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## **Culturally Contexted Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse** **in the Eastern Caribbean: *An Overview of Research*** ***Findings***

[http://www.stopitnow.com/caribbean\\_research\\_webcast\\_archivefield](http://www.stopitnow.com/caribbean_research_webcast_archivefield), UK

**August 3, 2010**

# Messages from the research

- **CSA is universal**
- **Lessons can be learnt from the Eastern Caribbean Study**
- **CSA is still largely taboo and silenced everywhere**

# Partners

- Commissioned by UNICEF
- Partially funded by DfID
- Carried out by the University of Huddersfield and Action for Children
- In partnership with the governments of six Caribbean countries



# Context

- Few empirical studies on CSA have been undertaken in the Caribbean
- The existing CSA literature largely comes from richer, more industrialised countries (particularly the US and UK)
- We do know from existing literature:
  - Onset of sexual behaviour is occurring at earlier ages- the Caribbean has the earliest age of sexual “debut” in the world (World Bank, 2003)
  - There is an increasing involvement of both boys and girls in commercial sexual exploitation (IOM, 2005)
  - Increasing numbers of young people are exchanging sex for material goods and services (Phillips 2002, Phillips 2006)

# Research objectives

To gain insights into:

1. How people in the Caribbean perceive CSA
2. How childhood is socially constructed
3. Attitudes about children's status
4. Opinions about what behaviours and social conditions contribute to CSA
5. Participants lived experiences and personal knowledge of CSA
6. The impact and effects of CSA
7. Views held about the forms of action needed

# Methodology

Conceptualised as a *Socially Transformative Action Research Project* (Participatory rather than Prescribed). What this means...

- Providing opportunities throughout the research process to generate awareness of the effects of CSA, share strategies on interventions and to develop alliances towards social transformation. All with the aim of using the research process to increase the protection of children

# Methods

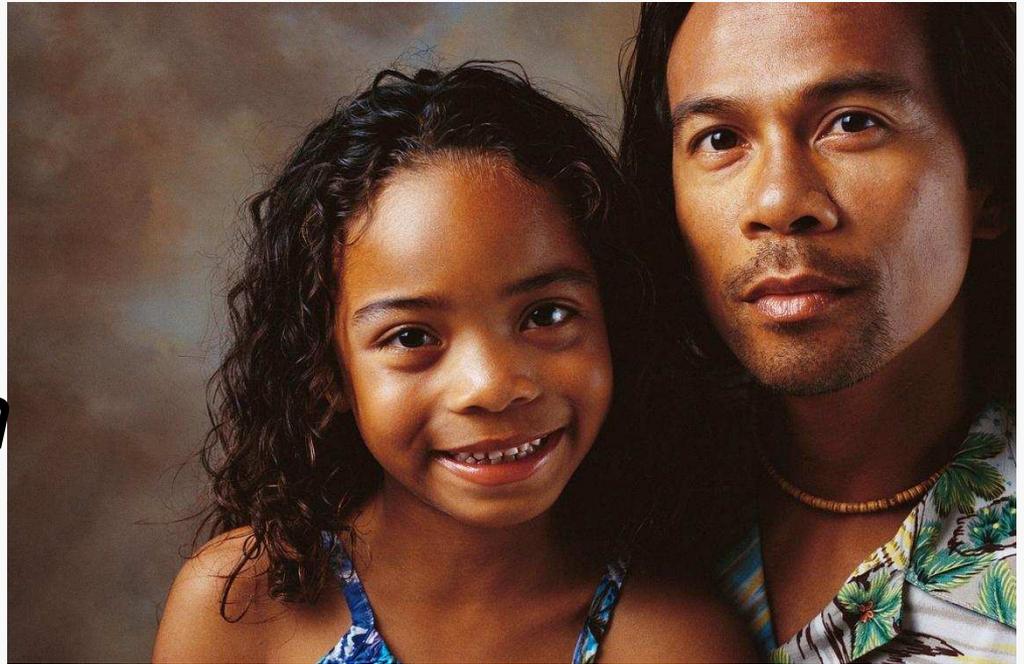
- Multiple mixed methods approach
- Wide-ranging – 8 Caribbean researchers working in six countries gathered information from over 1,400 men and women from all social backgrounds and levels of education

# Research tools

- Literature Review
- Policy and Legislative Analysis
- Stakeholder Consultation Sessions (120)
- Focus Group Discussions (300)
- Practice-Focused interviews (68)
- Policy-Focused interviews (42)
- Narrative interviews with adult survivors (11)
- Community Survey of Perceptions, Attitudes and Opinions (859)

Caribbean Society is generally clear about the unacceptability of child sexual abuse, cognizant of where the dangers lie and in some cases the reasons for this

*Most Caribbean families provide effective protection for children*



# Scale of the Problem

**Child sexual abuse** (including vaginal, anal, digital and object penetrative and non-penetrative sexual acts; oral sex, involving children in porn, watching sexual acts) **is considered a serious and extensive problem in the region**

*Respondents presented a picture of a social problem that is escalating and has increasingly severe consequences*

**CSA is perpetuated not only by men who but also by non-abusing adults through *complicity, silence, denial and failure to take appropriate action***

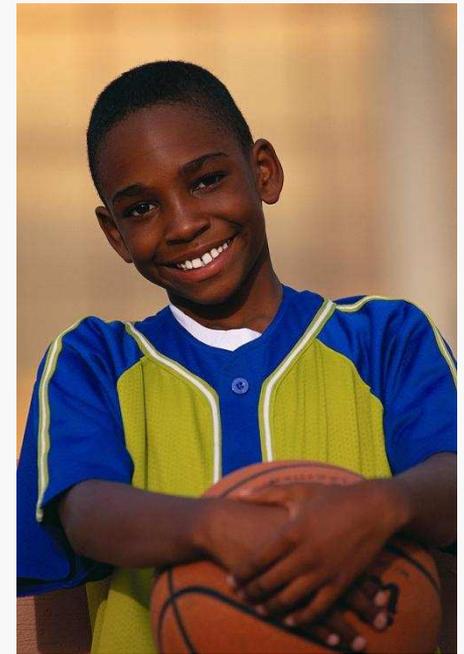
# **Main forms of CSA**

- **Intra-familial abuse (including incest)**
- **Non-family abuse**
- **Transactional sexual abuse**

**Findings both universal and specific**

# Some other worrying trends

- Cell phone pornography
- Internet abuse
- Issues linked to tourism
- Changing nature of family
- Abuse of boys
- Transactional sex between children
- Sexual aggression by girls
- CSA and natural disasters
- Over-sexualisation of children and its the normalisation
- Young children engaging in or imitating sexual acts.



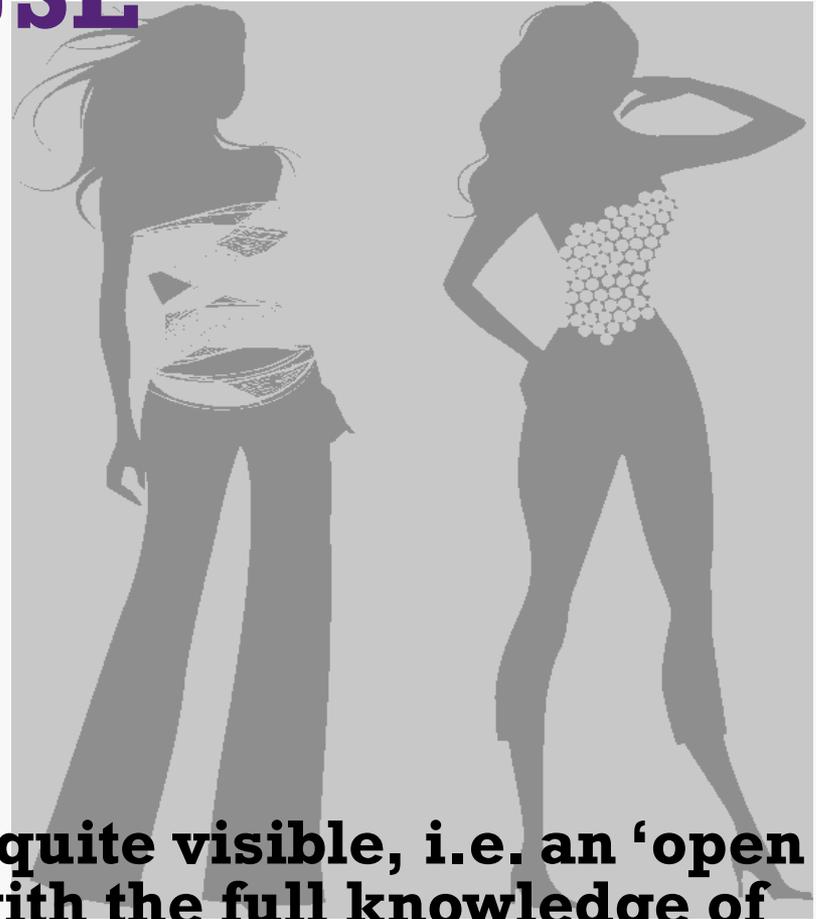
# **INTRA-FAMILIAL ABUSE**

***Most child sexual abuse takes place in the home within the family***

- Secretive, invisible, silenced
- Often multiple victims within a household
- CSA correlated with domestic violence
- CSA co-occurs with physical abuse (which is normative in the Caribbean), so children face multiple abuse
- Main perpetrators said to be step-fathers, mothers' boyfriends, biological fathers
- Women often know but fail to act

# TRANSACTIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE

A common form of abuse  
is the transactional sexual  
abuse of underage girls and,  
increasingly, boys,  
by older men  
*“Sex for material goods”*



**This form of abuse is often quite visible, i.e. an ‘open secret’- happens often with the full knowledge of parents, communities and officials.**

# Non-family abuse

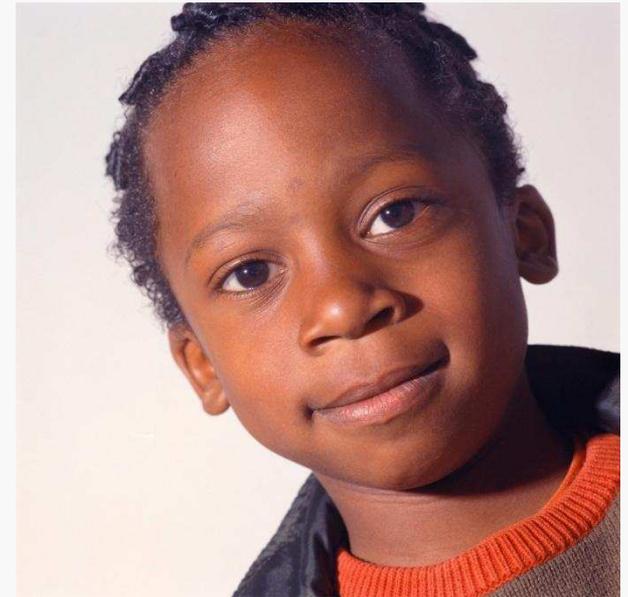


- **Stranger abuse unlikely**
- **Abuse by trusted adults**
- **Predatory adolescent boys**
- **‘Opportunistic’ abuse**

# Victims

**Most victims are girls**

***The abuse of boys  
was reported as a  
growing problem***





The Church was  
considered to  
be part of the  
problem...and  
the solution

# Consequences: Individual, Family & Societal Level

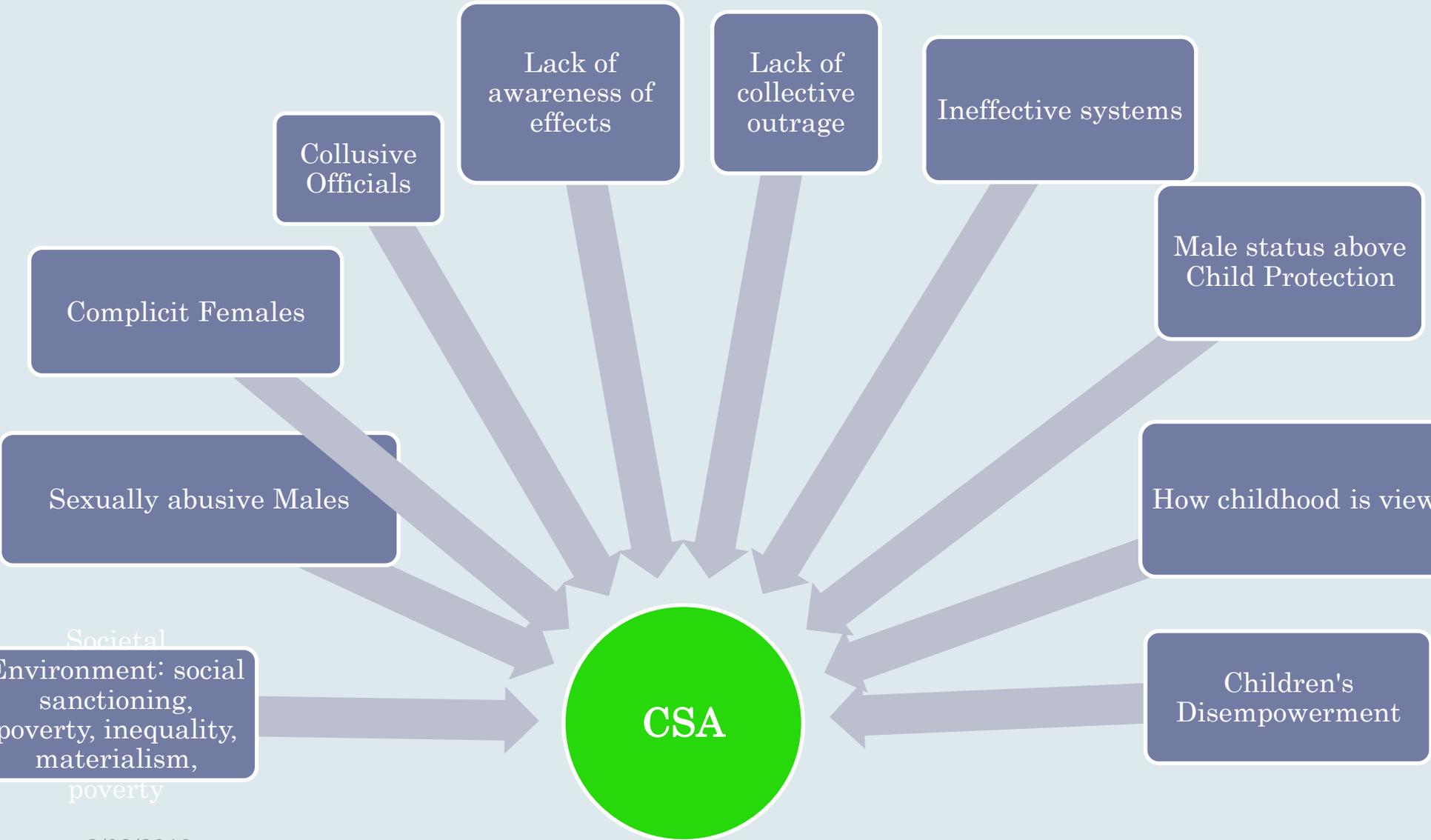
- Emotional, psychological & behavioural problems
- Physical problems: injuries to reproductive organs; STIs, HIV, abortion and associated risks
- Teen pregnancy and associated consequences
- Drug & alcohol misuse
- Abortions & complications
- Divorce and family break-up, distorted boundaries, betrayal of trust
- Co-abusing behaviours
- Linked with domestic abuse and community violence
- Normalisation of CSA/cyclical abuse

# Contributing factors

- Poverty - single mothers may ignore abuse for economic survival
- The way sex is viewed in society
- Patriarchal values and gender inequality
- Cyclical abuse - many mothers were victims themselves and cannot escape 'victimhood'
- 'Internalised normalisation' of sexually harmful behaviours
- Predatory behaviour of men who target vulnerable families



# SUSTAINING FACTORS: A Systems Model



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The dominant approach in the Caribbean to dealing with CSA is reactive (rather than preventative) and is led by a focus on criminal justice (often ineffective, and ridden with systemic problems). At the policy level, there is common commitment to a children's rights approach however this does not filter down universally across societal structures and institutions

*Recommendations are based on shifting paradigms:*

# Paradigm Shift 1

## *Develop National/Regional Strategic Plans for Building Abuse-Free Childhoods*

A whole of society approach- a scaled-up comprehensive response which makes best use of limited resources, harnesses and enhances community and family protective strengths, involves the State, NGOs, churches, schools and community activists working together and has long-term sustainable impact.

## Paradigm Shift 2

### *The reframing of child sexual abuse at the policy level as a public health issue*

This would push the problem higher up the political agenda and enable governments to use existing infrastructure and access funds from different sources to tackle the problem

# Paradigm Shift 3

## *Adoption of child/family friendly approach to budgeting, social planning and economic development*

Recognises that CSA has huge costs for governments- makes sound economic sense to view the protection and support of children and families not as a cost to be borne, but as a saving of other costs and an investment in development.

Improvements in empowerment-based welfarism especially for poor single mothers

# Paradigm Shift 4

## *The Introduction of Child-sensitive Justice Systems*

- The mandate for child protection rests in the evidence of its effects, not the evidence of the courts
- A review of the whole system of investigation and prosecution of child sexual abuse cases
- Fairer sentencing including restorative justice for some cases
- Reviewing the whole matter of mandatory reporting



# Introduction of evidence-based interventions:

- Building child protection infrastructure protection
- Supporting victims
- Work with abusers
- School-based interventions
- Promoting child-safe tourism
- Protecting children from sexual abuse in disaster and emergency situations
- Enhancing family and community protective functions

# Revisiting some findings

- CSA an extensive problem
- Most victims are girls (universal)
- Most CSA is committed by adult males (universal)
- Role of non-abusing adults who know and fail to act is a big part of the problem
- Inequality, poverty and growth of materialism linked to economic sexual exploitation of children
- Abuse via information technology (cell phones and internet) a growing problem



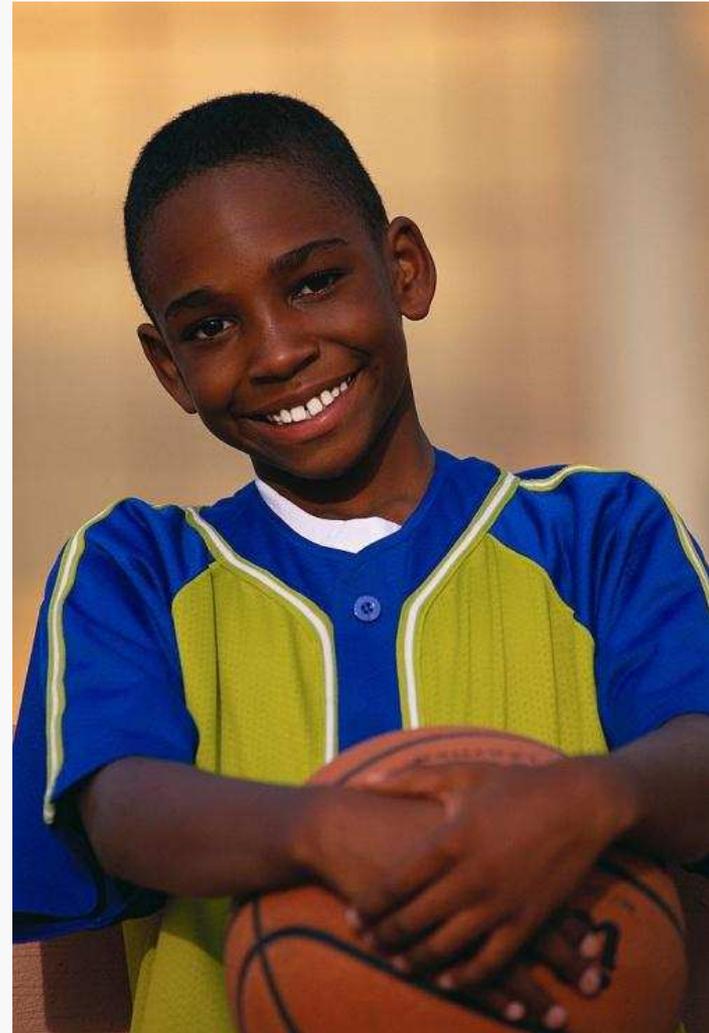
# Some findings specific to the Caribbean

- In small societies anonymity and confidentiality cannot be assured in reporting CSA
- Cultural values about the status of children means they are not always believed
- Abuse often committed by step-fathers and mother's boyfriends
- Opportunistic abuse linked to natural disasters
- Lack of appropriate & effective systems & resources
- Some growing concerns:
  - Child sex tourism
  - Abuse of boys
  - Sexual aggression by girls
  - Transactional sex between children and between children and adults

# Some Global Lessons

- Importance of producing *situated* knowledge
- CSA is not a marginal problem - whole of society approach is needed
- Public health approach enables use of existing infrastructure and primary focus is preventative (e.g. AIDS)
- Use systems model to understand and address sustaining factors (at micro, meso & macro levels)

- Child protection located in family strengthening and family-led - supported by policy, procedures and professional expertise (rather than the other way around)
- Child-centredness is key to ensuring interventions do not result in adding harm
- Child protection is an economic (as well as social) investment. Essential for reaching & sustaining development goals



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**Research Report available at:**

[www.unicef.org/barbardos](http://www.unicef.org/barbardos)

**Thank You**