

Interrupted Childhood: An Analysis of Vulnerability and Sexual Violence

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Abstract

Sexual violence against children and adolescents constitutes a serious violation of human rights, directly affecting the dignity, physical integrity, and psychological development of the victims. It is a complex phenomenon influenced by social, cultural, economic, and legal factors, occurring in various contexts such as family, institutional, school, and digital environments. The inherent vulnerability of childhood, combined with power imbalances between adults and children, increases the incidence of this form of violence, which is often marked by silence, underreporting, and social normalization. This article aims to analyze sexual violence against children and adolescents through the lens of vulnerability, seeking to understand its main forms, causes, and consequences. The methodology adopted is explanatory, based on a bibliographic review of legislation, legal doctrine, academic studies, and institutional data. The study concludes that combating child sexual violence requires coordinated action by families, society, and the State, as well as effective public policies focused on prevention, protection, and accountability.

Keywords: Childhood, Sexual Violence, Vulnerability

1. Introduction

Sexual violence against children and adolescents constitutes one of the most severe violations of human rights. It targets individuals at a unique stage of human development and deeply compromises their dignity, as well as their physical, emotional, and psychological integrity. This phenomenon is both complex and multifaceted; it extends far beyond the individual sphere, revealing social structures deeply marked by power asymmetries, the silencing of victims, and the normalization of violent practices. Despite normative and institutional advancements aimed at child protection, child sexual violence remains a pervasive and frequently invisible reality.

Childhood, as the foundational phase of human life, demands integral protection. This is widely recognized by the Brazilian legal framework, most notably through the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA). The inherent vulnerability of children and adolescents stems not only from their developing physical and psychological faculties but also from social, economic, cultural, and familial factors that can exacerbate their exposure to risk. Within this context, sexual violence manifests in various forms—including sexual abuse and sexual exploitation—occurring within private settings like the family nucleus, as well as institutional, educational, and digital spaces.

The unequal relationship between adults and children is a core structural element of child sexual violence. This power asymmetry, coupled with emotional, economic, and affective dependency, fosters the objectification of childhood, premature adultification, and the systematic violation of the victims' fundamental rights. Furthermore, structural factors such as gender inequality, poverty, social exclusion, and fragile protection networks contribute to the perpetuation of this violence, creating significant barriers to its identification, reporting, and the legal accountability of perpetrators.

Given this scenario, this article aims to analyze sexual violence against children and adolescents through the conceptual framework of vulnerability, seeking to understand its primary forms, causes, and impacts. To achieve this, the study adopts an explanatory methodology grounded in a comprehensive literature review, drawing upon legislation, legal doctrine, academic research, and institutional data. The ultimate goal is to contribute to a critical reflection on how to address child sexual violence, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated action among the family, society, and the State, as well as the strengthening of public policies focused on prevention, protection, and the guarantee of rights.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Child Sexual Violence within the Intrafamilial Context

This study addresses a topic of profound significance within Brazilian society, as it permeates numerous family environments. Approximately 80% of child sexual abuse cases highlight the severity, urgency, and persistent nature of this issue [1]. This phenomenon involves aggression committed, in most instances, by individuals close to the child—such as parents, step-parents, uncles, or other relatives—which further exacerbates the psychological and emotional consequences for the victim. The pre-existing relationship of trust between the perpetrator and the victim makes the abuse even more devastating, creating immense barriers to reporting and confronting this form of violence.

Sexual abuse has steadily gained greater visibility within society. This is driven partly by a growing contemporary concern for children's rights, which places a higher priority on early childhood health development and its long-term implications [2]. It is also fueled by advancements in communication media, which have made it easier for the public to access information regarding occurrences within the domestic sphere—events that were historically confined to immediate social circles.

Child sexual abuse is a painful and deeply disturbing reality affecting millions of children worldwide, and Brazil is no exception. In 2018, the country recorded at least 32,000 cases of sexual abuse, representing the highest rate of notifications documented since 2011 [3]. Ferreira conceptualizes intrafamilial sexual abuse as that which occurs between individuals bound by consanguineous (blood) and/or affective ties [4]. The author roots this behavior in patriarchal structures, framing it as a power dynamic that is cultural rather than inherent to human nature. Characterized by the use of physical force, threats, and promises of rewards, intrafamilial abuse is the most frequent modality, accounting for roughly 80% of all cases [5]. It is further compounded by the family's frequent inability to understand or recognize the child's attempts to communicate that the abuse is occurring. Consequently, this remains one of the least reported forms of violence against children; it is estimated that only 10% of these cases are ever formally reported, and a mere 3% lead to legal repercussions. As victims of sexual abuse, children are largely subjected to the will of another and forced to renounce their own desires, trapping them within an asymmetrical power relationship. As Ferrari and Vecina affirm, this subjection inflicts both physical and emotional consequences that can manifest in various ways across different domains, including school and social environments [6].

Consequently, the family serves as an individual's primary experience of socialization, providing a setting traditionally rooted in affection and solidarity. For this reason, the family environment appears inherently incompatible with the notions of domination and the objectification of one human being by another, both of which are central to the concept of violence. This incompatibility, however, is merely superficial and stems from viewing the family

in an idealized sense rather than its actual reality [7].

One of the foundational principles of the Brazilian Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA - Law No. 8,069/1990) is that of integral protection. This principle is a defining factor in how children and adolescents interact with the family, society, and the State. It is justified by the heightened vulnerability and fragility of these citizens as developing individuals up to the age of 18, which warrants the special treatment they are legally owed. Rooted in this framework of special protection, affectivity operates as a core legal principle within the domestic and familial sphere.

2.2 The Psychological and Social Effects of Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse on Victims

I have maintained your integration of sociological literature and Brazilian constitutional/statutory law (the Federal Constitution and the ECA), using standard English terminology for legal principles like “the principle of human dignity.”

Lima notes that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is a grave violation of human rights and constitutes a crime that inflicts profound and long-lasting consequences on its victims. During childhood, this traumatic experience can shape not only the immediate present but also severely impair the child's emotional and social future. Regarding psychological effects, sexual abuse can lead to the development of disorders such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Article 227 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees the right to child protection; consequently, the absence of adequate psychological support in abuse cases constitutes a direct infringement of this constitutional right.

The psychological ramifications of intrafamilial child sexual abuse are multifaceted and frequently manifest through behavioral and psychological disturbances. These include aggressiveness, self-harming behavior, anorexia, learning difficulties, low self-esteem, and school dropout, among others. Victims often carry these traumas throughout their lives, resulting in significant impacts on their interpersonal relations and their capacity to establish bonds of trust. Furthermore, the stigma associated with sexual abuse and the silence that frequently envelops domestic matters contribute to the victim's social isolation, intensifying feelings of shame, guilt, and insecurity [8]. Ferreira adds that victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse face profound challenges in fully integrating into their communities and developing a healthy identity. A compromised ability to express feelings, paired with a deep-seated distrust of others, undermines the construction of healthy relationships in both childhood and adulthood. The absence of an effective support network—which ought to encompass the family, school, and community—frequently perpetuates the cycle of suffering and prevents the victim from receiving adequate assistance.

Nunes reports that victims frequently internalize the traumatic experience, resulting in pervasive feelings of guilt and shame [9].

Within a legal framework, this can be interpreted as a violation of the principle of human dignity, as set forth in Article 1, Paragraph III of the Federal Constitution. Furthermore, it is crucial to emphasize that an inability to establish healthy relationships with authority figures and peers is widely observed among abuse victims. This issue is highly relevant to family law, as it compromises the development of healthy affective bonds, which are fundamental to the formation of a child's personality, as prescribed by the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA - Law No. 8,069/1990). Corroborating the aforementioned author, Rodrigues discusses how abuse victims often face stigmatization within their communities, which can ultimately lead to social isolation. Article 3 of the ECA establishes that children must be treated with respect and dignity; social stigmatization directly contradicts this fundamental statutory principle.

I have ensured that standard English terminology is used for Brazil's specialized laws, translating Lei Maria da Penha as the "Maria da Penha Law (Domestic Violence Act)" to provide clear context for international academic readers. Sexual abuse can destabilize family dynamics, resulting in conflicts and fractures within familial relationships. The Maria da Penha Law (Law No. 11.340/2006) underscores the importance of family protection and of confronting domestic violence, emphasizing the necessity of interventions that safeguard the child's well-being. Furthermore, difficulties in developing healthy interpersonal relationships can limit a child's opportunities for socialization, adversely impacting their academic performance and social interaction skills. This directly correlates with a violation of the right to education, guaranteed by Article 205 of the Federal Constitution, which ensures access to education for all as a fundamental right.

Souza and Habigzang describe the effects of intrafamilial child sexual abuse as multifaceted, severely impacting both the psychological and social spheres of the victims [10]. The Brazilian legal framework, especially the ECA, provides a robust legal structure for the protection of children and adolescents; however, the efficacy of these norms depends heavily on the implementation of adequate public policies and a comprehensive support system that fosters the victims' recovery. From this perspective, it is of paramount importance that the judicial system, in conjunction with mental health and social work professionals, operates in an integrated manner to guarantee protection and support for victims. Society also plays a crucial role in fostering a safe and welcoming environment where children can feel protected and supported. The discourse surrounding intrafamilial child sexual abuse must, therefore, remain a priority not only within the legal field but across the entire social sphere, striving toward a safer and more just future for children.

2.3 Prevention, Public Policies, and Institutional Challenges

I have standardized the terminology for public policy frameworks and historically specific legal developments, ensuring the tragic history behind Brazil's May 18 campaign is accurately and

respectfully framed for an English-language academic audience. Prevention measures are fundamental to reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse. Authors such as Souza and Habigzang emphasize the vital role of educational campaigns—implemented within both schools and family environments—as a primary tool to raise awareness among children and adults alike. Adequate sex education and the promotion of open dialogue are essential steps to empower children, teaching them to recognize abusive situations and seek help. Furthermore, training programs designed for health, education, and social work professionals can significantly enhance early detection and intervention capabilities. Despite existing legislative protections, the incidence of sexual violence against minors continues to rise. This trend demonstrates that the mere existence of a law is insufficient to yield a significant reduction in these crimes. Because many cases never reach competent authorities, there is an urgent need to implement public policies capable of providing effective prevention and public information, thereby reducing the number of children and adolescents subjected to sexual abuse within the domestic sphere.

In 2000, Federal Law No. 9,970 instituted May 18 as the National Day to Combat the Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children and Adolescents. This specific date was chosen to commemorate a tragic historical event: in 1973, a nine-year-old girl named Araceli Cabrera Sánchez Crespo was kidnapped, violated, and brutally murdered in the state of Espírito Santo. Six days after her disappearance, her body was found virtually unrecognizable due to the use of acid, bearing severe marks of sexual violence. This crime profoundly shocked Brazilian society at the time and continues to provoke public outrage today, particularly because the perpetrators escaped legal punishment. Consequently, this statutory mandate aims to establish public actions that educate society about sexual violence, reinforcing the message that reporting is of paramount importance in bringing cases of child sexual abuse to light (Law No. 9,970/2000).

I have utilized precise legal and criminological terminology standard in international academic publishing, such as translating "depoimentos gravados" to "recorded testimonies/specialized testimonies" (often referred to as Depoimento Especial in the Brazilian legal context) to ensure the concept is clearly understood.

Santos asserts that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is a critical issue that demands a multifaceted approach [11]. Findings indicate that education serves as a fundamental tool in the prevention of child sexual violence. Programs that educate children, parents, and educators about fundamental rights, bodily autonomy, and the identification of abuse are essential. This research demonstrates that awareness initiatives within schools can empower children to recognize inappropriate behaviors and feel safer when reporting them. However, the implementation of these programs remains uneven across different regions of the country, highlighting the urgent need for more integrated and comprehensive public policies.

The professional training of those who interact directly with children and adolescents, such as teachers and social workers, is equally crucial. Research reveals that many of these professionals lack the adequate training required to manage situations involving abuse, which inherently hinders early identification and proper intervention. Consequently, investing in continuous professional development is an urgent measure necessary to improve the efficacy of institutional responses [12].

Although Brazil possesses a robust legal framework—anchored by the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA) and the Maria da Penha Law—empirical data indicates that the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators still face serious obstacles. Delays in judicial proceedings and a systemic shortage of specialized courts dedicated to crimes against children contribute significantly to impunity. The literature highlights that a substantial number of child sexual violence cases never reach trial, a factor that discourages reporting and ultimately perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

Furthermore, research findings underscore the vital importance of protective measures for victims during the judicial process. The use of recorded testimonies and strict guarantees ensuring that victims are not exposed to their perpetrators are fundamental safeguards. Nonetheless, studies indicate that these measures are often inconsistently applied, severely compromising the victims' experience within the justice system. The rigorous implementation of clear protocols for victim protection is essential to increase public trust in the legal system [13].

In tandem with legal protections, psychological assistance is vital for the rehabilitation of sexual violence victims. Data demonstrates that while services do exist, the available supply is insufficient and frequently fragmented. The lack of integration between mental health services and the social justice system compromises the victims' access to necessary support networks. It is crucial to establish comprehensive care networks that guarantee continuous and holistic assistance.

Finally, research underscores the critical role of community support networks. Victims frequently experience profound isolation and a lack of resources. Initiatives that foster a welcoming environment and communal solidarity are vital to long-term recovery. Support groups that engage supportive family members and friends help victims feel secure, validated, and actively sustained throughout their healing process.

Silva reports that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is an issue that demands immediate and effective action. Analyzing prevention measures, the prosecution of perpetrators, and victim support systems reveals a clear need for an integrated, multidisciplinary approach. Education and professional training must be prioritized, alongside judicial efficiency and comprehensive psychosocial support for victims. Only through a concerted, collaborative effort will it be possible to guarantee the protection of children and

promote a safe and healthy environment [14].

3. Methodology

This study adopts an explanatory research methodology, as it seeks to analyze and understand the underlying causes, structural factors, and systemic implications of sexual violence against children and adolescents. As Lakatos and Marconi posit, explanatory research aims to record, analyze, and interpret facts by identifying their root causes in order to broaden generalizations, structure theoretical models, and generate hypotheses through logical deduction [15]. Such an approach demands deeper theoretical engagement, rigorous synthesis, and a critical reflection on the object of study—a framework that proves highly appropriate given the complexity of child sexual violence. Consequently, this investigation will utilize the explanatory method.

Explanatory research records, analyzes, and interprets facts while identifying their underlying causes. This practice aims to broaden generalizations, establish broader laws, structure and define theoretical models, and synthesize hypotheses into a unified view of the universe or the productive sphere at large. Furthermore, it serves to generate hypotheses or ideas through logical deduction [15].

Explanatory research demands a greater commitment to synthesis, theorization, and critical reflection based on the object of study.

This study utilizes the deductive method as its primary approach, operating on the principle that if all premises are true, the conclusion must logically follow as true. According to Lakatos and Marconi, the entirety of the information or factual content contained within the conclusion must already be present, at least implicitly, within the premises. Deductive arguments are either valid or invalid; either the premises completely support the conclusions, or they fail to support them if the logical sequence is flawed.

Regarding its methodological design, this article relies on bibliographic research. Accordingly, this method is characterized by being; elaborated from previously published material, consisting primarily of books, magazines, journal publications, scientific articles, newspapers, bulletins, monographs, dissertations, theses, cartographic materials, and internet resources. Its purpose is to bring the researcher into direct contact with the existing literature regarding the research topic. Within bibliographic research, it is crucial for the researcher to verify the veracity of the gathered data, paying close attention to any inconsistencies or contradictions that may arise across the selected works [16].

Furthermore, when considering the subjects in their own terms, it is necessary to employ cultural contextualization through a dialectical study, because; for dialectics, things are not analyzed as fixed objects, but rather in motion: nothing remains static, as everything is always in the process of transforming and developing; the end of one process is invariably the beginning of another" [17].

To this end, considering this an exhaustive investigation that applies critical evaluation and the synthesis of selected information, evidence related to the specific theme addressed in this work was consolidated. Thus, the research for this study relied on books, academic articles, and secondary data relevant to the topic, maintaining a theoretical approach and a qualitative design.

Gil notes that bibliographic research is developed based on previously processed material, consisting primarily of books and scientific articles. As Lakatos and Marconi testify, bibliographic research provides a general overview of the primary works already conducted; these are of paramount importance because they supply current and relevant data linked to the topic.

This study also utilized documentary research which, as Gil establishes, draws upon materials that have not yet received analytical treatment, or that can be reworked in accordance with the research objectives [18]. It is also a descriptive study, whose primary goal is to describe the characteristics of a given population or phenomenon, or to establish relationships between variables.

Consequently, this study qualifies as a qualitative, theoretical, and explanatory piece of research, grounded in the critical analysis and synthesis of selected evidence regarding sexual violence against children and adolescents. The study relied on the use of books, academic articles, and secondary data related to the theme, seeking to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and to the strengthening of strategies for the prevention, protection, and confrontation of child sexual violence.

4. Results and Discussion

The bibliographic analysis conducted in this study reveals that sexual violence against children and adolescents remains a complex and persistent phenomenon within Brazilian society, shaped by deep social inequalities, power dynamics, and systemic fragile protection networks. The findings derived from the literature demonstrate that the vast majority of cases occur within the intrafamilial environment, frequently perpetrated by individuals close to the victim, such as parents, step-parents, uncles, or family acquaintances.

Within this context, the relationship of trust established between the child and the perpetrator constitutes one of the primary barriers to reporting and early identification. Many victims remain silent due to fear, shame, or emotional dependency, which significantly contributes to the underreporting of cases. Studies indicate that only a small fraction of occurrences are ever brought to the attention of competent authorities, revealing the hidden dimension of the problem and highlighting the urgent need to improve preventative and combative public policies.

The results also demonstrate that the consequences of child sexual abuse are profound and long-lasting. From a psychological standpoint, victims may develop disorders such as anxiety,

depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), learning difficulties, and low self-esteem. These impacts directly hinder the child's emotional and social development, often reverberating throughout their entire adult life.

Beyond the psychological effects, child sexual violence generates significant social repercussions. Many victims face stigmatization and social isolation, which impedes the construction of healthy interpersonal relationships and compromises their socialization process. In this regard, the absence of an effective support network—comprising the family, school, community, and public institutions—contributes to the perpetuation of suffering and complicates the victims' recovery process.

Another relevant aspect identified in the literature concerns the institutional limitations in confronting child sexual violence. Although Brazil possesses a robust legal framework dedicated to the protection of children and adolescents—such as the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA), the Federal Constitution, and other specific pieces of legislation—the efficacy of these norms still faces significant obstacles. Among the primary challenges are the slow pace of the judicial system, a lack of professional training to handle abuse cases, and the insufficiency of integrated public policies aimed at prevention and victim care.

The literature also indicates that education and social awareness play a fundamental role in preventing child sexual violence. Educational programs that address bodily autonomy, children's rights, and the identification of abusive behaviors can contribute significantly to strengthening children's agency and reducing their vulnerability.

In this light, it is evident that confronting sexual violence against children and adolescents requires a multidisciplinary and integrated approach, involving not only the legal system but also the health, education, social assistance, and public security sectors. Coordinated action among these institutions is essential to guarantee the integral protection of victims and to promote a safer, more supportive social environment.

Consequently, the findings gathered in this research reinforce that child sexual violence cannot be understood merely as an individual or familial issue, but rather as a structural social problem that demands systemic responses and effective public policies. The promotion of educational initiatives, the strengthening of protection networks, and the specialized training of professionals who work directly with children and adolescents are indispensable measures to reduce the incidence of this form of violence and to secure the fundamental rights of childhood.

5. Conclusion

Sexual violence against children and adolescents constitutes a severe and persistent violation of human rights. Its impacts extend far beyond the immediate moment of abuse, reverberating deeply

and permanently throughout the victims' physical, psychological, social, and emotional development. Throughout this study, it has become evident that the inherent vulnerability of childhood—when combined with unequal power dynamics, emotional dependency, and fragile protection networks—acts as a defining factor in both the occurrence and perpetuation of sexual violence, particularly within the intrafamilial context.

The literature review demonstrates that although the Brazilian legal order possesses a robust normative framework dedicated to the integral protection of children and adolescents—most notably through the Federal Constitution, the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent (ECA), and related statutes—the efficacy of these norms still faces numerous hurdles. The underreporting of cases, the silence imposed upon victims, the slow pace of the justice system, and a systemic lack of integrated public policies all contribute to the maintenance of this landscape of rights violations.

Furthermore, this investigation verified that the psychological and social effects of child sexual abuse, especially when perpetrated within the family unit, are profound and multifaceted. They manifest through emotional disorders, learning difficulties, impairments in forming affective bonds, and social stigmatization. These consequences underscore the urgent need for continuous, specialized care for victims, requiring the coordinated, interdisciplinary engagement of professionals across the fields of health, social work, education, and justice.

In light of these findings, it is concluded that confronting child sexual violence demands more than the mere existence of legal statutes. The effective implementation of preventative public policies, the promotion of educational initiatives that foster open dialogue and social awareness, and the continuous specialized training of professionals who interact directly with children and adolescents are absolutely imperative. Moreover, the family, society, and the State must jointly uphold their shared responsibility toward the integral protection of childhood, ensuring safe, supportive, and violence-free environments. Ultimately, it is intended that this study contributes to the expansion of the academic and social discourse surrounding sexual violence against children and adolescents. It reinforces the urgency of concrete, effective measures capable of safeguarding dignity, respect, and full development during childhood, thereby definitively breaking historical cycles of silencing, impunity, and the violation of fundamental rights [19-23].

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