilement and their parents, often face insurmountable obstacles in trying to bring the perpetrators to justice (Smetana, 2020). The children have suffered defilement and other forms of abuse but they are too intimidated by cultural attitudes and nation inaction to seek redress since doing so can lead to hostility from family, the community and the police. Those who do seek justice are confronted by a legal system that ignores, denies and even condones violence against child victims and protects perpetrators (Mercer *et al.*, 2015).

As a response to defilement community responses is key to addressing the problem. Community responses are diverse, dynamic, and highly contextual. They have a unique ability to: Identify and quickly respond to people's needs and concerns (Koss, White & Lopez, 2017). Community responses for rape victims are often piecemeal and uncoordinated as different systems perform different functions. For example, victims go to the hospital for the rape exam and evidence collection; to the police station to meet with a detective; to the state's attorney to discuss prosecution; to the rape crisis center for information and crisis counselling; and to many other agencies as well. Community-based interventions rely on reporting mechanisms, existing child education on sexual abuse, and community actions against perpetrators

Literature has shown that economic status can lead to persistent defilement. According to Abikoye, Ogunboye, and Tari (2019) when a person is economically dependent on another, they usually have no say in any aspect of their life. Kaye et al (2020) argue that financial constraints due to the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic which has triggered red economic hardships have contributed to many people living below the poverty line leading to children fleeing from home and turning to the streets for support a phenomenon that can lead to defilement.

Similarly, research carried out by the Uganda Law Reform Commission (2016) established that 34% of cases of sexual abuse were linked to low economic status. Parents' separation and lack of finance lead to low economic status since the parents could not support the children financially (Ochen, Chi and Lawoko, 2019). Parent-child alienation due to financial constraints leaves their children vulnerable to defilement in society. Also, Rogan et al. (2017) revealed that low economic status was a significant risk factor that puts women and children at high risk of early sexual debut, transactional sex, and unwanted pregnancy which concurs with the current study on how economic standards and background impacts the incidences of defilement in the society. Based on the above literature, there exists a link between economic factors and defilement but it is not known whether the same have a hand in the rise in defilement cases in Tharaka Nithi County hence this paper explores the effects of economic factors on persistent defilement cases in Tharaka Nithi County.

2. Methodology

This paper is the outcome of a study conducted on defilement in Tharaka Nithi County in 2022. The basis for choosing the study area is the rising cases of defilement in the last four years, with young men finding themselves behind bars for committing sex offenses. Many children are defiled by people in all spheres of life, in the hands of their biological fathers, stepfathers, relatives, friends, religious leaders, caregivers, and strangers.

This study used phenomenological research design to collect qualitative data. This research design is because of its ability to investigate issues relating to lived experience within a particular group (Morrell-Scott, 2018). The unit of analysis for this study was victims of defilement in the study area.

The study adopted a census method where all 98 victims of defilement in the Sub-County were included in the study since the target population was small and manageable while carrying out the study. The Census technique, therefore, provided the opportunity for all victims of defilement to provide varied experiences with regard to defilement in the study area. In addition, a purposeful sampling procedure was used to draw key informants who included chiefs and parents/caregivers. However, the study was able to conduct 70 interviews with the defilement victims.

The interview and key informant interviews were the methods of data collection used in this study. The interview method was used to collect data from victims of defilement while the key informant interview method was utilized to collect information from chiefs (5) and parents/caregivers to cross-check the information given by respondents.

After data collection, the thematic analysis technique was used analysis data. This was used to identify themes from this data. The study adhered to ethical principles among them confidentiality, provision of adequate information about the study for decision-making on whether to participate or not and researchers' responsibility. Additionally, to ensure ethical considerations for the participation of minors the researcher ensured that the minors' parents were involved in the decision-making process for their child. An additional adult consent procedure to supplement assent by the minor was only included if it did not interfere with the dignity of the child. The design and execution of the consent process and research procedures will support or mitigate any vulnerabilities such as decision-making capacity, literacy level, poverty, legal rights, and cultural contexts.

3. Results & Discussion

In this section, we provide data from 70 respondents in this study on the effect of economic factors and the rise in defilement cases in Tharaka Nithi County. We begin by discussing the demographic information of respondents after which the effects of economic factors on defilement in the study area are examined.

3.1. Demographic Information of Respondents

This section provides the gender and age of respondents in this study.

3.1.1 Gender of Respondents

Respondents were asked to give their ages. Table 1 provides responses.

Table 1: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	4	5.7

Female	66	94.3
Total	70	100.0

Results in Table 1, show the vast majority 66(94.3%) of the defiled children were girls. On the other hand, 4(5.7%) of the defiled children were boys. The study results concur with Nansasi (2010) who assessed that the majority of the defiled children are girls since they are more vulnerable compared to boys.

3.1.2 Age Category of the Defiled Children

The study sought to determine the age category of the defiled children and the findings are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Age Category of the Defiled Children.

Age Category	Frequency	Percent
9-14 Years	6	8.6
15-18 Years	64	91.4
Total	70	100.0

From the study results in Table 2 the majority of defiled female children 64(91.4%) were between 15 and 18 years. Those between 9 and 14 years accounted for 6(8.6%).

3.2 Effects of Economic Status on Persistent Defilement Cases

The study investigated the effects of economic status on persistent defilement cases. Interviews were given to the parents, children, and chiefs. The study revealed that various economic factors in the community have contributed to defilement cases. These factors are; the provision of basic needs, aiding of caregivers/parents to generate income, and engaging in sexual activities for money. These economic factors in the community have led to an increase in the number of defilement cases in the societies.

3.2.1 Provision of Basic Needs

The study intended to establish the provision of basic needs in the area of Tharaka Nithi. The study results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Provision of Basic Needs

Provision of Basic Needs	Frequency	Percent
Father	47	67.1
Mother	14	20
Boyfriend	8	11.4

Others	1	1.4
Total	70	100

The results in Table 3 show that 47 (67.1%) of the respondents have a father as a provider of basic needs, 14 (20%) have a mother, 8 (11.4%) have a Boyfriend and 1 (1.4%) have others as a provider of basic needs. This shows that most of the providences of basic needs are met by the father despite being unemployed.

Parent [1] aged 30 years, said:

“To a greater extent, the issue of lack of economic resources has contributed to persistent defilement in my area because it brings about poverty which exposes a child to being lured with money so that she can settle her needs. This is so because children lack basic needs and hence find themselves in the trap of accepting gifts from people who in turn ask them for sexual pleasure.”

As a result of living in inadequate and/or congested housing, children are exposed to molesters because poor families are very vulnerable and lose their sense of identity and affiliation, exposing them to predators.

3.2.3 Assisting Parents/Caregivers in Generating Income

The study also sought to establish how assisting parents/caregivers to generate income influence defilement in the study. The study established that children help parents to generate income through the sale of alcohol in the study area as shown in table 4 below.

Table 4
Assisting Parents/Caregivers in Selling the Alcohol

Assisting Parents/Caregivers	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	7.1
No	65	92.9
Total	70	100

The results in Table 4 above shows that 5(7.1%) of the respondents said that yes that they assist parents/caregiver in selling liquor and 65 (92.9%) said No. This implies that most of the respondents do not help their parents/caregivers in selling liquor.

Child [3] a girl aged 14 years, said that:

“My parents are not in variance with me engaging with men or selling alcohol, as long as I generate some income for the home and for myself, it is a persistent thing.”

The exception above implies that the economic status of a homestead has a great significant impact on child defilement in the community. The fact that a family is in a state where they cannot provide the most basic needs opens a door and an opportunity for the opportunists who take advantage of any chance that presents itself.

Whether respondents involved in the sale of alcohol are sexually harassed by drunkards, table 5 below provides responses.

Table 5: Sexually Harassed by Drunkards

Sexually Harassed by Drunkards	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	8.6
No	64	91.4
Total	70	100

The results in Table 5 above show that 6 (8.6%) of the respondents said Yes that they have ever been sexually harassed by drunkards at their home and 64 (91.4%) said No. This indicates that most of the respondents have never been sexually harassed by drunkards at their homes.

Chief [4] a male, identified that:

“Indeed, economic status has been a major cause of defilement in my area, because people without land to cultivate are idle, which increases their chances of consuming alcohol, which, in many instances, leads to defilement.”

This demonstrates that people's living conditions can drive them to such desperation that they will accept anything to improve their plight. Poverty is related to malnutrition, hazardous housing and working conditions, unclean water and sanitation, and lack of access to healthcare in low-income nations.

Still, on alcohol and defilement, the study sought to establish if the victims of defilement are involved in the brewing of alcohol by their parents. The findings are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Brewing of Alcohol for Sale

Brewing of Alcohol for Sale	Frequency	Percent
Yes	6	8.6
No	64	91.4
Total	70	100

The results in Table 5 above show that 6 (8.6%) of the respondents noted that their parents brew alcohol for sale and 64 (91.4%) said no. This implies that most of the respondents' 91.4% of parents do not brew alcohol for sale.

Child [1] a girl aged 16, said:

“My parents are not well-off, both are unemployed and at times, I end up with someone so that I can cater for my food and my siblings or brew alcohol for that matter.”

This shows that child defilement is closely pegged to the economic status of a family or a homestead. Poverty as depicted here as lack of land is a contributing factor to children’s vulnerability to defilement.

Parent [3] a female, also noted that:

“It is an open fact that we all witness currently that, lack of sufficient economic resources leads to poverty which exposes a child to being lured to exchange sex for basic needs, for example, a girl was given 50bob so that she could get food and she was impregnated. This is child defilement in the highest sense of the word.”

This suggests that financial stability can significantly influence the prevalence of child defilement in society. The passage above demonstrates conclusively that there is a strong relationship between poverty and child defilement. As a result, child defilement has its roots in poverty. Parents abandon their responsibilities to provide for their children's needs due to poverty. A parent may advise a girl to find a capable somebody to care for her basic requirements. A female may wind up getting defiled for money out of bewilderment.

3.2.4 Mode of Transport to School

The study also sought to determine whether they are going to school and whether the mode of transport to school influences defilement in the study area. The study results are presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Going to School

Going to School	Frequency	Percent
Yes	43	61.4
No	27	38.6
Total	70	100

The results in Table 6 above show that 43 (61.4%) of the respondents said yes, that they go to school and 27 (38.6%) said no. This implies that most of the respondents go to school. The majority of the respondents noted that the school is not far away from their home and they get there by walking, relying on Samaritans or boda-boda riders to take them to school.

Chief [1] a male, said that:

“Poverty is undoubtedly produced by one key factor: a lack of sufficient economic resources, which exposes youngsters to the risk of taking money or presents in exchange

for sex from older people, who, for example, give sex in exchange for food and shelter, which is already defiling to minors.”

This suggests that family values and standing have a substantial effect on children, which may predispose them to child sexual abuse. As married men relocate to urban regions in pursuit of employment, poverty is the primary cause of family dissolution.

In support of the above statements, Chief [5] aged 45 years, said that:

“Many of my community members suffer from poverty and this tend to make them rush for any quick money scheme to alleviate the problem which in many occasions, end up in defilement of children in my community.”

The exception above demonstrates that poverty is a significant factor in cases of child defilement within the community. Poverty has a crucial part in child exploitation since it renders children susceptible.

On the mode of transport to school, the study also sought to establish whether the participants went to school using boda-boda which is a common mode of transport Tharaka Nithi. The study results are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Using Bodaboda to Go to School

Using Bodaboda	Frequency	Percent
Yes	3	4.3
No	67	95.7
Total	70	100

The results in Table 8 above show that 3 (4.3%) of the respondents said Yes, they use boda-boda to go to school and 67 (95.7%) said No. This implies that most of the respondents do not go to school by use of boda-boda. The majority of respondents walked to school because they cannot afford to pay for Boda-Boda.

Chief [3] aged 42 years, said that:

"It is an open fact that we all experience today that a lack of appropriate economic resources leads to poverty, which exposes a youngster to being led to swap sex for basic requirements, such as a girl who was paid 100 shillings to acquire food and was impregnated. This is child defilement in the most extreme sense.”

This suggests that financial stability can significantly influence the prevalence of child defilement in society. The preceding passage demonstrates conclusively that there is a strong relationship between poverty and child defilement.

The study engaged the respondents so as to establish whether they are asked for sexual intercourse by boda-boda riders in the area of Tharaka Nithi. The study results are presented in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Bodaboda Rider Asking for Sexual Intercourse

Asking for Sexual Intercourse	Frequency	Percent
Yes	4	5.7
No	66	94.3
Total	70	100

The results in Table 8 above show that 4 (5.7%) of the respondents said Yes, they have ever been asked for sexual intercourse in exchange for fare, and 66 (94.3%) said No. This implies that many of the respondents have never been asked for sex by boda-boda riders in exchange for the fare.

Child [2] aged 13 years opined that:

“Bodaboda rider usually takes advantage of me because I cannot afford to pay for my fare to and from school, my parents are not in a position to pay my school fees, and also my fare.”

This says that youngsters are readily influenced since their needs are not met. In addition, the inability of some parents and/or guardians to provide for their children rendered these children vulnerable and susceptible to influence by child molesters through the presents of money, food, clothing, and ornaments.

3.2.5 Money in Exchange for Sex

The respondents were further asked whether they are taking money in exchange for sex in the area of Tharaka Nithi. The study results are presented in Table 10 below.

Table 10: Money in Exchange for Sex

Money In Exchange for Sex	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	18.6
No	57	81.4
Total	70	100

The results in Table 9 above show that 13 (18.6%) of the respondents said Yes, they were given money in exchange for sex and 57 (81.4%) said No. This implies that most of the respondents have Yes, never been given money in exchange for money.

Parent [4] aged 50 years, opined that:

“For sure, poverty is caused by one major factor which is lack of sufficient economic resources which exposes children to the danger of accepting money or gifts for sex by older people, for instance, they give sex for food and shelter which already is defilement to children.”

This demonstrates that poverty is a significant factor in incidents of child defilement in the community. Poverty is a significant factor in child defilement because it makes youngsters vulnerable. Parents are compelled to surrender their children to able men in exchange for food because of entrenched poverty, lack of education, and lack of income-earning options.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The economic status of a homestead has a great significant impact on child defilement in the community. The fact that a family is in a state where they cannot provide the most basic needs opens a door and an opportunity for the opportunists who take advantage of any chance that presents itself. The study recommends that the parents should seek to advance their economic sources of livelihood in order to alleviate themselves from poverty levels and meet the social and basic needs of their families including their children.

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