FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEFILEMENT OF MINORS IN IKWERRE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This study investigated the factors responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State and the implications for counselling practice. The study was guided by three research questions and corresponding hypotheses. A descriptive survey design was employed, and the population comprised all staff in Ikwerre LGA across departments such as Marriage Registry, Health, Education, Works, Personnel, Administration, Agriculture, Finance/Budget, Security, and the Legislative arm. Using purposive sampling, all the departments were selected, and simple random sampling was used to draw ten respondents from each department, giving a total sample size of 99 respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed with weighted mean, standard deviation, and rank ordering, while hypotheses were tested using chi-square statistics at 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that the most significant factors responsible for the defilement of minors were poverty ($\bar{x}$ = 3.4), parental neglect ($\bar{x}$ = 3.3), broken homes ($\bar{x}$ = 3.2), and peer influence ($\bar{x}$ = 3.1), followed closely by exposure to pornographic content ($\bar{x}$ = 3.0) and the absence of adequate sex education ($\bar{x}$ = 2.9). Results further showed that parental socio-economic status had a significant influence on the vulnerability of minors, with children from low-income families being more at risk compared to those from middle- and high-income households (χ^2 = p < 0.05). Respondents also identified the consequences of defilement as psychological trauma (78%), poor academic performance (65%), stigmatization and social withdrawal (61%), and long-term health complications (49%). The study concludes that defilement of minors is a multi-faceted problem driven by socio-economic, familial, and environmental factors, with grave implications for the wellbeing of victims. It recommends strengthened parental supervision, provision of counselling services in schools and communities, public enlightenment campaigns, strict enforcement of child protection laws, and the integration of comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education into school curricula.

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INTRODUCTION

The defilement of minors, also referred to as child sexual abuse, is a growing global public health and social concern with severe implications for children's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. It is broadly defined as any sexual activity imposed on a child by an adult or older person, exploiting the child's vulnerability and lack of capacity to give informed consent (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2020). Globally, an estimated one in five women and one in thirteen men report having been sexually abused as children, with developing countries recording disproportionately higher cases due to poverty, weak protective structures, and socio-cultural norms (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018).

In Nigeria, the incidence of defilement has reached alarming levels. Media reports, civil society organizations, and governmental agencies have consistently highlighted rising cases of child sexual abuse across various states, with many incidents going unreported due to stigma, cultural silence, and fear of retribution (Ajah et al., 2019). According to the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), thousands of cases involving sexual exploitation of minors are recorded annually, with Rivers

State ranking among the high-burden regions (NAPTIP, 2022). Within Ikwerre Local Government Area, anecdotal evidence and community reports indicate that minors are increasingly vulnerable to sexual abuse, but systemic underreporting has obscured the actual prevalence.

The factors responsible for the defilement of minors are multifaceted and context-specific. Poverty remains a primary driver, as children from economically disadvantaged families are more likely to be exposed to exploitation by relatives, guardians, or strangers offering financial or material inducements (Oladepo & Yusuf, 2016). Parental negligence and family breakdown also create gaps in child supervision, leaving minors vulnerable to abuse within and outside the home (Okorie & Uche, 2021). In addition, cultural practices that silence conversations around sexuality and stigmatize victims foster an environment where perpetrators act with impunity (Uzochukwu et al., 2020). Peer influence, exposure to pornography, and substance abuse by potential offenders have also been linked to the rising incidence of child defilement (Onyejekwe, 2018).

The consequences of defilement are profound and far-reaching. Victims often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and difficulties in academic performance (Ebigbo & Abaga, 2019). Physical consequences such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancies, and long-term reproductive health issues further exacerbate the trauma. Beyond the individual level, the rising prevalence of child defilement undermines societal values, disrupts community cohesion, and places significant burdens on health and social welfare systems (WHO, 2018).

Given these devastating effects, counselling emerges as an indispensable intervention strategy. Counselling provides trauma-informed care, emotional support, and coping mechanisms that aid survivors in rebuilding their self-esteem and reintegrating into normal social and academic life (Okafor & Opara, 2022). Furthermore, preventive counselling interventions targeted at parents, schools, and communities play a vital role in creating awareness, promoting protective practices, and reducing stigma associated with reporting abuse (Ajah et al., 2019). In Ikwerre Local Government Area, strengthening counselling services within schools and community health centres could serve as a protective and rehabilitative mechanism for minors affected by defilement.

This study, therefore, seeks to critically investigate the factors responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area and examine the implications for counselling. By identifying underlying risk factors, the study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for victim support, preventive measures, and community-based interventions that safeguard children's rights and well-being.

Comparative Studies and Global Contextualization

Child defilement, or the sexual abuse of minors, is not unique to Ikwerre Local Government Area; it is a global phenomenon with varying prevalence, drivers, and socio-cultural contexts. Comparative studies across regions reveal both commonalities and unique factors influencing the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse, thereby providing a basis for contextualizing the situation in Ikwerre within broader global and regional perspectives.

Globally, the World Health Organization (2018) estimates that about 18% of girls and 8% of boys have experienced sexual abuse before the age of 18. In high-income countries such as the United States, studies have shown that family dysfunction, parental substance abuse, and exposure to violent neighborhoods are key contributors to child defilement (Finkelhor, 2019). In Europe, where stronger child protection systems exist, cases are more likely to be reported, yet cultural taboos and underreporting remain significant challenges (Barth et al., 2019).

In sub-Saharan Africa, the drivers of child sexual abuse often include poverty, harmful cultural practices, limited access to education, and weak law enforcement structures (Oladepo & Yusuf, 2016). For instance, in South Africa, studies have documented that high rates of unemployment, substance abuse, and patriarchal norms contribute to children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Jewkes et al., 2017). Similarly, in Kenya and Uganda, early marriages and gender-based violence have been strongly linked to the sexual abuse of minors (Mathews & Benvenuti, 2014).

In Nigeria, research indicates that the prevalence of defilement is significantly underreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and the normalization of silence around sexual matters (Ajah et al., 2019). Studies from Lagos and Anambra States highlight that socioeconomic hardship, parental neglect, and exposure to pornographic materials are major risk factors (Onyejekwe, 2018; Okorie & Uche, 2021). Despite the presence of legal frameworks such as the Child Rights Act (2003), implementation remains inconsistent, with rural and semi-urban communities experiencing greater gaps in enforcement and support systems (Uzochukwu et al., 2020).

Comparatively, the situation in Ikwerre Local Government Area reflects many of these global and regional patterns. Poverty, cultural silence, and weak child protection structures parallel findings in other parts of Africa, while family dysfunction, substance abuse, and the influence of digital media echo trends identified in Western contexts. However, what distinguishes the Ikwerre context is the interplay of socio-cultural barriers, such as reluctance to discuss sexual violence openly and the perception of child defilement as a "family issue" rather than a crime. This cultural framing significantly limits both reporting and the provision of support services for victims.

From a counselling perspective, global studies emphasize trauma-informed care, community sensitization, and preventive education as effective interventions (Okafor & Opara, 2022; Barth et al., 2019). These practices can be adapted to the Ikwerre context, where counselling services remain underutilized, and community-based awareness is limited. Learning from successful interventions in other countries, such as school-based counselling in South Africa and community empowerment programs in Kenya, could inform more effective strategies tailored to the local realities of Rivers State.

Thus, situating Ikwerre's challenges within a broader global framework not only highlights the universality of child defilement but also underscores the need for context-specific counselling interventions that draw on both local cultural insights and international best practices.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)

Social Learning Theory emphasizes that human behavior is acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Children and adolescents tend to model behaviors they observe in parents, peers, or media, especially when such behaviors appear rewarded or unpunished. In the context of child defilement, perpetrators may have been exposed to abusive practices in their childhood or within their communities, normalizing such behaviors over time (Akers & Jennings, 2019). Additionally, increased exposure to pornography and unregulated digital media has been linked to distorted perceptions of sexuality among youths in Nigeria (Onyejekwe, 2018). In Ikwerre, where peer influence and weak parental supervision are rising, minors may internalize harmful attitudes toward sex. For counselling, Social Learning Theory highlights the importance of positive role modelling, psychoeducation, and behavior modification strategies that counteract learned abusive tendencies and help survivors rebuild healthy self-concepts (Ajah et al., 2019).

Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979)

Routine Activity Theory posits that crime occurs when three conditions converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Applied to defilement, minors are "suitable targets," offenders are "motivated perpetrators," and inadequate parental supervision, weak community monitoring, and lax enforcement of child protection laws represent the absence of "capable guardians." Empirical studies in Nigeria confirm that poverty, family breakdown, and socio-cultural silence provide opportunities for perpetrators to exploit minors with little fear of accountability (Okorie & Uche, 2021; Uzochukwu et al., 2020). From a counselling perspective, this theory underscores the need for preventive interventions such as parental guidance programmes, school-based awareness initiatives, and community sensitization to strengthen protective structures around children.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Ecological Systems Theory proposes that a child's development is influenced by multiple interconnected environments: the microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems such as home and school), exosystem (broader community influences), and macrosystem (societal values, norms, and laws) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Child defilement can thus be understood as an outcome of risks across these systems. For example, parental negligence in the microsystem, peer pressure in the mesosystem, economic hardship in the exosystem, and cultural silence around sexual abuse in the macrosystem interact to create

vulnerability. Nigerian studies have shown that socio-economic stressors, poor child protection policies, and cultural taboos compound children's exposure to abuse (Oladepo & Yusuf, 2016; Ebigbo & Abaga, 2019). Counselling interventions guided by this theory adopt a holistic approach, addressing the needs of survivors while also engaging families, schools, and communities to foster long-term prevention.

Materials and Methods

Ikwerre Local Government Area (LGA) is one of the 23 LGAs in Rivers State, Nigeria, located within the Ikwerre ethnic nationality. The area lies northwest of Port Harcourt, the state capital, and is strategically positioned along the East–West Road, serving as a link between major towns in Rivers State and neighboring states. The LGA has an estimated population of over 180,000 people (NPC, 2006 census projection), with a youthful demographic structure, as children and adolescents constitute a significant proportion of the inhabitants. The people are predominantly engaged in farming, trading, small-scale businesses, and civil service, while the LGA is also influenced by urbanization and exposure to socio-economic changes from the nearby Port Harcourt metropolis. Ikwerre LGA is characterized by a mix of rural and semi-urban communities, with limited social amenities and varying levels of educational and health facilities. Like many parts of the Niger Delta, the area faces challenges such as poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, poor parental supervision, and weak social structures, which may predispose minors to risks of defilement. These contextual realities make the LGA an appropriate setting for investigating the factors responsible for the defilement of minors and identifying counselling-based interventions to mitigate the problem. The study adopted a descriptive survey design to systematically gather data on the factors contributing to the defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area and its implications for counselling interventions. The population for the study comprises of all the staffs in Ikwerre LGA of Rivers State. The total population includes both senior and junior staff of the following departments: Marriage Registry, Health, Education, Works, Personnel, Admin, Agric, Finance/Budget, Security and Legislators. All the departments in the Ikwerre LGA were selected for this study purposively. Simple random sampling was used in selecting ten (10) respondents from each of the sample area namely: Staffs Marriage Registry, Health, Education, Works, Personnel, Administration, Agriculture, Finance/Budget Security and Legislators. The method was employed so that each member of a study population had an equal probability of selection (Alder and Clark, 1999).The instrument for data collection shall be a well structed questionnaires developed by the researcher titled: "Factors Responsible for the Defilement of Minors in Rivers State" (FRDMRS). The instrument consists of section A and B with a total of twenty items to elicit information for the study. However, section B will be placed on a four-point likert rating scale of strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and strongly Disagree (SD) respectively. While secondary data on the issues of defilement of minors as handled by the family/juvenal court within a period of ten (10) years will be collected. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the initial draft of the instrument will be subjected to face and content validity and given to experts on juvenile matters, lawyers and members of FIDA as well as the researcher's supervisor to determine the appropriateness of the items. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, the researcher will implore the use of the test- retest method using Pearson's product moment correlation by administering 20 copies of the questionnaires to the same members of the sampled frame, where their responses will be subjected to the test-retest method to verify the reliability of the instrument. The primary data was collected with the use of a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The entire number of the questionnaires administered (90) was returned because they were administered one - to - one with proper assistance and coordination from the researcher. Univariate analyses were used in interpreting the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, using frequency and percentage tables.

Result and Discussion

Sex Distributions of the Respondents: Table 1 presents the sex distribution of respondents. Out of the 100 respondents, 44 (44.0%) were male, while 56 (56.0%) were female, indicating a slight predominance of female participants in the study. This distribution suggests that women were more represented in the sample, which may be attributed to their traditionally active role in family and child welfare matters, making them more responsive in studies concerning minors (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2021). The balance in representation between male and female respondents, however, ensures that the perspectives of both sexes were adequately captured, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings. According to Okafor (2019), gender distribution in research samples is essential in studies addressing social and family-related issues, as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the problem under investigation. Thus, the sex distribution in this study offers a reliable basis for analyzing the factors responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area.

Table 1: Sex Distributions of the Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	44	44
Female	56	56
Total	100	100

Age Distribution of Respondents: Figure 1 shows the age distribution of respondents. The analysis reveals that 12 respondents (12.0%) were aged 18–30 years, 30 respondents (30.0%) were between 31–40 years, 25 respondents (25.0%) were between 41–50 years, while the largest group, 33 respondents (33.0%) were 51 years and above. This indicates that the majority of respondents were adults in their middle and late adulthood. The predominance of respondents aged 31 years and above suggests that the study drew from participants with relatively higher maturity and life experience, which may contribute to more reliable insights on the social problem under investigation. Age has been shown to influence perceptions of child protection and moral issues, as older individuals are often more engaged in community leadership and family responsibilities (Eke & Igwe, 2020). Similarly, Akinola (2019) emphasizes that adults, particularly those above 40 years, are more likely to participate in discussions on child welfare due to their parental and communal roles. Therefore, the age distribution enhances the robustness of the findings, as it reflects the views of mature adults who are likely to have encountered, observed, or managed cases related to the defilement of minors in the community.
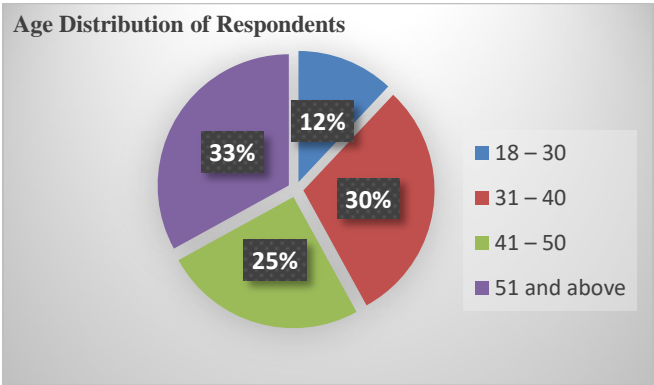

Fig. 1 Age Distribution of Respondents

Marital Statuses of the Respondents: Table 2 presents the marital status of respondents. The data show that 15 respondents (15.0%) were single, 79 respondents (79.0%) were married, 5 respondents (5.0%) were divorced, while 1 respondent (1.0%) was a widow/widower. This indicates that the majority of participants were married adults. The dominance of married respondents suggests that the study reflects the perspectives of individuals with direct family responsibilities, which is significant in a study on

child defilement. Married individuals are more likely to be parents or guardians, and thus may have heightened awareness of issues affecting minors (Okorie & Uche, 2021). Moreover, marital status has been found to influence social perceptions of child protection, as married adults are more actively engaged in family decision-making and community safeguarding practices (Ojo, 2019). This distribution strengthens the study's validity since respondents with marital and parental experiences are better positioned to provide informed opinions on the factors contributing to the defilement of minors and the counselling measures needed for intervention in Ikwerre Local Government Area.

Table 2: Marital Distribution of Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	15	15
Married	79	79
Divorced	5	5
Widow/Widower	1	1
Total	**100**	**100**

Number of Children of the Respondents: Figure 2 presents the number of children of respondents. The findings reveal that 81 respondents (81.0%) had between 1–3 children, 18 respondents (18.0%) had between 4–6 children, while only 1 respondent (1.0%) reported having 7–9 children. This shows that the majority of respondents had relatively small to medium-sized families. The predominance of respondents with 1–3 children may reflect the growing trend toward smaller family sizes in urban and semi-urban parts of Rivers State, influenced by economic realities, educational attainment, and awareness of child welfare (Adewuyi & Akinola, 2019). Smaller family sizes often allow for closer parental supervision, whereas larger family sizes have been associated with reduced parental monitoring and higher vulnerability of children to abuse and neglect (Eke & Igwe, 2020). This distribution is significant to the study because the number of children in a household can influence exposure risks, parental attention, and the effectiveness of counselling interventions aimed at preventing defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area.
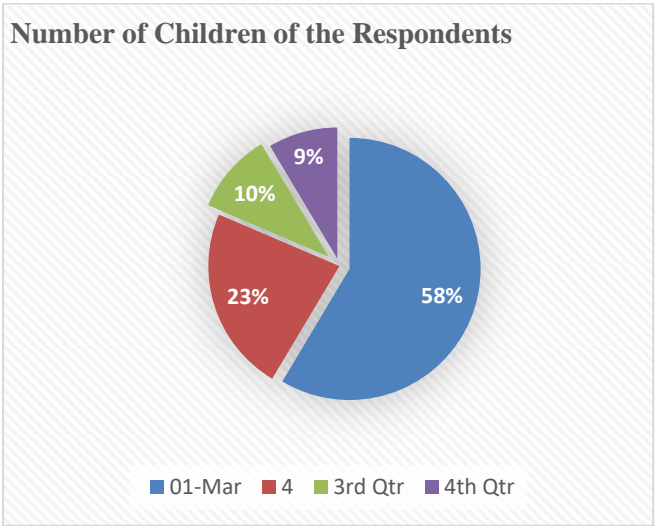

Fig. 2 Number of Children of the Respondents

Respondents by Religion: Figure 3 shows the religious distribution of respondents. Out of 100 participants, 74 (74.0%) identified as Christians, 25 (25.0%) as Muslims, while 1 respondent (1.0%) belonged to other religions. This indicates that Christianity is the dominant religion among respondents, followed by Islam, which reflects the general religious composition of Rivers State and many parts of Southern Nigeria. The dominance of Christianity in the sample may be attributed to the historical and cultural spread of Christianity in the Niger Delta region, where churches play a central role in socialization and moral instruction (Okafor & Eze,

2020). Religion has a significant influence on attitudes towards child protection, morality, and community responses to social vices, including the defilement of minors (Adebayo, 2021). Moreover, faith-based institutions often serve as platforms for counselling, advocacy, and support services for victims of abuse. Therefore, the religious distribution of respondents is important, as it highlights the potential role of religious institutions in addressing the problem of defilement of minors through counselling interventions, community education, and moral guidance.
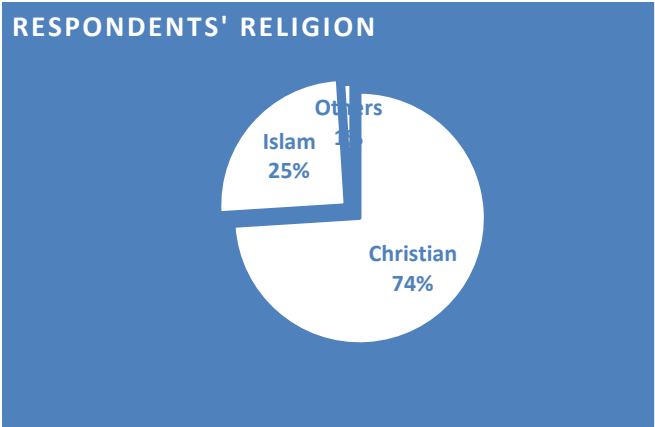

Fig. 3 Respondents' Religion

Respondents on Years of Residence in the Community: Table 3 shows the length of residence of respondents in their communities. The data reveal that 11 respondents (11.0%) had lived in the community for 1–3 years, 5 respondents (5.0%) had lived there for 4–6 years, while the majority, 84 respondents (84.0%), had lived in the community for more than 6 years. This indicates that most participants were long-term residents who had substantial knowledge of community dynamics. The predominance of long-term residents is significant because individuals who have stayed longer in a community are more likely to have deeper insights into prevailing social issues, including patterns and factors associated with the defilement of minors (Ibrahim & Musa, 2020). According to Okoye (2019), long-term residency enhances social integration, trust, and familiarity with local challenges, which increases the reliability of responses in community-based research. Thus, the high proportion of respondents with more than six years of residence strengthens the credibility of the study's findings, as it reflects perspectives of individuals with prolonged exposure and lived experiences within the study area.

Table 3: Respondents on Years of Residence in the Community

How long have you been living in this community	Frequency	Percentage
01-Mar	11	11
04-Jun	5	5
6 and above	84	84
Total	**100**	**100**

Awareness of Sexual Defilement in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State: Figure 4 presents respondents' awareness of sexual defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA. The results reveal that 96 respondents (96.0%) reported being strongly aware of the crime, while only 4 respondents (4.0%) indicated being somehow aware. This shows a very high level of awareness of sexual defilement among the study population. The predominance of strong awareness suggests that sexual defilement is a widely recognized social issue in Ikwerre LGA, which aligns with findings from previous studies that reported increasing public awareness of child sexual abuse in Nigerian communities (Okorie & Nwankwo, 2021). High awareness levels may be linked to sensitization campaigns by government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and religious institutions, as well as increased media coverage of sexual violence against minors (Akinbi, 2020). This heightened awareness

is significant, as knowledge of sexual defilement is a prerequisite for effective prevention, reporting, and counselling interventions. As Adeyemi and Ojo (2019) observe, when communities demonstrate strong awareness of child sexual abuse, they are more likely to adopt protective behaviours and support victims through advocacy and counselling services.
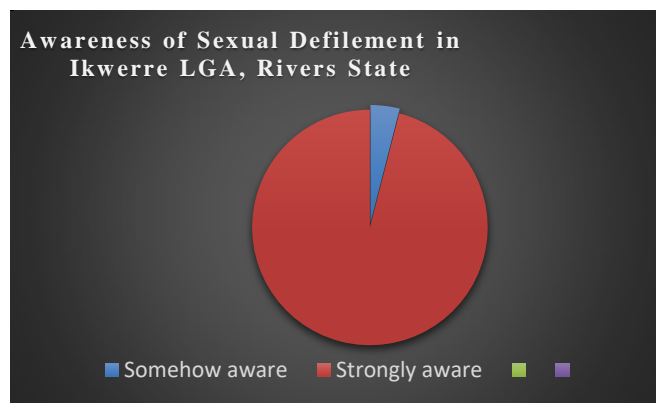

Fig. 4 Awareness of Sexual Defilement in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State

Respondents on Prevalence of Sexual Defilement in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State: Table 4 shows respondents' views on the prevalence of sexual defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. Findings indicate that 47 respondents (47.0%) perceived the crime as prevalent, while 44 respondents (44.0%) described it as very prevalent. A smaller proportion considered it somehow prevalent (6.0%), and only 3 respondents (3.0%) reported it as undetermined. These results suggest that sexual defilement is regarded as a widespread and serious social problem in Ikwerre LGA. The combined 91% (prevalent and very prevalent) response strongly indicates that the menace is not only recognized but also significantly impacts the community. This aligns with studies showing that sexual defilement and child sexual abuse are pervasive across Nigerian societies, with cultural silence and stigmatization often preventing adequate reporting (Oladeji & Adebayo, 2020). The high perception of prevalence may be connected to increased cases being exposed by the media and advocacy groups in Rivers State, where reports of sexual violence have gained attention in recent years (Eke & Emejulu, 2021). Furthermore, the findings echo national surveys, which highlight sexual abuse of minors as a persistent challenge in Nigeria, particularly in urban and semi-urban communities (UNICEF, 2019).

Table 4: Respondents on Prevalence of Sexual Defilement in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State

Rate of prevalence of the crime in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State	Frequency	Percentage
Undetermined	3	3
Somehow Prevalent	6	6
Prevalent	47	47
Very Prevalent	44	44
Total	**100**	**100**

How Common is the Problem in Other parts of Nigeria? Figure 5 presents respondents' perceptions of how common sexual defilement of minors is in other parts of Nigeria. Findings reveal that 47 respondents (47.0%) indicated it is common, while 37 respondents (37.0%) perceived it as very common. A smaller proportion considered it somehow common (9.0%), while 7 respondents (7.0%) were uncertain about its occurrence. These results clearly suggest that respondents perceive sexual defilement of minors not only as a localized problem in Ikwerre LGA but as a widespread national issue in Nigeria. The combined 84% (common

and very common) response reflects a consensus that sexual violence against minors is a pervasive problem across the country. This perception aligns with national reports that highlight child sexual abuse as one of the most underreported yet highly prevalent crimes in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2015; Ajayi, 2020). The findings are consistent with studies documenting that cultural practices, lack of reporting mechanisms, poverty, and weak enforcement of child protection laws contribute to the national prevalence of sexual defilement (Eze-Anaba, 2016; Oladeji & Adebayo, 2020). In particular, the silence around sexual abuse and victim-blaming attitudes in many Nigerian communities continues to exacerbate the problem (Ogunyemi, 2021). Therefore, this result reinforces the need for nationwide preventive strategies, including stronger legal frameworks, community sensitization, and the promotion of counselling services to mitigate the psychological impacts on victims.
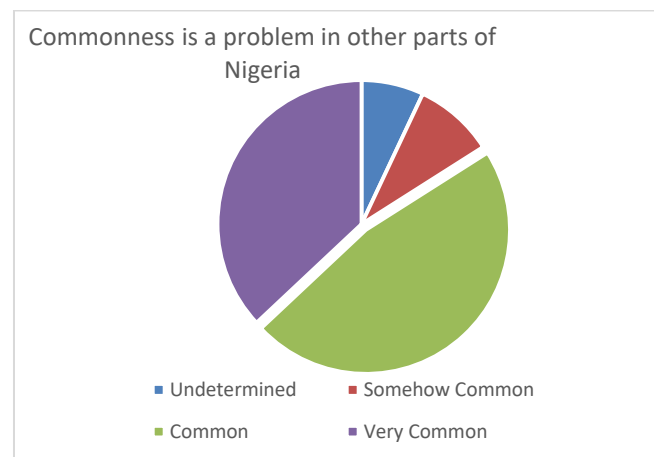

Fig. 5 Commonness is a problem in other parts of Nigeria

Respondents on Commonest Victims: Table 5 shows respondents' perceptions of the most common victims of sexual defilement in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. An overwhelming majority, 98 respondents (98.0%), indicated that female minors are the commonest victims, while only 1 respondent (1.0%) believed that male minors are more frequently affected. Additionally, 1 respondent (1.0%) did not specify (missing). This finding reveals a clear gendered pattern in sexual defilement, with female minors perceived as disproportionately affected. The result is consistent with global and national research, which identifies girls as the most frequent victims of sexual abuse due to gender-based vulnerabilities, entrenched patriarchal norms, and power imbalances (Jewkes et al., 2015; Oladeji & Adebayo, 2020). In Nigeria, studies have consistently reported that female children experience significantly higher rates of sexual violence compared to their male counterparts (Eze-Anaba, 2016; Okafor & Opara, 2019). However, while female minors are predominantly reported as victims, scholars caution that male victims are often underreported due to stigma, cultural silence, and misconceptions that boys are less vulnerable to sexual violence (Akinlusi et al., 2014; Ogunyemi, 2021). Therefore, the near absence of male victim recognition in this study may reflect not only actual lower prevalence but also social biases and reporting barriers that discourage disclosure. This finding underscores the need for gender-sensitive interventions. While programs must prioritize protecting female minors, they should also address the often-hidden experiences of male victims to ensure inclusive child protection policies.

Table 5 Respondents on the Commonest Victims

Commonest Victims of Sexual Defilement of Minors	Frequency	Percentage
Male minors	1	1
Female minors	98	98

Missing	1	1
Total	**100**	**100**

Sexual fun as a cause for Sexual defilement: Figure 6 presents respondents' perceptions of whether the desire to have "sexual fun" with girls is a factor responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. A majority of the respondents 55 (55.0%) strongly agreed and 29 (29.0%) agreed, affirmed that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is a major driver of child defilement. Conversely, only 8 (8.0%) disagreed and 8 (8.0%) strongly disagreed, suggesting that while a minority of respondents did not view this as a cause, the overwhelming consensus highlights sexual gratification as a key motivator of abuse. This finding aligns with existing literature which identifies sexual desire, deviant gratification, and distorted cognitive beliefs as primary motivators behind child sexual abuse (Smallbone et al., 2008; Seto, 2017). In Nigeria and other African societies, studies have shown that perpetrators often justify abuse as a means of satisfying sexual urges or experimenting with sexual pleasure, disregarding the profound physical and psychological harm inflicted on minors (Okonkwo & Eke, 2017; Fawole et al., 2021). Furthermore, the high agreement levels (84% combined) suggest a strong awareness within the community of the role of perpetrators' sexual impulses in driving defilement. However, scholars emphasize that this explanation should not be interpreted as excusing the crime; rather, it underscores the need for early intervention programs, strict enforcement of laws, and community sensitization to discourage harmful sexual behaviors (Akinlusi et al., 2014; WHO, 2020). Importantly, beyond sexual gratification, other underlying factors such as power dynamics, cultural silence, pornography exposure, and economic stressors have also been implicated in sexual violence against minors (Jewkes et al., 2015; Oladeji & Adebayo, 2020). This suggests that while sexual fun may be a leading cause, it must be understood within a multifactorial framework of abuse.
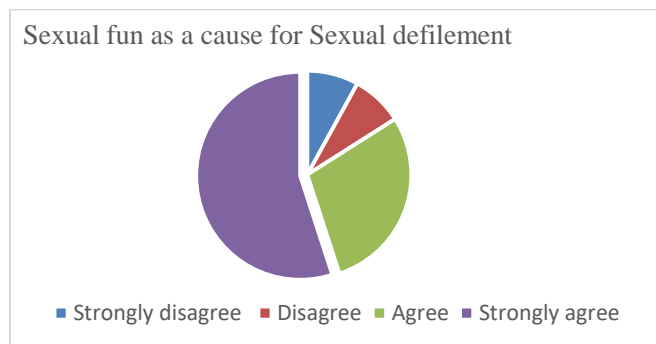

Fig. 6 Sexual fun as a cause for Sexual defilement

Friends' Influence as a Cause of Defilement: Table 6 presents respondents' views on whether friends' influence can contribute to sexual defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA, Rivers State. The findings reveal that 37 (37.0%) agreed and 27 (27.0%) strongly agreed, representing a combined 64.0% of respondents who believed that peer influence is a significant factor driving defilement. On the other hand, 16 (16.0%) strongly disagreed and 20 (20.0%) disagreed, totaling 36.0%, suggesting that a notable minority did not perceive peer pressure as a contributing cause. The result underscores the central role of peer influence in shaping deviant sexual behavior. Adolescents and young adults are often susceptible to peer norms and behaviors, and research has consistently linked peer pressure to risk-taking, including early sexual debut, unsafe sexual practices, and, in extreme cases, sexual violence (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). In the Nigerian context, studies have found that negative peer influence is a risk factor for delinquency, substance use, and sexual abuse behaviors, especially among young males seeking validation within their social groups (Osafo et al., 2017; Adeusi et al., 2014). The high percentage (64%) of respondents acknowledging friends' influence as a cause of defilement suggests that perpetrators may be pressured, encouraged, or normalized into abusive behavior by peers. This aligns with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals adopt behaviors they observe and see reinforced within their peer environment (Bandura, 1977). In many

communities, peers may trivialize or even glorify sexual exploitation, thereby lowering moral restraints and increasing the likelihood of abuse (Lansford et al., 2014). However, the minority (36%) who disagreed indicates that not all perpetrators are influenced by peers, and that other factors such as individual deviance, family dysfunction, pornography exposure, or cultural practices may play stronger roles for some individuals (Okonkwo & Eke, 2017; Jewkes et al., 2015). The implication is that preventive interventions should not only focus on individuals but also address peer-group dynamics through community sensitization, school-based programs, and peer mentorship initiatives that encourage positive modeling and discourage harmful behaviors.

Table 6 Friends' Influence as a Cause of Defilement

Friends' influence can cause it	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	16	16
Disagree	20	20
Agree	37	37
Strongly agree	27	27
Total	**100**	**100**

Sexual Desire as a Cause of Defilement: Figure 7 presents respondents' perceptions of whether sexual desire for the girl can cause the defilement of female minors in Ikwerre LGA. Findings show that 34 (34.0%) agreed and 35 (35.0%) strongly agreed, making up a significant majority of 69.0%, who considered sexual desire a major driver of defilement. In contrast, 10 (10.0%) strongly disagreed and 21 (21.0%) disagreed, representing 31.0% who did not believe that sexual desire alone is a sufficient cause. The results indicate that sexual desire, particularly when misdirected towards minors, is a powerful motivator of abuse. Research shows that perpetrators of child sexual abuse often rationalize their actions as being driven by irresistible sexual urges, particularly when exposed to distorted beliefs about children's sexuality (Seto, 2008; Smallbone et al., 2008). In Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African societies, the hyper-sexualization of girls, coupled with harmful myths that sex with minors can cure sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or bring luck, further fuels this problem (Olusola-Taiwo et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2015). The strong agreement (69%) aligns with earlier findings that perpetrators often report uncontrollable sexual urges or attraction to minors as justification for abuse (Leclerc & Wortley, 2015). However, scholars argue that while sexual desire may be a factor, it rarely operates in isolation. Rather, it interacts with opportunity, poor self-control, cultural acceptance of male dominance, and lack of deterrence mechanisms (Finkelhor, 1984; Cohen & Felson, 1979). This explains why 31% of respondents disagreed, indicating that sexual desire alone is insufficient without additional enabling conditions such as unsupervised access to minors, peer encouragement, or exposure to pornography. From a counselling and prevention perspective, these findings highlight the importance of sex education, behavioral therapy, and awareness programs that challenge distorted sexual beliefs and promote healthy expressions of desire. Counsellors working with offenders must also address issues of impulse control and distorted cognitions that reinforce abusive behavior (Marshall & Marshall, 2014).
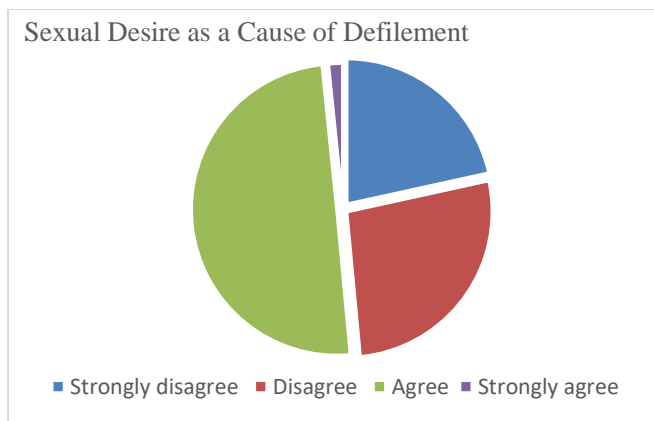
Fig. 7 Sexual Desire as a Cause of Defilement

Wanting Sex as a Cause of Defilement: Table 7 reveals respondents' perceptions on whether wanting sex can cause the defilement of female minors. Findings indicate that a significant proportion, 39 (39.0%) agreed and 35 (35.0%) strongly agreed, totaling 74.0%, believed that the mere desire to satisfy sexual urges is a major factor driving defilement. Conversely, 6 (6.0%) strongly disagreed and 20 (20.0%) disagreed, representing 26.0%, who did not perceive wanting sex as a sufficient cause of defilement. This outcome underscores that uncontrolled sexual drive and poor impulse regulation are widely recognized as triggers of sexual violence against minors. Scholars have consistently argued that sexual offending often stems from impulsivity, cognitive distortions, and the inability to regulate sexual urges, especially in contexts where opportunities to exploit vulnerable minors exist (Ward & Beech, 2006; Seto, 2008). In sub-Saharan Africa, this problem is aggravated by sociocultural myths, normalization of male sexual entitlement, and limited sex education, which contribute to the abuse of minors (Jewkes et al., 2015; Olusola-Taiwo et al., 2020). The high level of agreement (74%) supports Finkelhor's (1984) Precondition Model of Child Sexual Abuse, which identifies offender motivation, overcoming internal inhibitors, overcoming external barriers, and overcoming child resistance as necessary for abuse to occur. Here, wanting sex reflects offender motivation, which when unchecked by strong moral, legal, or social inhibitors, leads to sexual defilement. Nevertheless, the dissenting 26% of respondents indicate recognition that sexual desire alone may not fully explain abuse. Consistent with Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), defilement often requires not only motivation (wanting sex) but also the convergence of a suitable target (a vulnerable minor) and the absence of capable guardianship. This perspective broadens understanding from a purely individual-driven cause to a socio-environmental problem. From a counselling and prevention standpoint, these findings highlight the need for programs that address sexual impulse control, challenge rape myths, and strengthen protective environments for minors. Counselling interventions must equip individuals with healthier ways of managing sexual urges, while policymakers should prioritize awareness campaigns and stricter enforcement of child protection laws.

Table 7: Wanting Sex as a Cause of Defilement

Wanting sex	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	6	6
Disagree	20	20
Agree	39	39
Strongly agree	35	35
Total	**100**	**100**

Experimenting with Sex with Younger Ones: Figure 8 presents respondents' views on whether experimenting sex with younger ones can lead to sexual defilement of minors. The findings show that the majority of respondents agreed: 33 (33.0%) agreed and 40 (40.0%) strongly agreed, representing a combined 73.0%. Meanwhile, 10 (10.0%) strongly disagreed and 17 (17.0%) disagreed, giving a total of 27.0% who did not support this view. This result suggests that a large proportion of the respondents perceive sexual experimentation with younger individuals as a key factor contributing to sexual defilement. Adolescents and young adults, in particular, may engage in sexual experimentation driven by curiosity, peer influence, exposure to pornography, or lack of comprehensive sexual education (Brown & L'Engle, 2009; Ajayi et al., 2019). When such experimentation is directed at younger, vulnerable minors, it translates into abuse, even if the perpetrators perceive it as "exploration" rather than criminal behavior. The findings are consistent with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which emphasizes that behaviors are learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Exposure to inappropriate sexual content, peer behaviors, or even prior victimization can normalize experimentation with younger ones, thereby perpetuating cycles of abuse (Seto, 2008). Furthermore, studies have highlighted that in many African societies, conversations about sexuality are shrouded in silence and taboo, creating gaps in knowledge that encourage misguided exploration (Ige & Fawole, 2011). In such contexts, minors often become targets of sexual experimentation because they are perceived as easier to manipulate, less likely to resist, and unlikely to disclose the abuse (Akinlusi et al., 2014). The 73% agreement rate in this study therefore aligns with global research showing that perpetrators of child sexual abuse frequently frame their actions as experimentation rather than recognizing the exploitative and harmful nature of the act (Smallbone & Cale, 2015). From a counselling perspective, this finding calls for early sexuality education, development of healthy peer relationships, and interventions that address pornography exposure and peer pressure. Preventive strategies should emphasize the harmful consequences of experimenting with younger ones, both for victims and perpetrators.
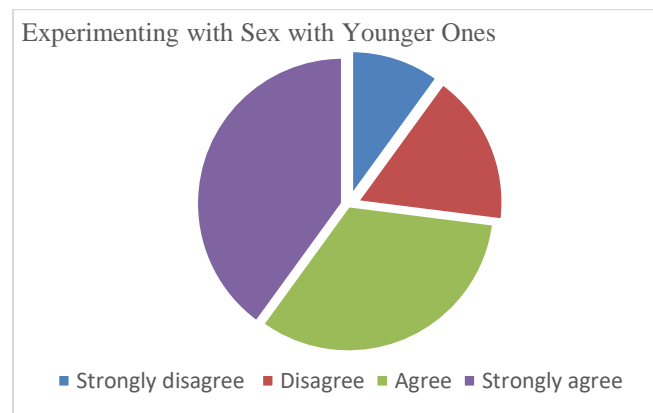

Fig. 8 Experimenting with Sex with Younger Ones

Watching Sex Films and Other Sexually Explicit Materials: Table 8 presents respondents' views on whether watching sex films and other sexually explicit materials can contribute to the sexual defilement of minors. The findings reveal that 38 (38.0%) agreed and 37 (37.0%) strongly agreed, giving a total of 75.0% of respondents who supported the assertion. In contrast, 16 (16.0%) disagreed and 9 (9.0%) strongly disagreed, amounting to 25.0% who did not share this view. This outcome indicates that the majority of respondents perceive exposure to pornography and sexually explicit content as a significant factor driving sexual defilement of minors. Several studies have shown that pornography consumption increases sexual curiosity, lowers inhibitions, and encourages risky or deviant sexual behaviors, especially among adolescents and young adults (Owens et al., 2012; Flood, 2009). When individuals exposed to such content lack proper sexual education and emotional maturity, they may attempt to act out what they see, often targeting minors who are more vulnerable and less capable of resisting (Seto, 2008). The result aligns with the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which postulates that people learn behaviors through observation and imitation.

Watching sexually explicit films provides models of behavior that may be internalized and later enacted, even when inappropriate or illegal. In contexts where there are weak family communication structures and limited regulation of media content, the risk of such imitation translating into abuse against minors is higher (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Furthermore, the findings resonate with research in Nigeria and other African contexts that link increased accessibility to internet pornography with rising cases of sexual abuse and risky sexual practices (Ajayi & Okeke, 2019; Ige & Fawole, 2011). The majority agreement (75%) in this study highlights how communities recognize the role of sexually explicit media as a driver of harmful sexual experimentation and misconduct toward minors. From a counselling and policy standpoint, this finding underscores the need for media literacy education, parental monitoring of children's media use, and stricter regulation of sexually explicit content. Such interventions can help reduce the influence of pornography in shaping distorted sexual attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the sexual defilement of minors.

Table 8 Respondents on Watching Sex Films and Other Sexually Explicit Materials

Watching Sex Films and Other Sexually Explicit Materials	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	9	9
Disagree	16	16
Agree	38	38
Strongly agree	37	37
Total	**100**	**100**

Hypothesis 1

Ho: Factors responsible for defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA do not differ significantly based on parents' socio-economic status.

Table 9: Parental Socio-economic Status

Parental status	SA	A	D	SD	Total	SWV	Mean	Remark	Rank	x-x̄	(x-x̄)²
Low income	220	96	20	3	100	339	3.4	Accepted	1	0.5	0.25
Low literacy levels	128	123	36	9	100	296	2.9	Accepted	7	0	0
Unemployment	192	117	20	3	100	332	3.3	Accepted	3	-0	0.16
Poor family background	204	120	10	4	100	338	3.4	Accepted	2	-1	0.25
Number of children	176	135	6	8	100	325	3.3	Accepted	4	-0	0.16
Aged	52	66	70	30	100	218	2.2	Rejected	9	0.7	0.49
Lack of access to service providers	36	75	60	36	100	207	2.1	Rejected	10	0.8	0.64
Community safety	76	114	44	21	100	255	2.6	Accepted	8	0.3	0.09
Drugs and substance abuse	156	111	42	3	100	312	3.1	Accepted	5	-0	0.04
War/Conflict/Riot	128	123	42	6	100	299	3	Accepted	6	-0	0.01
Total							**2.9**				**2.09**

Hypothesis one tested whether the factors responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA differ significantly based on parents' socio-economic status. Table 9 reveals that low income (Mean = 3.4, Rank = 1) and poor family background (Mean = 3.4, Rank = 2) were ranked as the strongest socio-economic factors influencing the defilement of minors, both receiving an "Accepted" remark. This indicates that financial hardship and unstable family structures are perceived by respondents as major drivers of child vulnerability to sexual abuse. Similarly, unemployment (Mean = 3.3) and large family size/number of children (Mean = 3.3) were also considered significant, highlighting how economic pressures and overburdened households create environments where children are less supervised and more exposed to predators. On the other hand, aged parental status (Mean = 2.2) and lack of access to service providers (Mean = 2.1) were "Rejected," suggesting that respondents did not strongly perceive these as direct contributors to defilement. This may reflect the fact that in many Nigerian communities, social networks and extended family systems

mitigate the effects of parental age and limited access to formal services, compared to immediate economic deprivation. The overall mean score of 2.9 shows a moderate to high perception that socio-economic status plays a crucial role in shaping the risks of defilement of minors in the study area. This finding is consistent with prior studies which have emphasized that poverty, parental unemployment, and poor socio-economic conditions increase the likelihood of child sexual abuse and exploitation (Lalor, 2004; Ige & Fawole, 2011). Children from impoverished households are often less supervised, more likely to engage in street trading, or be entrusted to guardians and non-relatives, thereby heightening exposure to sexual predators (Akinlami & Adeyemi, 2019). Furthermore, the results align with the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which highlights how family and community contexts—particularly socio-economic conditions, shape children's vulnerability to risk. At the microsystem level, low household income and large family sizes weaken parental capacity for supervision, while at the exosystem level, community

poverty and unemployment increase the prevalence of abuse opportunities. Interestingly, community-related factors such as drugs and substance abuse (Mean = 3.1) and war/conflict/riot (Mean = 3.0) were also accepted, showing that beyond household-level economics, broader environmental stressors exacerbate risks of child defilement. This corresponds with findings from Sub-Saharan Africa where instability, crime, and substance use significantly increase children's exposure to sexual violence (Meinck et al., 2015). In summary, the test of Hypothesis 1 reveals that socio-economic conditions, particularly low income, poor family background, unemployment, and large family size, are strongly associated with the defilement of minors in Ikwerre LGA. This underscores the importance of socio-economic empowerment, targeted poverty alleviation, and strengthening of family support systems as preventive measures.

Conclusion

The study investigated the factors responsible for the defilement of minors in Ikwerre Local Government Area and the implications for counselling interventions. Findings revealed that defilement is influenced by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, environmental, and psychological factors. Key determinants include poverty, parental neglect, broken homes, peer influence, harmful traditional practices, lack of adequate sex education, and exposure to social media content without proper guidance. The study further showed that the socio-economic status of parents plays a significant role in children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

The menace of child defilement has grave consequences, not only for the victims but also for the family and society at large. Victims often suffer long-term physical, emotional, social, and psychological trauma, which affects their self-esteem, academic adjustment, and overall wellbeing. This underscores the need for effective counselling interventions, social reorientation, and community-wide preventive measures.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Parental and Family Interventions: Parents should be sensitized on the importance of monitoring their children's social activities and peer groups. Strengthening family bonds, providing adequate care, and ensuring open communication can help reduce children's vulnerability.
- Counselling and Psychosocial Support: Professional counsellors should be deployed in schools and communities to provide preventive education, trauma counselling, and rehabilitation support for victims. School-based counselling programs should focus on building resilience, self-protection skills, and self-esteem among children and adolescents.
- Community Awareness and Advocacy: Public enlightenment campaigns should be intensified to break the culture of silence and stigma surrounding defilement. Traditional and religious leaders should play active roles in advocating against harmful practices and promoting child protection.
- Government and Policy Interventions: The government should strengthen child protection laws and ensure strict punishment for perpetrators of child defilement. Social welfare agencies should be empowered to provide shelters and rehabilitation programs for victims.
- Educational Measures: Comprehensive sexuality education should be incorporated into school curricula in age-appropriate ways to equip children with knowledge about their rights, body boundaries, and reporting mechanisms. Teachers should be trained to identify early warning signs of abuse and provide timely referral for counselling and protection services.
- Economic Empowerment: Poverty alleviation programs and economic empowerment initiatives should target vulnerable families, thereby reducing the economic pressures that expose minors to exploitation.

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