Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Silence And Disclosure: Rethinking Communication And Power In Addressing Child Sexual Abuse In Nigeria

Olusola A John

olusola.john@uregina.ca

University of Regina https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4948-0231

Sadiya Abubakar

Baze University https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7277-5127

Aliyu Bello

Baze University https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6023-1765

Research Article

Keywords: child sexual abuse, communication, disclosure, gender justice, Nigeria, development communication

Posted Date: September 21st, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11069829/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains one of Nigeria's most pervasive yet chronically underreported crises shaped by interlocking pressures of gender norms, cultural practice, and institutional weakness. This study examines how communication shapes discourse, perception, and disclosure of CSA among secondary school students in Abuja. Drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, feminist frameworks, and participatory development communication, it uses a convergent mixed-methods design comprising surveys of 420 students, 12 focus group discussions, and 10 key informant interviews. The findings are revealing. Institutional communication is overwhelmingly top-down and monologic, leaving students without safe spaces for disclosure or meaningful participation. Silence surrounding CSA in these institutions is beyond a cultural artifact; it is structurally produced through power relations embedded in gender hierarchies, institutional inertia, and communicative systems that exclude children's voices. Girls face heightened vulnerability due to entrenched expectations of modesty and compliance, while boys encounter a different but equally powerful barrier, stigma anchored in hegemonic masculinity. Digital platforms have further expanded the terrain of CSA beyond physical school environments. Crucially, this study contributes something absent from most prior Nigerian research: the evidence that institutional failure under-trained teachers, absent reporting protocols, and underfunded counselling is as powerful a producer of silence as cultural taboo, and that children's silence is situational and changeable rather than fixed. The study recommends a transition from awareness-driven communication to dialogic, child-centred approaches, comprehensive sexuality education, and institutionally accountable reporting mechanisms.

Introduction

Communication occupies a pivotal position in development processes, facilitating the spread of knowledge, shaping behaviour, and enabling social change. In the context of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Nigeria, however, it routinely fails to fulfil that potential. Rather than aiding disclosure and deterrence, communication has repeatedly reproduced silence, stigma, and exclusion (Ogunfowokan & Fajemilehin, 2020; Akpan & Essien, 2023). This irony is particularly acute in Nigeria, where CSA continues to rise despite increased awareness campaigns and policy interventions.

CSA constitutes a significant public health and human rights crisis, with wide-ranging implications for individual wellbeing and national development. National surveys indicate that approximately one in four girls and one in ten boys experience some form of sexual violence before the age of 18, yet fewer than 5% of cases are formally reported (National Population Commission & ICF, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). That gap between prevalence and reporting points to critical deficiencies in communication systems, institutional trust, and cultural attitudes toward sexuality and bodily autonomy.

From a humanities perspective, communication is not a neutral process of information exchange. It is a site of power where meanings are produced, contested, and regulated. Foucault (1978) conceptualised discourse as a mechanism through which power operates, determining what can be said, who may

speak, and whose voices are rendered unintelligible. In The History of Sexuality, he showed how institutions such as schools, clinics, and churches produce and police talk about sexuality, not merely by prohibiting speech but by channelling it into approved registers that simultaneously foreclose other forms of articulation. In the context of CSA, this means adults and institutions control the communicative terrain, leaving children with severely constrained agency to articulate their experiences (Oduro, 2021).

Feminist theory adds another dimension. Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity argues that gendered identities are not innate but constituted through repeated social practices. Girls become legible as "good girls" by performing modesty and compliance; speaking about sexual abuse disrupts that performance and threatens social recognition. For boys, performing invulnerability and stoic masculinity renders disclosure equally threatening to identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In Nigeria, these dynamics compound: girls face reputational stigma if they disclose, while boys face ridicule and disbelief (Adelekan et al., 2022).

Despite the acknowledged importance of communication in addressing CSA, existing approaches in Nigerian schools remain predominantly top-down. Information is typically disseminated through student assemblies, media campaigns, and occasional sensitisation programmes, with limited opportunity for interaction, feedback, or child-centred dialogue (Okon & Ekpenyong, 2024). This approach rests on the flawed assumption that awareness alone can efficiently drive behavioural change, overlooking the complex sociocultural and psychological conditions that govern disclosure and institutional response.

Recent developments have further complicated the picture. The proliferation of digital technologies has introduced new forms of CSA risk: online grooming, cyber exploitation, and coercive image sharing. Studies from 2022 to 2025 document the growing role of digital platforms in facilitating CSA, particularly among adolescents with smartphone access (Eze et al., 2023; Nwankwo & Ugwu, 2024). These transformations require a re-evaluation of communication strategies that can address both traditional and emerging forms of abuse.

This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between communication, power, and disclosure among secondary school students in Abuja. Specifically, it aims to:

- • Analyse the nature and effectiveness of current CSA communication strategies in secondary schools;
- • Examine how gender and cultural norms shape communication and disclosure;
- • Identify structural and institutional barriers to effective communication and reporting; and
- • Propose transformative communication approaches that enhance CSA prevention and response.

These objectives were pursued through the following research questions:

- • What do current CSA communication strategies in Abuja secondary schools look like, and how effectively do they function?

- • How do gender and cultural norms affect students' willingness to discuss or disclose CSA?
- • What barriers prevent effective communication and reporting of CSA?
- • What forms of transformative communication do students and institutional stakeholders themselves propose?

By integrating humanities scholarship, gender studies, and development communication, the study offers a critical, empirically grounded framework for understanding and addressing CSA in the Nigerian context.

Communication as Power, Knowledge, and Institutional Control

Communication is often conceptualised as a neutral conduit for information. Foucault (1978) challenged that assumption decisively, arguing that discourse is itself a form of power that shapes what can be known, regulates behaviour, and constructs social reality. In The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, he made a foundational claim: the modern West did not repress sexuality but produced it, subjecting it to elaborate mechanisms of classification, confession, and surveillance. Institutions such as schools, churches, and clinics became key sites for generating "true" knowledge about bodies and sexuality, determining which speech acts were intelligible and which were pathologized or silenced. Power, in this account, does not simply say no; rather, it incites certain forms of speech while making others structurally unthinkable.

Applied to CSA in Nigerian schools, Foucauldian analysis reveals how institutional communication functions as a disciplinary technology. Student Assemblies and top-down campaigns do not merely inform; they define what CSA "is" (a moral transgression rather than a structural harm), who may speak about it (adults, authorities), and who must remain silent (child-victims). The child who attempts to disclose operates within a discursive field that has already delegitimised her or his voice. The institution's repeated preference for one-way communication is therefore not an oversight. As Foucault (1978) argues, rather, it is a power effect that preserves the authority of those who control the communicative apparatus. Oduro (2021) offers a complementary analysis of Ghanaian schools, showing how cultural secrecy functions as a quasi-institutional mechanism that draws children into regimes of silence. This study extends that insight, showing that in the Nigerian context, institutional failure such as absent protocols, untrained teachers, and underfunded counselling operates as a second, analytically distinct mechanism that a purely discursive analysis is likely to miss.

Development Communication: Participatory Approaches and Their Limits

Development communication has moved considerably from early diffusion-of-innovations models, which treated information transmission as the primary driver of change (Rogers, 2003), toward participatory frameworks that foreground dialogue, local knowledge, and community agency (Melkote & Steeves,

2015; Servaes, 2020). In this tradition, participatory communication is more than a technique. It represents an epistemological commitment: those most affected by a problem possess valid, actionable knowledge, and sustainable change requires their active involvement in constructing solutions (Freire, 1970, as cited in Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

In the context of CSA, participatory communication holds genuine promise. If students can engage in facilitated small-group discussions rather than passively receiving adult-delivered messages, they may develop more nuanced understandings of abuse, feel validated in their experiences, and build trust in reporting channels (Okon & Ekpenyong, 2024). Nevertheless, the participatory literature has not gone unchallenged. Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue that participatory interventions frequently reproduce the very power dynamics they claim to dismantle by selecting convenient representatives rather than the most marginalised, holding consultations with predetermined outcomes, or encouraging "participation" within frames so narrow that substantive challenge is impossible. Applied to Nigerian schools, this critique carries weight: simply switching from assemblies to small-group discussions will not automatically produce genuine dialogue if the underlying institutional culture still rewards compliance, if teachers retain authority to sanction what topics are "appropriate," and if students know that certain disclosures will trigger blame rather than support. Authentic participation in CSA communication requires not merely a change in format but a renegotiation of institutional authority, that is, a more demanding transformation than the participatory literature sometimes acknowledges.

Feminist Perspectives on Voice, Silence, and Gendered Vulnerability

Feminist theory provides an indispensable framework for understanding how gender shapes communication and produces silence. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity holds that gender is not an innate attribute but an effect of iterative citational practice: one becomes a recognisable "girl" or "boy" by repeatedly enacting the behaviours and speech styles that social norms have coded as gender-appropriate. Crucially, this means that speaking about sexual abuse is not simply difficult; for girls socialised into modesty and compliance, it may feel subjectively impossible because it ruptures the very performance through which social legibility and protection are achieved.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) extend this analysis through the concept of hegemonic masculinity: the culturally exalted form of manhood organised around dominance, toughness, and the suppression of vulnerability. This norm positions boys as structurally unlikely to disclose sexual victimisation. Disclosure would require admitting both sexual victimisation which feminises them, and helplessness, which violates the core of hegemonic masculine identity. As a result, boys face a distinctive and underanalysed silencing mechanism that is no less structurally produced than girls' silencing, even if its cultural content differs.

Empirical evidence from sub-Saharan Africa corroborates these theoretical claims. Gender norms significantly shape both the occurrence and underreporting of CSA, with female-dominated stigma narratives focusing on reputation and "immodesty," while male-dominated narratives focus on weakness

and emasculation (Mensch et al., 2019; Ogunfowokan & Fajemilehin, 2020; Adelekan et al., 2022). These findings underscore the necessity of gender-differentiated communication strategies that address the specific silencing mechanisms operating for girls and boys respectively, rather than treating "gender-sensitive" as a generic quality of tone.

CSA Disclosure: Empirical Evidence and Social-Ecological Models

CSA Disclosure: Empirical Evidence and Social-Ecological Models
Research consistently identifies a cluster of interacting barriers to CSA disclosure: knowledge deficits about what constitutes abuse, fear of stigma and disbelief, distrust of institutional actors, and concern about family disruption (WHO, 2020; McElvaney & Greene, 2020). Social-ecological models of disclosure (McElvaney & Greene, 2020) are useful because they situate the child's decision within nested layers of influence- individual cognition, peer relationships, family dynamics, institutional protocols, community norms, and policy frameworks rather than treating disclosure as a purely individual psychological act. This multi-level framing matters: it shows that communication interventions targeting only child-level knowledge will inevitably be insufficient if the institutional and community layers remain unchanged.

In the Nigerian context, many students obtain information about CSA from informal sources rather than formal education; reporting mechanisms are often unclear or inaccessible; and when children do disclose, institutional responses are frequently inadequate or victim-blaming (NPC & ICF, 2019; UNICEF, 2020; Akpan & Essien, 2023). Recent scholarship has expanded attention to digital CSA. Eze et al. (2023) and Nwankwo and Ugwu (2024) document the growing prevalence of online grooming and coercive image-sharing among Nigerian adolescents with smartphone access. Critically, digital victimisation does not follow the same gendered pattern as physical CSA, boys and girls report similar rates of online contact but respond differently, partly because digital anonymity modifies how stigma operates. This distinction has direct implications for communication design.

Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-method design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). Triangulation across these strands enabled a fuller and more valid picture of CSA communication dynamics than either strand could provide alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Study Area and Population

The research was conducted in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, between September 2024 and February 2025. The study population comprised secondary school students aged 12 to 18 years, a range selected because of its well-documented vulnerability to CSA and because adolescence is the

developmental period most characterised by accelerating exposure to digital communication technologies.

Sampling Technique and Data Collection

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, four secondary schools were purposively selected from six area councils to represent diverse socioeconomic contexts: two schools in lower-income areas, one in a middle-income area, and one serving a socioeconomically mixed population. The remaining two councils were excluded due to documented security and logistical constraints at the time of data collection. In the second stage, we randomly selected 105 students from each school, yielding a total survey sample of 420 students. This sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for cross-sectional surveys, with a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, a conservatively estimated prevalence of 50%, and a design effect of 1.2 to account for clustering within schools. Survey items covered CSA knowledge, sources of information, previous disclosure experiences, and perceptions of school communication practices.

For the qualitative component, we conducted 12 FGDs, three per school, then stratified by gender and age cohort (12 to 14 years and 15 to 18 years), with each group comprising 8 to 10 participants. Additionally, we conducted 10 KIIs with school counsellors, principals, and child protection officers. All instruments were pilot-tested in a non-participating school and revised for clarity and cultural appropriateness prior to administration.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics were generated, and chi-square tests were conducted to examine associations between gender and disclosure attitudes, with Cramér's V reported as the effect size measure for significant associations. Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. To establish trustworthiness, two members of the research team independently coded two FGD transcripts and one KII transcript prior to team discussion; intercoder agreement reached 86%. The team resolved disagreements through discussion, and the lead researcher applied the revised codebook consistently to the remaining transcripts.

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

The authors obtained ethical approval from the Federal Capital Territory Education Board and the institutional review board of the authors' university. Informed consent was obtained from parents and guardians; age-appropriate assent was obtained from student participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. Referral pathways to psychosocial support services were made available to any participant who disclosed personal distress during data collection.

On positionality: the researchers are based in Abuja and work professionally within the educational system, creating potential for social desirability bias in participant responses. To mitigate this, rapport-building sessions were held before each FGD; peer facilitators already known to student groups were recruited to lead discussions; and participants were repeatedly assured, verbally and in writing, that participation was entirely voluntary, that responses would not be shared with school authorities, and that no response would affect academic standing. Anonymised transcripts were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the study was conducted exclusively in Abuja; CSA communication dynamics in rural communities, Northern Nigerian states, or other geopolitical zones may differ considerably, limiting generalisability. Second, self-report surveys on sensitive topics are inherently susceptible to social desirability bias, the study has likely underestimated both the prevalence of abuse experiences and the intensity of stigmatised attitudes. Third, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot rather than a developmental trajectory; longitudinal research would better illuminate how communication strategies evolve in response to interventions. Fourth, data on digital CSA risks rely on retrospective recall, which is susceptible to memory distortion. Fifth, despite strong confidentiality assurances, some participants may have withheld full disclosure out of fear that responses would reach parents or school authorities.

Findings

What Do Current CSA Communication Strategies Look Like?

Of the 420 survey respondents, 68.3% (n = 287) reported having received information about CSA at school. Among that group, assembly presentations were the most common format (51.4%, n = 148), followed by media campaigns (23.1%, n = 66); classroom discussions were cited by only 12.6% (n = 36). The overwhelming majority—74.5% (n = 313) described the communication they had received as "one-way," with no opportunity to ask questions or engage in dialogue. A student in an FGD put it plainly:

"They just come and talk to us during assembly, telling us to avoid bad people. But they never ask if we understand or if we have questions. It is like they are just doing it because they have to." (FGD, female, 14 years)

Teachers and counsellors confirmed the limited interactivity. One school counsellor noted:

"We have a once-a-term guidance session, but it is mostly me talking. I would like to do more, but I do not have the training to handle such discussions safely." (KII, school counsellor)

How Do Gender and Cultural Norms Affect Communication and Disclosure?

Gender significantly shaped both access to information and willingness to disclose. Among female respondents, 62.4% (n = 131 of 210) agreed that reporting abuse risks being labelled "spoilt" or "immoral." One female student elaborated:

"If a girl says a man touched her, people will say she is not a good girl. She must have done something to attract him. So we keep quiet." (FGD, female, 15 years)

Boys reported a distinct but comparably powerful silencing mechanism. Among male respondents, 58.7% (n = 123 of 210) stated that disclosing abuse would be perceived as weakness. One explained:

"A boy is not supposed to be weak. If you say somebody did something to you, they will laugh at you and say you are not a man." (FGD, male, 17 years)

Chi-square analysis confirmed a statistically significant association between gender and willingness to disclose hypothetical abuse ($\chi^2(1) = 14.32$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's V = 0.19), representing a small-to-medium effect. Girls were disproportionately concerned about reputational stigma; boys' reluctance centred on challenges to masculine identity.

Cultural and Religious Constraints

Cultural and religious frameworks emerged as structurally reinforcing barriers. Over three-quarters of respondents (76.2%, n = 320) reported that discussions about sexuality are considered taboo in their homes and communities. Teachers described being caught between child protection responsibilities and the fear of parental and community censure:

"If I talk about sex or abuse in class, some parents will say I am corrupting the children. So I just stick to the syllabus." (KII, teacher)

Religious leaders in follow-up discussions reinforced the view that sexuality should be discussed exclusively within the context of marriage, narrowing further the communicative space available to students who have experienced or witnessed abuse.

What Are the Main Barriers to Reporting?

Institutional trust was critically low. Only 32.1% of respondents (n = 135) indicated that they would report CSA to a teacher or counsellor. The primary reasons given were fear of victim-blaming (41.2%, n = 173), lack of confidentiality in school reporting processes (28.6%, n = 120), and the belief that reporting would produce no effective outcome (23.5%, n = 99). One student recounted a peer's experience:

"A friend told a teacher once, and the teacher said it was the girl's fault for dressing nicely. So we learned that telling is useless." (FGD, female, 13 years)

School principals acknowledged serious institutional deficits. One stated:

"We have no clear guidelines on how to handle such cases. If a child reports, I do not know whether I should call the police or the parents first. Many times, we just tell the child to avoid the person." (KII, principal)

What Do Students Want Instead?

Despite the prevalence of top-down communication, 82.1% of respondents (n = 345) expressed a clear desire for more interactive formats. Preferred modalities included small-group peer discussions (44.3%, n = 186), peer education programmes in which older students facilitate with younger groups (28.1%, n = 118), and dedicated one-on-one counselling sessions (9.7%, n = 41). Students consistently emphasised that participatory formats would increase their sense of safety and agency:

"If we talk in small groups with our friends and a teacher we trust, maybe some of us can share what happened to us. But now, nobody asks, and we are afraid to say anything." (FGD, male, 16 years)

Digital Communication and Emerging Risks

Over half the full sample—53.6% (n = 225 of 420)- reported having received unsolicited sexual messages online, and 28.1% (n = 118 of 420) had been asked to share intimate images. Boys and girls reported broadly comparable rates of initial online contact, though girls were considerably more likely to describe sustained pressure and coercion following that contact. One female student described the pattern vividly:

"A man added me on WhatsApp. He said he wanted to be my friend. Then he started sending me money and asking for pictures. When I refused, he said he would tell my father that I am dating someone." (FGD, female, 16 years)

The vast majority of students who had experienced this kind of online contact had not informed an adult, citing fear of losing telephone access or being held responsible for the contact.

Discussion

This study examined how communication systems shape CSA disclosure in Nigerian secondary schools. The findings make one central point clear: existing communication strategies are not simply inadequate; they actively produce the silence they nominally seek to break. The discussion below situates these findings against the theoretical frameworks introduced in the literature review, foregrounds tensions and divergences, and addresses the implications of institutional failure alongside discursive control.

Communication as Power and as Institutional Absence

Consistent with Foucauldian analysis (1978), this study found that communication in schools is deeply embedded in power relations. The dominance of assemblies and one-way campaigns reflects a structure in which adults control discourse, and children are assigned the role of passive recipients. This

configuration serves the institution's need to demonstrate compliance with child protection mandates rather than children's need for safe, meaningful disclosure channels. The communicative structure thereby replicates broader power imbalances and forecloses the possibility of children articulating experiences that the institutional framing has not anticipated or authorised (Foucault, 1978; Oduro, 2021).

Yet the findings also surface something that a strictly Foucauldian account does not fully explain. Many teachers and counsellors reported not controlling communication deliberately but operating in a vacuum of training and protocol. One counsellor explicitly expressed a desire to do more while acknowledging a complete absence of capacity. This silence stems from material neglect, underfunded counselling systems, absent in-service training, and the state's failure to develop and disseminate institutional reporting protocols. A Foucauldian framework centred on discursive regulation risks misreading these structural absences as disciplinary design. The evidence suggests that institutional inadequacy and discursive control operate in tandem, and communication interventions must address both.

Gender Performativity and the Differential Production of Silence

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity explains the gendered contours of silence with considerable precision. For girls in this study, performing "good girlhood" through modesty and compliance is incompatible with disclosing sexual victimisation; to speak is to invite the accusation of having invited the abuse. For boys, performing invulnerability and stoicism is incompatible with admitting victimisation. In both cases, silence is a rational response to the social penalties that truthful disclosure would incur.

An important divergence from parts of the feminist literature emerges in the digital risk findings. Boys and girls in this sample reported broadly similar rates of unsolicited online sexual contact. Masculine norms create a specific form of vulnerability in the digital domain: boys may be equally or more exposed to certain forms of grooming, but the same norms that produce stoicism offline may make them significantly less likely to report online experiences, rendering them statistically invisible in official records. Communication and support strategies designed exclusively around girls' experiences of stigma will, as a result, systematically fail the boys in their cohort.

Participatory Communication: Widely Wanted, Structurally Constrained

The strong student preference for interactive, small-group, and peer-led formats expressed by 82.1% of respondents aligns with the normative claims of participatory development communication theory (Servaes, 2020). But the data also document why straightforward implementation is unlikely to produce genuine change. Teachers fear parental backlash for discussing sexuality; school cultures reward order and compliance over dialogue; and there is neither training nor protected time for facilitated discussion. These are not problems that participatory formats alone can solve.

This is precisely where Cooke and Kothari's (2001) critique becomes pertinent. If participation is introduced without restructuring the institutional conditions that determine whose speech is authorised and what consequences follow from speaking, the result is what they call "participation as tyranny" which is an apparent opening of space that actually reproduces existing power dynamics under a more legitimate-seeming label. Authentic participatory communication in Nigerian schools would require reforming teacher training, developing clear and confidential reporting protocols, and renegotiating the cultural norms that govern what can be discussed in the classroom. These conditions lie well beyond the purview of communication strategy alone.

Institutional Trust and the SDG Framework

The finding that only 32.1% of students would report CSA to a teacher or counsellor is perhaps the study's most consequential empirical result. It should be interpreted as an accurate assessment of institutional performance: students who have witnessed or experienced victim-blaming responses are rationally calculating that disclosure produces worse outcomes than silence, rather than a measure of students' irrationality.

This has direct implications for the SDG framework. SDG 5.2 calls for the elimination of violence against women and girls; SDG 16.2 calls for an end to abuse of children. Both are premised on the existence of functional institutional mechanisms for protection and accountability. Where reporting produces blame rather than protection, the formal existence of reporting mechanisms is not enough. A student who discloses to a blaming teacher is arguably placed in a worse position than one who maintains silence, facing public reputational damage without protective institutional action. Communication reform and institutional accountability reform are not sequential tasks; they should proceed simultaneously.

Where This Study Diverges from and Extends the Existing Literature

Oduro's (2021) study of Ghanaian schools identified cultural secrecy as the primary barrier to CSA disclosure. Our findings partially corroborate this, as cultural and religious norms featured prominently, but suggest that institutional failure is an equally significant and analytically distinct barrier. More importantly, students in this study demonstrated a conditional rather than absolute silence: 82.1% wanted interactive communication formats, and qualitative data showed students willing to disclose in small groups with trusted peers. This conditionality matters analytically. It suggests that silence is not a fixed cultural disposition but a situated response to specific institutional conditions. If trusted facilitators, confidential reporting, and trained teachers change those conditions, the barriers to disclosure may prove far more tractable than a purely cultural framing implies.

Recommendations

Replace Top-Down Communication with Facilitated Dialogue

Given that 74.5% of students described current communication as one-directional, schools should formally introduce facilitated small-group discussion sessions on CSA, child rights, and bodily autonomy, held at minimum once per term. These sessions should be led by trained external facilitators or specially trained teachers and not by the authority figures students associate primarily with discipline.

Establish School-Based Peer Education Programmes

Given that 82.1% of students preferred peer-led formats, schools should pilot structured peer education programmes in which upper-secondary students (16–18 years) receive training to facilitate age-appropriate discussions with younger cohorts. Peer facilitation may reduce the authority-related inhibition that deters students from speaking to teachers. Monitor and evaluate pilots before scaling.

Establish Confidential and Accountable Reporting Mechanisms

Since only 32.1% of students would report to a teacher, schools must introduce multi-modal confidential reporting mechanisms: anonymous written reporting boxes, designated female and male contact staff with a defined child protection role, and a written institutional protocol specifying who is responsible for what action, and within what timeframe, following any report. The absence of such protocols, as documented in KIIs with principals, is a structural driver of non-disclosure, and addressing it is a prerequisite to any communication intervention.

Integrate Digital Safety and Online CSA Prevention into Curricula

Given that 53.6% of students reported receiving unsolicited sexual messages online, and 28.1% had been asked to share intimate images, digital safety must be integrated into existing curricula. Content should cover recognition of grooming tactics, privacy settings, and accessible reporting pathways for online abuse, alongside offline forms. Schools should partner with technology companies and child protection organisations in curriculum development, ensuring that digital literacy content is regularly updated to reflect the evolving landscape of online CSA.

Invest in Teacher Training and Institutional Capacity

The documented absence of teacher training in trauma-informed and participatory communication is a proximate cause of institutional silence. The National Education Policy should mandate pre-service and in-service training in these areas, and school counselling systems should be adequately resourced with trained, dedicated child protection personnel. Without this investment, the other recommendations in this section will remain aspirational.

Engage Cultural and Religious Frameworks Strategically

Rather than opposing cultural and religious frameworks directly, communication strategies should work within them where possible. Framing child protection as a religious duty and engaging trusted community and religious leaders as trained messengers has proven effective in analogous contexts across sub-Saharan Africa. This approach does not require abandoning critical gender analysis; it requires strategic sequencing in which trust is established before norms are challenged.

Policy Implications

- • Educational policy: Integrate comprehensive sexuality education into national secondary curricula aligned with UNESCO's (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. Mandate teacher training in participatory pedagogy and trauma-informed approaches as part of national teacher qualification frameworks.
- • Institutional reform: Require all secondary schools to establish written confidential reporting protocols and to designate trained child protection contact staff. Strengthen the counselling system through additional budget allocation and minimum staffing standards.
- • Legal and regulatory frameworks: Enforce existing child protection legislation, including the Child Rights Act (2003) and its state-level equivalents. Align institutional practice with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and with SDG targets 5.2 and 16.2. Develop enforceable standards for online platforms operating in Nigeria regarding reporting mechanisms for online CSA.
- • Community engagement: Commission multi-year awareness campaigns that directly and respectfully address cultural and religious barriers to CSA disclosure, using community and religious leaders as trained co-designers and messengers rather than passive conduits.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the silence surrounding child sexual abuse in Nigerian secondary schools is not an organic cultural product. It is a structurally manufactured outcome, produced through the interaction of top-down communication models, absent institutional protocols, undertrained teachers, and gendered norms that render disclosure harmful to the children who most need to speak. The humanities-grounded framework employed here, drawing on Foucault, Butler, and participatory communication theory, enables a precise diagnosis of how these conditions operate. Equally important, the study identifies where those frameworks require supplementation: Foucauldian discourse analysis does not fully account for material neglect and institutional absence; feminist accounts of gendered vulnerability need expansion to encompass the distinctive silencing experienced by boys; and participatory communication theory must reckon with the structural constraints that prevent genuine participation in Nigerian school cultures.

The study's most actionable finding is that students' silence is conditional rather than fixed. Children in this sample wanted to speak, and they indicated clearly the conditions under which they would: small groups, trusted peers or facilitators, and assurance of confidentiality. Transforming CSA communication

in Nigerian schools means creating those conditions through sustained investment in teacher training, institutional accountability mechanisms, peer education, and digital literacy. These are not supplementary to child protection; they are foundational. Their absence is a measurable development failure with direct implications for gender equality, child rights, and the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Future research should extend this analysis to rural Nigeria and to states with distinct legal and cultural frameworks; include children with disabilities, who face disproportionately elevated CSA risk; and conduct longitudinal evaluations of participatory communication interventions to assess their effects on disclosure rates and institutional response quality.

References

1. Adelekan A, Olorunfemi O, Adebayo A (2022) Gender norms and child sexual abuse disclosure in urban Nigeria. J Child Sex Abuse 31(4):412–429. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2022.2033861
2. Akpan U, Essien E (2023) Silence as discourse: Power and communication in child sexual abuse prevention in Nigeria. Afr J Dev Stud 13(2):45–63. https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2023/v13n2a3
3. Braun V, Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Res Psychol 3(2):77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
4. Butler J (1990) Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Routledge
5. Cochran WG (1977) Sampling techniques, 3rd edn. Wiley
6. Connell RW, Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. Gend Soc 19(6):829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639
7. Cooke B, Kothari U (eds) (2001) Participation: The new tyranny? Zed Books
8. Creswell JW, Plano Clark VL (2018) Designing and conducting mixed methods research, 3rd edn. SAGE
9. Eze P, Okafor C, Nwachukwu C (2023) Digital risks and child sexual abuse in Nigeria: A mixed-methods study of adolescents' experiences. Child Abuse Negl 142:106220. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106220
10. Foucault M, Hurley R (1978) Trans.). Pantheon Books
11. McElvaney R, Greene S (2020) Child sexual abuse disclosure: A review of the evidence and implications for practice. Child Abuse Rev 29(4):304–313. https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2643
12. Melkote SR, Steeves HL (2015) Communication for development: Theory and practice for empowerment and social justice, 3rd edn. SAGE
13. Mensch BS, Grant MJ, Blum RW (2019) Gender norms and child sexual abuse in sub-Saharan Africa: A review of the literature. J Adolesc Health 64(4):S9–S17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.11.004

14. National Population Commission & ICF (2019) Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey 2018. NPC and ICF
15. Nwankwo O, Ugwu C (2024) Online grooming and child sexual abuse in Nigeria: Prevalence and reporting patterns among secondary school students. J interpers Violence 39(2):210–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605231189124
16. Oduro GY (2021) Child sexual abuse and the politics of silence in Ghanaian schools. Gend Educ 33(5):567–582. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2020.1814204
17. Ogunfowokan AA, Fajemilehin RB (2020) Barriers to disclosure of child sexual abuse in Nigeria: A qualitative study. J Child Sex Abuse 29(3):304–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2019.1661945
18. Okon E, Ekpenyong M (2024) Participatory communication and child protection in Nigerian secondary schools: Opportunities and challenges. Dev Pract 34(1):78–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2249113
19. Rogers EM (2003) Diffusion of innovations, 5th edn. Free
20. Servaes J (ed) (2020) Handbook of communication for development and social change. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2014-3
21. UNESCO (2018) International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach. UNESCO
22. UNICEF (2020) Violence against children in Nigeria: Findings from a national survey. UNICEF Nigeria
23. United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations
24. World Health Organization (2020) Global status report on violence against children 2020. WHO