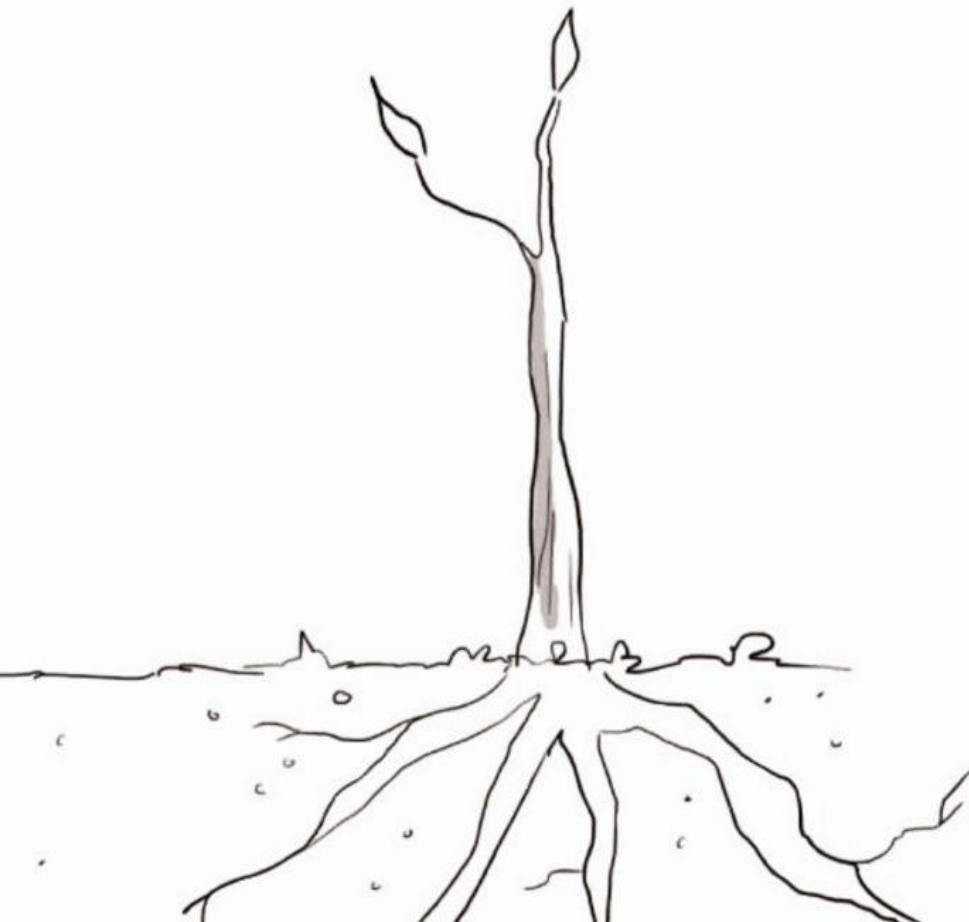


# TRACING THE PATH TOWARDS REVELATION OF INCEST

The importance of addressing incest against children and adolescents from family dynamics.





*“With deep gratitude for all the survivors of incest who  
have entrusted us with their stories.”*

## Save the Children Bolivia

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## PREFACE

Aware of the taboos in our society, a ray of light emerges from the courageous alliance between the Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento of the Universidad Católica Boliviana and Save the Children. This research project, titled "Tracing the Path to Disclosure: The Importance of Addressing Incest against Girls, Boys, and Adolescents within Family Dynamics," ventures into the exploration of sexual violence against children and adolescents, specifically incest that occurs within homes. It challenges the reluctance and silence that have shrouded this phenomenon for far too long.

The choice to address incest is not arbitrary; it is an act of courage and responsibility toward those individuals whose emotional wounds have been overlooked. The perpetration of this crime occurs embedded deep within the essence of the family structure., a place that paradoxically should be a safe, a space of peace and protection. However, the harsh reality reveals that family dynamics can become the foundation supporting the unbearable weight of incest.

This research endeavor is not merely an exposition of figures and statistics; it is a call to name the unnameable and unspeakable by its true name. Throughout history, literature and approaches to addressing this issue have tended to evade this reality, relegating to oblivion what it represents and downplaying the true magnitude of this crime. In the effort to maintain appearances, the urgency to confront the brutality of this disturbing crime was set aside.

In this journey towards disclosure, the aim is to unravel the complexities and factors contributing to the perpetuation of incest. It goes beyond pointing out what is already written, diving into the social and psychological fabric that allows this atrocity to persist in different family dynamics, where the vast majority converges on silence, concealment, non-disclosure, and even worse, inaction. With a multidisciplinary approach, this research seeks to shed light on key factors, such as the age of the victims at the time of the first occurrence of incest, underlying causes, and, most crucially, to identify effective strategies for preventing and addressing this form of intrafamilial violence.

The ultimate purpose of this work is to contribute to the construction of a world where the protection and well-being of girls and boys are not compromised by those who should protect them. We express our gratitude to those who have entrusted this work and shared their experiences, guiding us on this journey towards truth. This prologue marks the beginning of a necessary conversation and an unwavering commitment to a future where the shadow of incest no longer darkens the childhood of those who deserve to live in the light of respect, protection, and love.

This research provides us with a unique opportunity to demystify the reality of incest, challenging misconceptions and confronting uncomfortable truths that have remained veiled for too long. It is a call to empathy and a profound understanding that behind each statistic, there is a girl or boy whose innocence has been violated within their own family.

It is essential to recognize that disclosure, the courageous act of sharing the truth, is a fundamental part of the healing and coping process. Girls and boys who suffer in silence deserve to be heard, supported, and guided towards a path of healing. This research stands as a testimony to their courage and as a beacon that illuminates the dark path toward justice and recovery.

In this journey, we must rid ourselves of the tendency to minimize incest with euphemisms and address it with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. In doing so, we commit to taking concrete and effective measures to change the structures that perpetuate this violence. We cannot afford to continue to circumvent and evade the responsibility of protecting the most vulnerable.

I express my deep gratitude to the Research Institute of Behavioral Sciences and the tireless

researchers who have embraced this cause with dedication and passion. Their hard work not only generates valuable knowledge but also contributes to a revolution that challenges established norms and paves a new path toward the protection of childhood.

In conclusion, dear readers, let us leave an indelible mark by listening to and working alongside the survivors. May this research not only be an academic document but a catalyst for real and lasting change. May every written word and discovery be a spark that ignites the flame of collective consciousness, propelling us to act for the dignity and hope of those who have suffered in silence for too long. The truth demands responsibility, and this research is a significant step on the path toward a future where the protection of childhood is a non-negotiable priority.

Marianela Montes de Oca

Country Director

Save the Children Bolivia



## BACKGROUND

According to data from the Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency (2023), 42% of sexual violence cases against children in the Plurinational State of Bolivia occur within their homes, perpetrated by individuals from the family environment. This statistic corroborates ongoing research by the International Mission of Justice and the Research Institute of Behavioral Sciences, which indicates that one in 10 young people reports experiencing sexual violence, with 44% of cases involving a family member or acquaintance.

In response to this concerning reality, the Research Institute of Behavioral Sciences at Universidad Católica Boliviana "San Pablo," in collaboration with Save the Children Bolivia, initiated a study to explore the familial dynamics maintaining incest against children in Bolivia. The objective is to analyze factors contributing to the perpetuation of secrecy surrounding this form of violence, with two primary aims: a) advocating for the specific classification of incest in legislation to facilitate effective prosecution and victim protection, and b) providing evidence to address incest as a public policy issue.

This research comprises two complementary studies. The first, adopting a qualitative approach, delves into the life stories of 27 incest survivors across various Bolivian cities, aiming to elucidate the familial dynamics inhibiting disclosure of incestuous abuse. The second study involves an online survey of 381 parents and caregivers of children, aimed at identifying their knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding the prevention of intrafamilial sexual violence.

Discussing incest is inherently challenging, evident not only in academic and legal spheres but also in everyday discourse. Consequently, terms such as "intrafamilial child sexual abuse" (CSA) and "child sexual violence" (CSV)<sup>1</sup> have been employed to navigate the sensitivity surrounding the issue. However, through this research, the aim is to confront and acknowledge incest directly, facilitating appropriate responses and sanctions for each case's severity and characteristics.

The report is structured into five chapters:

1. Chapter One conducts a literature review on familial dynamics within the phases of incest (or child sexual abuse phases proposed by Barudy, 1998), identifying gaps in existing knowledge and formulating research questions.
2. Chapter Two reviews the national legal framework on sexual violence against children, proposing the recognition of incest as a distinct crime in Bolivian legislation.
3. Chapter Three presents qualitative study findings on the familial dynamics hindering incest disclosure.
4. Chapter Four presents quantitative study results, offering insights into parental knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to prevention.
5. Chapter Five concludes the report with recommendations derived from the research.

The report also incorporates graphic representations of trees created by survivors, symbolizing their life journeys and the impact of incest on their narratives. Through this research, the aim is to challenge prevailing structures, discourses, guilt, shame, and fears surrounding incest, ultimately recognizing, dignifying, protecting, caring for, and restoring victims of intrafamilial sexual violence.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Law 548, the Child and Adolescent Code, specifically in Article 148, Child Sexual Violence (CSV) is defined as all sexual behaviors typified in the Penal Code that are perpetrated against children and adolescents. This legal definition serves as a framework for understanding and addressing Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) within the Bolivian context.









## Chapter 1

# Literature Review on Family Dynamics within the Context of Incestuous Relationships

## 1. Introduction

In 1998, Barudy proposed a developmental perspective on child sexual abuse (CSA), emphasizing its complex and multifaceted nature, influenced by various social, cultural, familial, and individual factors throughout an individual's lifespan. Barudy delineated five distinct phases within CSA:

- a) Seduction: where the abuser initiates physical contact with the victim;
- b) Abusive interaction: characterized by the commencement of abusive behaviors towards children and adolescents;
- c) Secrecy: where the abuser enforces a code of silence through coercion and emotional manipulation;
- d) Disclosure: often occurring during adolescence or adulthood, coinciding with the process of individualization;
- e) Retraction: involving the dismissal or disqualification of the victim's experiences, often due to power dynamics within the familial or social context (Rivera, 2005; Save the Children, 2020).

This model has become a cornerstone in the efforts of various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), psychiatrists, and psychologists, who employ it to address and protect child and adolescent victims of abuse. However, despite its widespread utilization, there remains a dearth of comprehensive literature reviews analyzing the intricate interplay of family dynamics across each phase.

Given the substantial body of research on this topic, the objective of this chapter is to conduct a systematic literature review spanning from 2018 to 2022. The aim is to consolidate existing knowledge and identify the nuanced role of family dynamics in shaping the progression of CSA phases. Additionally, we endeavor to categorize this information based on geographical region, publication year, and methodological approach. In this review, terminology such as "intrafamilial child sexual abuse" (CSA) is employed, aligning with international conventions, albeit all literature referenced adheres to the research's definition of incest.

## 2. Method

The literature review focused on identifying articles and reports that delineated factors associated with family dynamics and intrafamilial child sexual violence. Studies primarily focused on psychopathology or clinical interventions were excluded from consideration. Such exclusions are recommended in situations where the existing body of literature has not been comprehensively reviewed or exhibits a diverse and heterogeneous nature (Peters et al., 2015).

### 2.1 Selection Criteria

The selected research encompassed publications in both English and Spanish released between 2018 and 2022. We opted to include documents specifically addressing intrafamilial child sexual abuse, acknowledging that, in English, the term "sexual abuse" encompasses both penetrative and non-penetrative sexual acts.

The chosen articles and reports were directly related to one or more phases of CSA, including seduction, abusive interaction, establishment of secrecy, disclosure, and retraction. Preference was given to documents utilizing qualitative methodologies such as case studies and interviews due to their ability to provide in-depth insights. Additionally, emphasis was placed on documents analyzing intrafamily functions, roles, and relationships, particularly those exploring the victim's interactions with other family members. Furthermore, we included research examining risk factors within the family context, such as intimate partner violence, substance abuse, lack of caregiver support, as sources of information on the dynamics within families where intrafamilial child sexual violence occurs.

Excluded literature encompassed studies solely focusing on the sequences of child sexual abuse, documents primarily addressing child maltreatment or providing an intergenerational perspective on child sexual violence, research concerning sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals external to the family, publications focusing solely on prevention programs, studies exploring family dynamics between CSA survivors and their children, and those not addressing any phase of child sexual violence.

## **2.2 Data and Search Strategy**

PubMed and ScienceDirect were utilized for English-language searches, while Scielo was employed for Spanish-language documents. The search strategy, implemented across all databases, utilized the following terms and operators: ("Abuso sexual infantil" OR "Incesto") AND (Dinámica Familiar OR Características familiares) AND (Cuidador Familiar OR Relación padre-hijo OR relación madre-hijo OR miembros familiares) within the title, abstract, or keywords. This strategy yielded 64 documents meeting the specified criteria, from which research published within the last five years (2018 - 2022) was selected, resulting in 23 relevant documents.

# **3. Results**

## **3.1 General characteristics identified**

From the analysis of the 23 studies selected for this literature review, a distinct variation in the production and advancement of research on intrafamilial sexual abuse across continental regions is evident. Notably, the Americas exhibit the highest volume of research output on CSA, closely followed by Asia. However, it is noteworthy that despite the substantial production of knowledge, this output is predominantly concentrated within a handful of countries. In the Americas, the United States emerges as the primary contributor to selected research, while Israel stands out as the sole producer of research on CSA in the Asian Middle East.

Given that intrafamilial sexual abuse transcends geographical boundaries, the concentration of research within a limited number of countries underscores potential knowledge gaps concerning CSA. While findings from the reviewed research may offer insights applicable to a global context, the absence of research in certain regions impedes a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, economic, and other factors influencing the phenomenon of CSA and family dynamics.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the research selected for this literature review does not fully reflect the global research output on CSA in the past five years, as studies failing to meet the specified selection criteria were excluded. Considering that language was a selection criterion, it is inevitable that research from countries with greater proficiency in English and/or Spanish publication will be overrepresented.

Furthermore, only two studies on CSA conducted in Latin America (Brazil and Peru) within the last five years were identified, with no research conducted in Bolivia, suggesting a notable knowledge gap in this region. Conversely, there is a noticeable uptick in the number of investigations on intrafamilial sexual abuse between 2020 and 2021, likely influenced by heightened awareness and

interest in understanding this phenomenon amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated increase in intrafamily violence.

Regarding methodological trends, the majority of studies (14) employed qualitative methodologies, with six utilizing quantitative approaches, one employing a mixed-method design, and one based on theoretical analysis. Among quantitative studies, half adopted descriptive methodologies, presenting statistical data on various aspects of CSA cases. Additionally, one study utilized retrospective analysis, while two employed predictive methodologies.

Qualitative studies predominantly utilized descriptive methodologies, with various approaches to data analysis observed, including grounded theory, text analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and content analysis.

In summary, two methodological trends emerged from the reviewed research: a preference for qualitative methodologies and a focus on descriptive research, with mixed research also leaning toward descriptive analysis. The complexity of the CSA phenomenon may hinder the development of quantitative research beyond descriptive analysis, while qualitative methodologies offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of CSA.

Another notable methodological trend pertains to the selection of research populations, with a primary focus on children and adolescents who are victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse. Additionally, there is a growing interest in studying adult survivors of CSA.

Overall, the predominant use of primary sources of information, particularly involving victims and survivors of CSA, underscores the importance of ethical considerations and methodological rigor in research within this sensitive domain.

**Table 1: Overview of Reviewed Literature**

NO.	Authors	Year	Country	Population	Sample	Source of information	Method used
1	Dias, P., Marques, I., Dalbosco, D.	2021	Brazil	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	108	Court records of child sexual abuse cases of justice in Brazil between 2010 and 2016	Quantitative, descriptive. OR was used to look at predictor variables for retraction.
2	Katz, C., Tsur, N., Nicolet, R., Klebanov, B., Carmel, N.	2020	Israel	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	40	Recording of forensic interviews	Secondary qualitative thematic analysis. The research questions were guided by a grounded theory approach aimed at the systematic development of a data-driven theoretical model.
3	Lívano, R., Valdivia-Lívano, S., Mejía, C.	2021	Peru	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	97	Forensic psychological evaluations from January to December 2017	Observational, analytical, cross-sectional study.

4	Elliott, S., Goodman, K., Bardwell, E., Mullin, T.	2022	USA	Child and adolescent victims of intra- family child sexual abuse	224	National Sexual Assault Online Hotline Archive (NSAOH)	Descriptive quantitative method.
5	Grandgenett, H., Pittenger, S. Dworkin, E., Hansen, D.	2021	USA	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	1732	se registration	Quantitative, retrospective method using a structural model that predicts the disclosure of information before and during a forensic interview using analysis of secondary data.
6	Tener, D., Marmor, A., Katz, C., Newman, A., Silovsky, J., Shields, J., Taylor, E.	2021	U.S. and Israel	Therapeutic and legal professionals who provide services to children and adolescents involved in abuse intrafamily child sexual abuse.	37	Participants from Israel and the United States	Cross-cultural comparative qualitative study based on an open- ended questionnaire answered online.

7	Wallis, C., Woodworth, M.	2021	Canada	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse; police officers.	230	Case registration Royal Canadian Mounted Police archives	Qualitative method using multivariate Cox regression analysis to determine the impact of the variables of interest on the time elapsed to the formal disclosure of information.
8	Adinew, Y., Mekete, B., Adinew Y-M.	2018	Ethiopia	Victim of intrafamily sexual violence against children	1	Participant	Qualitative method, case study through in-depth interviews.
9	Tener, D., Tarshish, N., Turgeman, S.	2020	USA	Families presenting cases of intra-family sexual abuse	100	Case registration	Qualitative method, case file analysis.
10	Van Vugt, E., Garofalo, C.	2021	USA	85 young perpetrators of child sexual abuse	85	Participants from correctional archives.	Mixed method. File review and survey application "Cognitive and affective empathy scale" "Sex With Children scale". "The Strengths and difficulties questionnaire" (Questions about criminal history).
11	oçtürka, N., Yükselb, F.	2019	England	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse and their families.	263	Forensic evaluation record, family interview, social investigation, and psychiatry report	File review and descriptive analysis. Qualitative approach.
12	Katz, C., Have, D., Hindi, I.	2021	Israel	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	60	Recording of forensic interviews	Review of forensic interviews. Thematic analysis. Qualitative approach.



13	Wamser-Nanney, R., Sager, J.	2018	England	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamilial and domestic child sexual abuse their non-offending mothers.	247	Participants	Quantitative approach, use of questionnaires for predictive analysis.
14	Katz, D., Tener, D.	2021	USA	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	22	Participants	Analysis of forensic interviews.
15	Loinaz, Bigas, Sousa, A.	I., N., 2019	Spain	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	221	se registration	Quantitative descriptive. The data were analyzed with the SPSS 22 statistical package, with descriptive statistics, comparison of chi-square frequencies, and odds ratio to calculate the risk in case of statistically significant differences.
16	Mcelvaney, R., Nixon, E.,	2020	Ireland	Parents of child or adolescent victims of intrafamily sexual abuse	20	Participants	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Analysis based on the grounded theory approach from the coding, line by line, of the NVivo 11 software.
17	Buchbinder, E., Sinay, D.	2020	Israel	Survivors of intrafamily child sexual abuse	20	Participants	Qualitative and narrative method through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, implementing the life title.

18	Boitumelo, R. Smit, E.	2019	South Africa	Therapeutic and legal professionals who provide services to children and adolescents involved in abuse intrafamily child sexual abuse.	9	Participants	Qualitative, semi-structured interview. Analysis using Atlas ti.
19	Sufredini, F., Ojeda, C., Krenkel, S., Crepaldi, M.	2022	Brazil	Mothers of children and adolescents victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	12	Participants	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Analysis of interviews based on a grounded theory supported by the analysis of the participants' case records.

20	Zagrodney, J., Cummings, J.	2020	Canada	108 Canadian and U.S. participants of intimate partner-perpetrated CSA victims contacted from a virtual participant database.	108	Participants	Qualitative. Instrument: Online questionnaire with open-ended questions about beliefs and perceptions about an ASI vignette in which a girl is observed as the victim, and a male (father) as the victim. of the victim or the mother's partner) as the perpetrator.
21	Have, D.	2018	Israel	Mothers of children and adolescents victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	20	Participants	Qualitative descriptive phenomenological. Semi-structured interviews analyzed with Atlas ti.
22	Katz; C., Field, N.	2020	Israel	Child and adolescent victims of intrafamily child sexual abuse	29	Recording of forensic interviews	Thematic analysis

23	Bertele, N., Talmon, A.	2021	USA	Research on child sexual abuse between siblings	15	Theoretical sources	Scoping review
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Source: Self elaboration on ther basis of literature review

### 3. 2 Thematic axes

Upon reviewing the research, eight thematic axes emerged, five of which are aligned with Barudy's proposal: seduction, sexually abusive interaction, establishment of secrecy, disclosure, and retraction. Additionally, three distinct thematic axes were identified: the characteristics of abuse and risk factors; the victim care system; and the effects produced by CSA, both on the victims and their environment.

#### Thematic Axis 1: Seduction

Despite its significance in the context of sexual violence, information regarding the seduction phase is notably scarce in research on intrafamilial sexual violence. In cases where the perpetrator is a family member, access to the victim is often unquestioned within the social or familial environment, unlike situations involving external perpetrators, where seduction is employed to gain the victim's trust. It is assumed that the victim is safe in the company of their abuser, particularly if the abuser holds a familial or protective role. Consequently, perpetrators may manipulate and groom their victims without resorting to physical force, exposing them to sexual content and behaviors to normalize sexualized conduct. Katz and Field's (2020) research identified prolonged seduction phases in cases involving father perpetrators and their daughters, characterized by gradual exposure to sexual content and grooming of both the victim and the perpetrator.

#### Thematic Axis 2: Abusive Sexual Interaction

Findings regarding the abusive interaction stage predominantly highlight internal factors and aspects of children and adolescents. Notably, at least 90% of CSA cases involve multiple instances of abuse, with the presence of the mother acting as a protective factor, resulting in fewer recurring events among female victims residing with their mothers. Sibling relationships also play a protective role, acting as a barrier against aggression, although abuse may occur against all members of the family. In the absence of protective mechanisms, victims may develop active responses aimed at mitigating the associated risks, reflecting intentional strategies to promote survival, particularly when abuse is perceived as imminent or inevitable.

#### Thematic Axis 3: Establishment of Secrecy

Disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse is often hindered by various factors, including anticipated negative reactions from parents, fear of destabilizing the family unit, feelings of shame and self-blame, and doubts regarding the believability of the abuse. In cases where sibling roles are reversed, leading to power dynamics and abuse between siblings, silence may become normalized, further complicating disclosure. Moreover, societal perceptions of the "functional" family, especially concerning paternal or high social status, can discourage disclosure and perpetuate secrecy surrounding abuse.

#### Thematic Axis 4: Disclosure

Disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse may occur under various circumstances, including discovery of the abuse by family members or authorities, or when the victim is separated from the perpetrator.

However, disclosure is often met with avoidance, dismissal, or violent reactions, particularly in environments characterized by domestic violence and familial dysfunction. Support from non-offending caregivers facilitates disclosure, although intrafamilial abuse may complicate supportive responses due to the complex nature of familial relationships.

### **Thematic Axis 5: Retraction**

The likelihood of retracting allegations of abuse is influenced by interpersonal variables, such as the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator and the support provided by caregivers during and after disclosure. Retraction tends to happen more often when abuse is disclosed to informal individuals rather than family members or the protection system. However, retraction is multifaceted, influenced by interpersonal, socio-family, and demographic variables, as evidenced in the cases studied by Días Bai et al. (2021).

### **Thematic Axis 6: Characteristics and Risk Factors**

Identifying risk factors can shed light on family dynamics that facilitate abuse within the family. Among these risk factors are economic strain that can result in family members being absent from their homes due to work commitments, the death of a biological father and the introduction of a new partner into the household (Adinew et al., 2018), substance abuse (Katz & Field, 2020), role reversal between parents and children, with children assuming caregiver roles (Tener et al., 2018; Boitumelo, 2019), poor parental relationships (Katz et al., 2021), and particularly, intimate partner violence by the father towards the mother (Loínaz et al., 2019; Buchbinder & Sinay, 2020).

Additionally, specific characteristics were found to potentially increase the likelihood of committing acts of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), including the perpetrator's perception that their sexual needs are not satisfied by their partners, the perpetrator's tendency of having sexual intercourse with younger people or to consume pornography content that involves minors, and having a background of child sexual abuse victimization (Boitumelo, 2019; Katz et al., 2020).

The study also found that perpetrators may have unsatisfied sexual needs within their relationships, a tendency to engage in sexual relations with younger individuals or consume pornographic content involving minors, and a history of experiencing child sexual violence (Boitumelo, 2019; Katz et al., 2020).

### **Thematic Axis 7: Victim Assistance Programmes**

In addition to findings regarding phases of sexual abuse proposed by Barudy, factors related to the victim care programmes were identified. The research focused on obstacles within the CSA victim care system, including the justice system, based on the perceptions and experiences of professionals attending CSA cases and survivors.

Tener et al. (2021) emphasized changes in professional interventions with families experiencing CSA during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding both reporting of violence and therapeutic interventions. Similarly, Buchbinder and Sinay (2020) identified difficulties within the care system for CSA victims from the perspective of survivors, highlighting high dissatisfaction and lack of confidence in Israel's care system due to inefficiencies in ensuring victims' well-being and safety.

### **Thematic Axis 8: Effects Caused by CSA**

Research by Buchbinder and Sinay (2020) found that perpetrators of CSA (parents of victims) suffer from depression following disclosure of the abuse. Similarly, mothers and victims often experience feelings of guilt, depression, and persistent anger. Adinew et al. (2018) also found feelings of guilt and shame among CSA victims, which may be exacerbated when the family dissolves following disclosure.

Finally, Zagrodny and Jordan's research focused on factors that increase or decrease mothers' guilt after disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse. They found that factors decreasing guilt include

lack of direct knowledge or participation in the abuse and the belief that it is expected to trust one's partner. Factors increasing guilt include realizing misplaced trust and the expectation that mothers should intuitively identify CSA.

Table 2: Research according to thematic axis.

Thematic focus	Title	Authors
Seduction	«Unspoken: Child– Perpetrator Dynamic in the Context of Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse».	Katz; C., Field, N.
Abusive sexual interaction	«No way to run or hide: Children’s perceptions of their responses during intrafamilial child sexual abuse».	Katz, C., Tsur, N., Nicolet, R., Klebanov, B., Carmel, N.
	«Comparing intra and extra-familial child sexual abuse in a forensic context».	Loinaz, I., Bigas, N., Sousa, A
	"Incest Survivors' Life-Narratives."	Buchbinder, E., Sinay D
	«Testimony of an Ethiopian girl sexual assaulted by her stepfather: a case report».	Adinew, Y., Mekete B., Adinew, YM.
	“Victim, perpetrator, or just my brother?” Sibling Sexual Abuse in Large families: A child advocacy center study».	Tener, D., Tarshish, N., Turgeman, S.
	"Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Review of Empirical Studies in the Field."	Nina Bertele and Anat Talmon
Secret	The Secret of intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Who Keeps It and How?."	Tener D
Disclosure	"Incest Survivors' Life-Narratives."	Buchbinder E and Sinay D
	Forensic psychological evaluations of child sexual abuse: Process of disclosure and its chronicity in the Peruvian highlands".	Lãvano, Rosario M. and Valdivia-Lãvano, Solange and Mejia, Christian R.
	Reactions to the disclosure of intrafamilial childhood sexual abuse: Findings from the National Sexual Assault Online Hotline."	Elliott, Shannon A. and Goodman, Kimberly L. and Bardwell, Emma S. and Mullin, Tara M.
	"Telling a trusted adult: Factors associated with the likelihood of disclosing child sexual abuse prior to and during a forensic interview."	Gr and genett, Hanna M. and Pittenger, Samantha L. and Dworkin, Emily R. and Hansen, David J.
	Non-offending caregiver support in cases of child sexual abuse: An examination of the impact of support on formal disclosures."	Wallis, Cassidy R.D. and Woodworth, Michael
	"Parents' Experiences of Their Child's Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse."	Mc Elvaney R and Nixon E
	"Narratives of Mothers Whose Children Had Been Sexually Abused: Maternal Reactions and Comprehension Regarding Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse."	Sufredini, F., Ojeda, C., Krenkel, S., Crepaldi, M

	<i>Predictors of maternal support following children's sexual abuse disclosures."</i>	Wamser-Nanney R and Sager JC
Recantation	« <i>Predictors of recantation after child sexual abuse disclosure among a Brazilian sample</i> ».	PAD B. and Alberto IMM and Dell'Aglio DD
Professional services	<i>"How does COVID-19 impact intrafamilial child sexual abuse? Comparison analysis of reports by practitioners in Israel and the US".</i>	Tener, Dafna
	<i>"Incest Survivors' Life-Narratives."</i>	Buchbinder E and Sinay D
Effects of ASI	« <i>Psycho-Social Effects of Father–Daughter Incest: Views of South African Social Workers</i> ».	Gqgabi RB and Smit EI
	« <i>Testimony of an Ethiopian girl sexually assaulted by her stepfather: a case report</i> ».	Adinew YM and Mekete BT and Adinew YM
	« <i>Qualitatively Understanding Mother Fault After Childhood Sexual Abuse</i> ».	Zagrodney JL and Cummings JA
Characteristics and risk factors	<i>"Similarities and Differences Between Youth Who Engaged in Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexually Abusive Behavior: An Exploratory Study."</i>	van Vugt E and Garofalo C
	« <i>Characteristics of victims and perpetrators of intrafamilial sexual abuse</i> ».	Nilüfer Koçtürk , Fadime Yüksel
	« <i>"We took turns": How do child victims of intrafamilial child sexual abuse perceive and experience their siblings?</i> ».	Katz, Carmit and Tener, Dafna and Hindi, Inbal

## 4. Conclusions

Based on the review of recent literature on child sexual abuse within families, it is evident that Barudy's framework regarding the phases of sexual abuse is both relevant and suitable for organizing, analyzing, and understanding the factors surrounding incestuous phenomena. Within academic discourse, there is a significant interest in exploring factors associated with the disclosure phase and characteristics related to sexually abusive interactions.

Literature about disclosure indicates that in cases of incest, victims may take several years before disclosing their experiences, mainly if there is domestic violence within the family, lack of support from caregivers, or fear of causing distress within the family unit. Thus, factors influencing disclosure are intertwined with family dynamics and reactions upon disclosure. Therefore, further investigation into these factors is deemed necessary to facilitate early disclosure of incest in safe environments.

However, notable gaps exist, particularly concerning other phases of sexual abuse, notably the initial phase: seduction. It is essential to clarify that while risk factors have been identified that may precede abuse—such as family violence, role changes within the family, or the introduction of new parental figures—these risk factors are not synonymous with seduction. Seduction involves intentional actions aimed at creating opportunities for abuse. In contrast, risk factors encompass circumstances and events that may heighten the probability of intrafamilial sexual violence but do not directly cause it.











## Chapter 2

### Review of the national regulatory framework: The importance of criminalizing incest as an autonomous crime in cases of intra-family sexual violence against children and adolescents.

#### 1. Key messages

- In Bolivia, the majority of sexual violence cases against children and adolescents occur within the family. However, no specific criminal offence in Bolivian law currently addresses and punishes this act, thus failing to protect minors adequately. There is only Article 310 of the Penal Code which identifies the grounds for aggravating circumstances.
- While Bolivia lacks autonomous legislation on this issue, Ecuador took a step forward in 2019 by criminalising incestuous rape as a separate offence aimed at shedding light on sexual violence within familial settings. In contrast, countries like Chile, Peru, Uruguay, and Mexico still treat such violence as an aggravating circumstance rather than a distinct offense.
- Recommendations from international bodies, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) and the observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, have highlighted the need for Bolivia to address this gap in its legislation. Specifically, there is a call to include incest as an autonomous criminal offense and to promote awareness, education, and advocacy campaigns to combat intrafamily sexual violence.
- It is imperative to reassess existing care protocols and guidelines, incorporating critical parameters and procedures to be followed in cases of intrafamily sexual violence. This includes broadening the scope beyond just rape to encompass all forms of sexual abuse within the family environment, such as inappropriate touching.
- Currently, two bills are being considered to amend the Bolivian Penal Code to include incest or incestuous rape as autonomous criminal offences. These bills need to encompass a wider range of sexual abuse within the family, not limited solely to rape. Additionally, Senate Bill No. 118-22 (PL 118-22 CS) proposes making crimes of sexual violence against children and adolescents non-prescriptive, thus ensuring perpetrators can be held accountable regardless of the passage of time.

This document synthesizes the evidence on the current state of national and international regulations on intrafamily sexual violence against children and adolescents, as well as the feasibility of a proposal regarding the criminalization of incest as an autonomous criminal offense in Bolivian law.

#### 2. Sexual violence in the family against children and adolescents in national legislation

##### 2.1 Political Constitution of the State (CPE)

As the paramount norm of the national legal system, the Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia

(CPE) asserts that children and adolescents are entitled to rights and are thus safeguarded against all forms of violence (Articles 15 and 58). These constitutional provisions are reinforced by international conventions and covenants on human rights, which have been ratified by the Bolivian State and form an integral part of Bolivia's legal framework (Articles 13, 256, and 410).

## 2.2 Law 548: Code for Children and Adolescents

This body of law defines sexual violence as any conduct of a sexual nature typified in the Penal Code (article 148, paragraph II). Likewise, in the event of sexual violence, the Child and Adolescent Code establishes that it is the responsibility of the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents, deployed through the structure of the country's municipal governments, to intervene ex officio and file complaints with the competent authorities (article 188).

## 2.3 Penal Code

Within the Penal Code (PC), the following articles are identified as crimes of sexual violence against children and adolescents: Rape (article 308), Rape of an infant, child, or adolescent (article 308 bis), Sexual Abuse (article 312) and Statutory rape (article 309), which are broken down below:

**Table 3. Crimes of sexual violence according to aggressor, victim, constituent elements of the crime and punishment**

Crime	Aggressor	Victim	Elements constitutive of the crime	Pena <sup>4</sup>
Rape	Any chargeable person	Any person of either sex 14 years of age or older.	Non-consensual carnal access with a virile member, body part or object. Through the use of physical or psychological force or violence.	15 to 20 years
Rape infant child, child, adolescent	Any chargeable person	Infants, girls, boys adolescents between the ages of 0 and 13.	Carnal access with a virile member, part of the body, or any object, even if the allegation is made consent.	20 to 25 years
Sexual Abuse	Any chargeable person	Any person of either sex or gender (difference in penalty according to age).	Sexual acts that do not result in carnal access (penetration).	6 to 10 years; 10 to 15 years if the victim is a child or adolescent
Statutory rape	Any chargeable person	Adolescents between 14 and 17 years of age.	Carnal access achieved by seduction or deception.	3 to 6 years

Source: Own elaboration based on the Penal Code

In subsection 3 of article 310 of the Penal Code, the crimes of rape, rape of infants, children, adolescents, and statutory rape are determined as aggravating circumstances when an ascendant, descendant or relative have perpetrated the aggression within the fourth degree of consanguinity or second degree of affinity; adding 5 additional years of punishment at the time of the issuance of the sentence. Although this subsection does not expressly include the crime of sexual abuse, in professional practice, it is expected to see it invoked and applied as an aggravating circumstance. Concerning the statute of limitations for reporting these crimes, the Penal Code determines that the statute of limitations will begin to run four (4) years after the victim has reached the age of majority.

**2.4 Bills of Law**

Currently, within the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, bills PL 117-22 CS and PL 118-22 CS, which aim to amend the Penal Code, are being discussed. Both propose the incorporation of incest or incestuous rape as an autonomous criminal offense to be contemplated as Article 308 ter.

**Table 4. Bills on incest or incest rape**

PL 117-22 CS	PL 118-22 CS
Article 308 ter (INCEST). If the crime of rape is committed against a person of either sex, with a kinship relationship up to the fourth degree of consanguinity or second degree of affinity between the perpetrator and the victim, the penalty shall be deprivation of liberty for fifteen (15) to twenty (25) years.	Article 308 ter (INCESTUOUS VIOLATION) The penalty shall be deprivation of liberty for twenty (20) to twenty-five (25) years to whoever, being an ascendant, descendant or relative within the fourth degree of consanguinity or second degree of affinity, or not being so, having been inserted in places of family rest, commits the crimes of rape and rape of an infant, child or adolescent.

Source: Self-elaboration on the basis of the Penal Code

Likewise, PL 118-22 CS proposes the imprescriptibility of crimes of sexual violence against children and adolescents. The Ministry of the Presidency proposed the Preliminary Draft Bill PL 372/22-23, which proposes the imprescriptibility of crimes against sexual freedom.

Of these legislative initiatives, PL 117-22 CS and PL 118-22 CS are still being processed in the Senate. On the other hand, PL 372/22-23 was not approved in the Chamber of Deputies and is therefore awaiting its deposition.

**3. Intrafamily sexual violence against children and adolescents in national plans and protocols**

The State, through the Plurinational System for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPPROINNA), has the duty to generate public policies and plans containing action mechanisms for the protection of children and adolescents in cases of violence in general.

The Multisectoral Comprehensive Development Plan for the Well-Being of Children and Adolescents 2021-2025, as approved by Ministerial Resolution MJTI-DGAJ-RM-Z-33-2023, aims to ensure the protection of children's and adolescents' rights throughout the national territory (Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency, 2023). Despite recognizing that a significant proportion of violence and sexual violence against children and adolescents occurs within familial contexts, the plan's guidelines for response and action within the protection system are formulated in a generalized manner, lacking specific directives for addressing cases of sexual violence. Moreover, there is a notable absence of guidelines tailored specifically to address intra-family sexual violence cases.

Among the existing protocols, several are noteworthy:

- a) The Model of comprehensive care for victims of sexual violence (Ministry of Health, 2015).
- b) The Protocol for the prevention, care, and punishment of all forms of violation of the sexual integrity of children and adolescents (Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency, 2017).
- c) The Protocol for prevention, action, and reporting in cases of physical, psychological, and sexual violence in educational units and special education centers (Ministry of Education, 2019).

All of these protocols establish pathways for the care of child and adolescent victims of sexual violence, the application of protective measures as stipulated by the Criminal Code or the Code for Children and Adolescents, and acknowledge that sexual violence against children and adolescents commonly occurs within familial settings. However, the first two protocols lack differentiated treatment in addressing cases of intra-family sexual violence, and there's even been identified a certain degree of contradiction and impracticality in implementing the right to protection, particularly concerning the necessity for consent or the accompaniment of a family member during certain procedural actions, such as forensic medical examinations or interviews in a Gessell Chamber.

Conversely, the protocol issued by the Ministry of Education stands out as the only one presenting minimum specifications when the aggressor is a family member. For instance, it allows directors or teachers of educational units to directly contact the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and Adolescents (DNA) for initiating case proceedings.

Moreover, in 2017, the Ministry of Justice and Institutional Transparency, in collaboration with public entities and the Network for the Right to a Life Free of Violence, developed the "Protocol for the Prevention, Attention, and Punishment of all Forms of Violations to the Sexual Integrity of Children and Adolescents". This protocol, along with the Critical Route for Prevention, Attention, and Sanction, outlines specific guidelines for public and private entities, civil society institutions, and families to promptly address and prevent sexual violence. Notably, these documents were created with the active participation of children and adolescents, aiming to eradicate sexual violence through comprehensive and interdisciplinary actions benefiting the child population.

### **3.1 Recommendations and obligations of the Plurinational State of Bolivia:**

### **3.2 Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) -Case of Ángulo Losada vs. the State**

In 2022, the IACHR issued the judgment in the case of Brisa Angulo Losada vs. the State of Bolivia, being the first case of incest heard by the IACHR. Concerning what is understood as incestuous rape, the IACHR determined that it entails a different affectation than incest.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR ) has emphasized that incest represents a distinct form of sexual violation, warranting specialized treatment within the state's legislation. In January 2023, during the reading and notification of a judgment, the IACHR directed the Bolivian State to reevaluate the criminal types of rape and to abolish statutory rape. While the IACHR did not specify a fixed timeline for implementing these normative changes, it emphasized the necessity for them to be enacted within a reasonable period. Regarding the implementation of awareness and sensitization campaigns, the IACHR granted the Bolivian State 18 months from the date of notification to carry out these initiatives.

Judge Mudrovitsch (2022), in his concurring vote to the aforementioned judgment, underscored the importance of criminalizing incestuous rape as a means to safeguard the physical and psychological integrity, as well as the sexual autonomy, of individuals in situations of extreme vulnerability, particularly aggravated when victims have not reached the legal age of consent. Furthermore, the inclusion of incestuous rape in the Penal Code was advocated to enhance the visibility and accountability of such behavior.

### 3.3 Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the 5th and 6th Report of the Plurinational State of Bolivia

In January 2023, the Committee expressed its concern about the prevalence of sexual violence committed against children and adolescents in the country. As a result, it recommended that the Bolivian State ensure that cases of sexual violence against children and adolescents, including those cases that occur in the circle of trust of children, are reported, investigated, and prosecuted promptly. To this end, it was recommended to apply approaches that avoid revictimization and consider the use of audiovisual media to record the testimony of victims of sexual violence. Likewise, it was recommended to implement awareness-raising actions to combat the stigmatization of children and adolescents who are victims of sexual violence -including incest- and to ensure accessible, confidential, and effective reporting channels to report these incidents (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023).

### 3.4 Domestic sexual violence against children and adolescents in international law: Comparative legislation.

Table 5. Comparative legislation of international incest or incestuous rape regulations

Country	As contemplated by	Law
Ecuador	Type of crime: incestuous rape	Art. 39 Organic Integral Penal Code
Chile	Aggravating circumstance	Art. 363 Chilean Penal Code
Colombia	Aggravating circumstance	Art. 211 Colombian Penal Code
Mexico	Aggravating circumstance	Art. 266 Federal Penal Code
Peru	Aggravating circumstance	Art. 170, DL 635 Penal Code

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information gathered from comparative criminal legislation.

According to the preceding table, it is evident in comparative legislation that incestuous rape is considered an aggravating factor in the crime of rape or sexual abuse. Ecuador is the only country that has typified the crime of incestuous rape as an autonomous criminal offense. This change took place in 2019, being fully effective as of 2020. However, the statistics presented by Ecuador do not yet reflect the impact of the regulatory change, as the crime of rape is still considered in general in the reports<sup>5</sup>.

However, it should be noted that in those countries where incest is criminalized, it is considered a crime against morality or the family, sanctioning consensual sexual relations between persons of legal age. However, acts of domestic sexual violence committed









## Chapter 3

# QUALITATIVE STUDY INTERTWINED SECRETS: NAVIGATING FAMILY DYNAMICS AFTER INCEST

### 1. Introduction

Incest represents a grave violation of children's and adolescents' rights, causing severe physical and emotional harm with lasting consequences well into adulthood (Lippard & Nemeroff, 2020; Save the Children, 2012). Previously defined as abusive sexual interaction between family members, incest extends beyond consanguineous ties to encompass adoptive parents, stepparents, uncles, aunts, and other familial figures engaging in such behaviours towards children or adolescents within the family system (Barudy, 1998).

It is crucial to underscore the inherently violent nature of incest and unequivocally reject any notion of it being a "sexual relationship," as it lacks the essential elements of mutual consent, knowledge, and voluntariness, which minors within the family structure cannot provide. Given the age disparity and familial power dynamics, incest is inherently violent, irrespective of whether physical coercion is involved.

Furedi's theory of the culture of fear is instrumental in this context. Children and adolescents often harbour profound fears about the repercussions of disclosing abuse, including potential family conflict, disbelief, and social stigmatization. These fears intertwine with overwhelming feelings of shame and guilt instilled by perpetrators or exacerbated by dysfunctional family dynamics (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019).

Families represent intricate systems shaped by individual histories, interrelationships, and interactions with various societal, institutional, normative, cultural, and discursive systems. The prevailing discourse often idealizes the family as a safe and protective environment, rendering incestuous occurrences discordant with societal norms and challenging to acknowledge.

While considerable research explores factors influencing disclosure, much centres on victims' experiences. Recent studies identify facilitators of disclosure, such as having a trusted support figure, assurance of validation, and the opportunity to take action against incest (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Lemaigre et al., 2017). Conversely, hindrances to disclosure include fear of adverse parental reactions, concerns about family cohesion, shame, guilt, and disbelief (Hanna et al., 2021; McElvaney, 2020; Tener, 2018; Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019). Role reversal dynamics, such as siblings acting as both aggressors and victims, further complicate disclosure by blurring the boundaries of right and wrong and normalizing silence.

Moreover, the perception of a "functional" family, mainly if a high-status member influences victims' reluctance to disclose abuse, reinforces societal silence around such aggression (Tener, 2018). However, little research delves into the familial dynamics sustaining secrecy in cases of incest. Hence, this study aims to explore the dynamics perpetuating incest secrecy and impeding disclosure. Through interviews with 27 survivors<sup>2</sup>, this study seeks to elucidate the relational dynamics maintaining this violence.

Following this introduction, the qualitative methodology utilized will be outlined, followed by significant

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<sup>2</sup>. The term "survivor" will be used when referring to the capacity of the participants to confront the traumatic events experienced without being defined by them, taking into account that the very fact of narrating the experience of incest implies the appropriation and resignification of one's own life history. The term "survivor" makes visible the active position of the participants about their own experiences; likewise, in the analysis of the information obtained, the term "victim" will be used concerning the incest events perpetrated when the participants were children or adolescents, without denying the agency of the participants.



findings regarding incest's perpetuation dynamics. Subsequently, these findings will be discussed using the frameworks of shame, fear, and guilt, offering deeper insights. The study's conclusions will be presented, aiming to enhance understanding of familial dynamics sustaining incest secrecy and inform legislative measures addressing this issue, including defining incest within legal frameworks and extending statutes of limitations for sexual crimes against minors. Survivors' narratives are essential in articulating their experiences and contribute to this understanding, often after years of processing and healing.

## **Context of the research**

Bolivia, with its rich tapestry of geographic, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, fosters a myriad of family structures and dynamics. Indeed, Bolivian families defy a singular model, encompassing various configurations. Among the most prevalent are families consisting solely of parents and their children, households embracing multiple generations including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, simple single-parent families where one parent raises their children alone, extended single-parent families where the parent resides with both children and other relatives, multigenerational families involving grandchildren and grandparents, and childless families, among others (Vera et al., 2018).

Moreover, ethnic diversity plays a pivotal role in shaping Bolivian family compositions, serving as a conduit for transmitting and perpetuating traditions and values deeply rooted within community ties. This cultural mosaic is evidenced by approximately 41% of the Bolivian population identifying with various indigenous groups. Prominent among these are the Aymara and Quechua communities in the Andean region, while the Guarani, Mojeña, and Chiquitana cultures predominate in the lowland regions of the country.

Bolivia boasts diverse family structures, contributing to greater flexibility in member roles. For instance, within single-parent families, it is common for grandparents and older siblings to assume parental responsibilities (Cuevas, 2017). In Aymara culture, older siblings are entrusted with caring for and guiding younger siblings, imparting valuable skills and fostering familial unity (Inchauste, 2018). Similarly, in Quechua communities, childcare roles are allocated based on parental work obligations; agricultural families typically designate mothers as primary caregivers, while those engaged in non-agricultural labour may rely on grandparents or uncles for childcare (Terceros, 2002). Lowland indigenous communities exhibit diverse family dynamics, including monogamy, polygamy, and free unions, each influencing childcare roles within the family structure (Zolezzi, 2009).

However, despite this rich diversity, patriarchal norms and adult-centered patterns persist. According to the 2021 Household Survey, 92.2% of nuclear families uphold the father as the family's head, relegating mothers to secondary roles and primarily assigning them caregiving duties as part of their social reproductive function.

## **2. Methodology**

### **1.1 Type of research**

The complexity and sensitivity surrounding the phenomenon of incest necessitated the development of a methodological framework prioritizing the exploration of meanings and the elucidation of the secrecy entrenched within it.

The quest for meanings was contextualized within a qualitative research paradigm, necessitating a shift in perspective from the macro to the micro level. The objective was not to seek overarching laws offering universal explanations but to comprehend the intricacies that surface when examining the phenomenon from a specific vantage point (King et al., 1994). Consequently, this study delved into the construction of meanings surrounding the perpetuation of secrecy in cases of incest through the narratives of survivors, who shared their recollections, beliefs, and perceptions regarding familial dynamics.

## 2.2 Participants

A total of 27 survivors of incest participated in this research, comprising 26 women and one man. These individuals hail from various cities across Bolivia, including La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, Sucre, and Potosí. Two recruitment strategies were employed: Firstly, participation invitations were disseminated in collaboration with specialized institutions working with this population. Secondly, an open call was made through social media networks.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Being victims of child sexual violence perpetrated by a family member, including fathers, mothers, siblings, cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and parents' partners during childhood or adolescence.
- Being over 18 years old at the moment of participation.
- Having previously received some form of therapeutic support or having access to therapeutic spaces for support.
- Being born in Bolivia.

The selection process was conducted with utmost sensitivity towards the survivors' experiences, recognizing the importance of respecting their autonomy and emotional well-being. Through the collaborative invitation organized with specialized institutions, three survivors from La Paz participated in a group interview. However, given the absence of such institutions in other cities, an open call was initiated on social media platforms, inviting individuals willing to share their experiences to contact the research team. A phone number was provided to facilitate initial contact, and upon explaining the research objectives and data usage, individuals opted to schedule either individual or accompanied interviews. In total, 46 individuals contacted the research team, of whom 24 participated in individual in-depth interviews (23 women, one man), while the remaining 22 did not meet the established selection criteria.

## 2.3 Data Collection

The data collection methodology was meticulously designed to avoid re-victimization, ensuring that participants did not need to recount explicit details of their incest experiences. Instead, information was gathered to understand the dynamics of survivors' families using artistic tools adapted to their needs.

Two art-based therapy tools proposed by Ncube (2006) were employed to mediate the interviews:

1. Emotion Recognition: To address emotions and feelings related to incest experiences, the "Recognition of Emotions and Feelings Sheet (HRES)" was used. This tool allowed participants, both in group and individual interviews, to identify and express emotions associated with their experiences of incest. Using colours to represent their feelings visually, participants engaged in relaxation and body awareness exercises to facilitate emotional connection. The HRES was designed to deepen understanding of participants' emotional responses within a sensitive research context.
2. Tree of Life: This methodology involved creating a metaphorical tree representing the participants' lives, focusing on aspects relevant to the context of incest dynamics. Participants were guided to draw, paint, or collage a tree representing their life, highlighting the present moment, ancestral history, family dynamics, significant life events, influential individuals, dreams, ambitions, achievements, and obstacles. Through this visual representation, critical aspects of participants' lives were explored, including their experiences of incest, family dynamics, and future perspectives.

These artistic tools were employed with care and respect to allow participants to metaphorically and symbolically express their experiences, safeguarding their mental health and preventing re-victimization. Each tool aimed to facilitate the opening and guidance of participants' narratives about their experiences of incest and related issues, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of their perspectives.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis employed a deductive thematic approach, wherein the categories or themes were derived from a comprehensive theoretical review, allowing for the development of specific coding to elucidate the meaning of observations gathered from participants' words, narratives, or behaviours (Tarrés, 2013). The analysis unfolded across three stages:

1. Preliminary or Familiarization Stage: This phase involved a superficial review of the conducted interviews to gain familiarity with the data.
2. Descriptive-Analytical Stage: Codes were generated from the interviews and subsequently grouped into themes. This stage involved thoroughly analysing the data to identify patterns and recurring themes.
3. Interpretative Stage: In this final stage, the content was interpreted according to the emergent themes from the study (Herrera, 2018).

It is important to note that initially, each researcher conducted their analysis independently. Subsequently, themes were collaboratively constructed based on the codifications where researchers converged, aligning with the research question. Through this iterative process, distinct categories were developed, corresponding to the two main thematic axes of the research: family dynamics and the revelation or establishment of the incestuous secret.

### Analytical categories

#### Family dynamics

Family dynamics refer to the intricate relationships and interactions encompassing various affective, generational, and structural dimensions, including roles, rules, beliefs, and communication patterns (Dermachi et al., 2016). The family operates as a system that evolves, adapts, and reshapes itself about broader societal systems such as cultural, political, economic, and religious frameworks. Understanding family dynamics is crucial in the context of incest research, as factors facilitating or inhibiting its disclosure are deeply intertwined with familial culture (Brits et al., 2021).

In this research, the analysis of family dynamics considers several key aspects, including:

1. Roles within the family: Examining the roles of different family members and their impact on intrafamilial dynamics.
2. Communication patterns: Investigating the modes and quality of communication among family members, including openness, honesty, and effectiveness in expressing needs and concerns.
3. Presence of violence: Assessing any forms of violence within the family, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, and their impact on family dynamics.
4. Emotional and social connections: Understanding the emotional bonds and social connections among family members, including levels of intimacy, trust, and support.
5. Quality of relationships: Exploring the overall quality of relationships within the family, including cohesion, warmth, and conflict resolution.
6. Rules and behavioural patterns: Analyzing the rules, norms, and behavioural patterns governing family interactions, including boundaries, discipline strategies, and decision-making processes.
7. Beliefs and values: Examining the beliefs, values, and cultural norms shaping family dynamics and influencing attitudes towards incest and its disclosure.

## **The establishment and disclosure of the incest**

Secret represents pivotal aspects of Barudy's proposed process (1998). The establishment phase involves the victim concealing and maintaining secrecy about the abuse, often influenced by individual, familial, and societal factors. On the other hand, the disclosure phase entails the victim deciding to reveal the abuse, overcoming emotional and social barriers, and sharing their experience with others. Understanding both aspects is fundamental for comprehending the dynamics of incest within families and forms a central focus of this research.

### **2.5 Validity and reliability**

Following the validity and reliability criteria outlined by Velloso and Tizzoni (2020), the following measures were implemented in the study:

- 1. **Credibility:** Rigorous monitoring of congruence between an extensive theoretical review and practical results was undertaken. It ensured coherence between the research execution and the reviewed theory to address the research question effectively.
- 2. **Transferability:** The research results were enhanced through detailed descriptions of all steps in implementing in-depth interviews, enriched by the utilization of artistic tools. This comprehensive approach provided a profound understanding of the original research context and facilitated extrapolating findings to other situations or populations.
- 3. **Reliability:** The research tool and analytical categories were validated by two experts on the topic and two qualitative research experts. This validation ensured that the instruments utilized were suitable for obtaining the desired information accurately and effectively.
- 4. **Confirmability:** Three researchers established a robust coding system for the interviews, carried out independently and blindly. This measure aimed to prevent the influence of researchers' personal beliefs on research findings, ensuring objectivity and confirmability of the results.

### **2.6 Ethical considerations**

The research adhered to stringent ethical standards to ensure participants' protection and the validity of results. Key ethical considerations that guided the study are outlined below:

1. **Institutional Ethical Review:** The research proposal underwent thorough scrutiny by the Ethics Committee of the Universidad Católica Boliviana "San Pablo" to ensure compliance with fundamental principles of research involving human subjects (Record No. 02/2023).
2. **Informed Consent:** All study participants provided informed consent, which included detailed information on confidentiality, data treatment, and voluntary participation. Emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation, and participants explicitly consented to recording research sessions solely for research purposes.
3. **Confidentiality Agreement:** Researchers signed a confidentiality agreement committing to safeguarding participants' identities even after the study's conclusion.
4. **Elimination of Contact Information:** Contact information of individuals who initially expressed interest in participating but later declined was promptly deleted to ensure privacy.
5. **Therapeutic Support:** An agreement was established with a therapeutic centre to address the potential emotional impact of the topic on participants. This arrangement allowed participants to access therapeutic support and professional care if needed.

6. Well-being of the Research Team: The emotional well-being of both participants and the research team was prioritized. Biweekly emotional support meetings with the researchers were held to provide support and process emotions. Additionally, upon conclusion of the data collection phase, an emotional support workshop led by a therapist was organized to safeguard the mental health of the research team.

### 3. Findings

The findings are organized into two main sections. The initial section provides insights into the occurrence of incest. It delves into various aspects including the victims' perceptions of their parents' socioeconomic conditions, the age at which the first incestuous event occurred, the identity of the aggressors, their relationship with the victims, disclosure of the incest, and the subsequent responses of the families. The second section elucidates the family dynamics observed to either facilitate or impede the disclosure of incestuous experiences.

#### 3.1 Insights into the occurrence of incest

Table 6. summarizes the initial findings. Each finding is then briefly explained.

Table 6. General data

Total participants (N=27)	
<b>City</b>	
La Paz	11
Cochabamba	6
Santa Cruz	5
Sucre	4
Potosi	1
<b>Participants Gender</b>	
Man	1
Woman	26
<b>Perception of economic hardship at the time of incest</b>	
Yes	10
No	17
<b>Perception of overcrowding</b>	
Yes	7
No	20
<b>Age at which the first incest event occurred</b>	
Early childhood (0-5)	14

School-age children (6-12)	11
Adolescence (13-17)	2
<b>Gender of the offender</b>	
Man	26
Woman	1
<b>Family relationship with the aggressor</b>	
Father	3
Brother	7
Cousin, extended family	11
Uncle	5
Grandfather	1
<b>Age of incest disclosure</b>	
Early childhood (0-5)	1
School-age children (6-12)	5
Adolescence (13-17)	7
Adulthood (18 on)	14
<b>Person receiving the disclosure</b>	
Parent	7
Brothers	9
Extended family	3
Others	8
<b>Repeated abuses by different family members</b>	
Yes	9
No	18
<b>Cases of extra-familial sexual violence other than incest experience</b>	
Yes	15
No	12

### Perception of economic hardship and overcrowding

The assessment of economic hardship and overcrowding considered the survivors' firsthand experiences of their parents' economic circumstances when the incestuous incidents commenced. Among the cases examined, 10 participants recounted instances where their families were grappling with financial difficulties during the period of the abuse. Conversely, 17 survivors indicated they hailed from middle-class backgrounds without economic challenges. Seven interviewees were noted as living in overcrowded conditions, while the remaining 20 individuals resided in comfortable living spaces. This succinct observation sheds light on a significant misconception surrounding incest: the notion that it solely affects

economically disadvantaged families. In reality, incest transcends social class boundaries.

## Age at which the first incest occurred

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of the prevalent age range in incest cases, we categorized the participants' ages according to the groups outlined in the Child and Adolescent Code: Early Childhood (0-5 years), School-aged Children (6-12 years), and Adolescents (13-17 years). Initially, it was noted that 14 interviewees disclosed that the onset of incestuous abuse occurred between the ages of zero and five years, while in 11 cases, it commenced between the ages of 6 and 12 years. The significant occurrence of incest at such tender ages warrants attention. Victims within these age brackets possess limited resources to comprehend the nature of the abuse, thereby facilitating its perpetuation.

## Who were the aggressors?

An aggressor is defined as any family member who, leveraging their position of power and age disparity relative to the victim, engages in rape or sexual abuse against another family member of younger age. Among the 27 survivors, 26 were women, with only one man reported. However, when considering the gender of the aggressor, the distribution is inversely proportional: 26 of the aggressors were male, compared to one female.

Regarding the relationship between victims and aggressors, paternal figures (including one stepfather) were identified in four cases, while a grandfather was implicated in another instance. Additionally, six cases involved older siblings as aggressors, whereas cousins were identified in eleven instances. In the remaining five cases, uncles and aunts were found to be involved.

Contrary to this reality, testimonies revealed a prevailing misconception among family members that sexual violence is exclusively perpetrated by individuals outside the family circle. This belief often leads to a lack of caution and supervision when children are left alone with other family members:

*"My mother was not bad, but she was very trusting. She believed everyone was good because if a relative came over, she would say, 'Here, you will sleep with my son.' My mother was naive, and she died that way." (Individual interview, August 22, 2023).*

*"It was a family environment where everyone trusted each other a lot, and we were all very free inside the house, but they were overprotective of us outside." (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).*

## Incest disclosure

In the context of incest, disclosure of the secret entails sharing one's experience of the abuse with another individual, whether it be a friend, partner, family member, health professional, counsellor, or another trusted person. It is observed that only half of the cases ( $n = 13$ ) disclosed the violence endured during childhood or adolescence. Among these disclosures, the majority were made to a sister or brother ( $n = 9$ ), while seven cases were disclosed to a parent, three to an extended family member, and eight to others. Conversely, the remaining survivors ( $n = 14$ ) disclosed the abuse in adulthood. Notably, the purpose of disclosure varies significantly by age: in childhood, disclosure aims to access protection to halt incestuous abuse, whereas, in adulthood, it is more geared towards overcoming the trauma.

Regarding the disclosure process, two specific modalities prevalent in childhood and adolescence are identified: accidental disclosure and premeditated disclosure. Accidental disclosure occurs without the deliberate intention of the victim, as exemplified by situations where health professionals while examining the victim for unrelated issues, identify signs of sexual violence and relay this information to the parents. Conversely, premeditated disclosure occurs when the victim consciously decides to disclose the abuse to a trusted individual.

To illustrate this distinction, two cases are presented:



1. In the first case, the survivor's parents discovered the incestuous abuse when they read her private diary without permission, resulting in a feeling of invasion of privacy that was negatively perceived by the victim. She expressed feeling as though *"she had been raped a second time... And that diary, well, it wasn't a diary, it was a book. I was writing a book. And they found it, so that's how they found out, not because of me. I did want them to find out, but not like that."* (Individual interview, August 19, 2023).

2. In the second case, the survivor, with the explicit intention of exposing the incest, deceived her father, the aggressor, by falsely claiming they were alone at home when, in reality, her older sister was present. This action led to the older sister discovering the incestuous abuse: *"My sisters left, and (the father) asked me to look out the window to see if they had left the house. I looked and for some reason... I said yes, yes, they had left, but they hadn't. I could still hear them in the hallway. Then my dad closed the door to his room... And I remember making noise with my feet, walking, walking, almost running... And my dad was almost naked, and my sister went upstairs and, knocked on the door and said: open up. And my dad got scared and quickly changed, but it took him a while. And I remember my dad opened the door, and my sister said: why did you close the door? And my dad said: nothing. He couldn't even explain it to her. I remember my sister grabbed my hand and said: come on, let's go."* (Individual interview, September 5, 2023).

In contrast, in twelve cases, the parents of the survivors remained unaware of the incestuous abuse. A typical pattern underlying the decision not to disclose stems from the desire to shield the parents from the emotional pain of disclosure. Fear of adverse family reactions serves as a primary deterrent for keeping the incest hidden despite the profound emotional anguish experienced by the survivors. Thus, the victim faces the arduous decision of whether to share the truth, cognizant that revealing the secret may provoke conflicts or even lead to the dissolution of her family, as depicted in the testimony of one survivor:

*"You know you are going to cause a storm; there is going to be a storm. You are going to challenge the family, or you are going to hurt someone, but something bad is going to happen... It is an internal struggle. I want to talk about it. I want to extinguish that fire, but I do not want to witness what will happen because it's ugly, and it's not just something ugly; it is something ugly that will happen."* (Focus group, June 20, 2023).

## Family response to incest disclosure

Regarding the family's response to the disclosure of incest, it is crucial to highlight that out of the 13 cases where victims revealed the abuse during childhood or adolescence, protective actions were taken in only three of them. These actions included filing formal complaints against the aggressor and, in one case, establishing legal protective measures within the family. Conversely, in the remaining 10 cases, individuals to whom the victim confided either did not believe the victim or actively covered up the abuse. Testimonies collected underscore this:

*"When my uncle abandoned them, he (my abusive cousin) and his sister, he left them with my grandparents for a long time. They practically grew up with my grandparents. So when my sister disclosed the abuse, my mom said 'poor thing'. And I angrily asked, 'How can they say 'poor thing' after what he did?'"* (Individual interview, August 29, 2023).

It is essential to recognize that the revelation of incest often induces overwhelming anxiety within the family, leading to the justification of covering up the abuse to preserve the image of a seemingly functional and respectable family, as depicted in the following testimony: *"Everyone sees the family, and everyone says: 'Oh, what a nice family, super united, I don't know what,' but within that whole family, it is like a giant monster that is back there, right? and nobody admits it."* (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).

In some cases, the distress triggered by the disclosure reaches such extreme levels that the family system resorts to denial of the incest, often due to a lack of resources to cope with the situation. For instance, one

interviewee shared her experience: "*I told her, she just cried, she didn't tell me anything, she answered - it's just a dream, nothing else-*" (Personal interview, August 2023).

It is crucial to understand that the disclosure of incest typically has a profound impact on the recipient of the information. Initial reactions can vary widely, ranging from grief, crying, anger, and shock to counterintuitive responses such as denial and disbelief. The family system often finds itself ill-equipped to respond when faced with the overwhelming revelation of incest. In some instances, the coping strategies adopted may inadvertently harm the victim, even if the initial intention is to shield them from further abuse.

An illustrative example exemplifies this dynamic: the victim's older cousin inadvertently discovered the incest when he entered a room and found his brother and the victim with their pants off. After questioning the victim, the family decided that the older cousin would take her with him to his college classes to prevent contact between her and the abuser. However, this measure resulted in the six-year-old girl being left alone for several hours inside a car in the university parking lot. These attempts to separate the victim from her aggressor proved short-lived, and family life resumed as if nothing had happened, with the hope that the incident was an isolated one. Unfortunately, this decision exposed the victim to further violence over several years.

In summary, the initial findings on the occurrence of incest reveal several key points: a) incest cuts across all socioeconomic levels within families; b) girls in early childhood and school age are particularly vulnerable; c) the perpetrators are predominantly individuals who have daily access to the victims and are involved in their daily activities; d) disclosure of incest does not guarantee protection for the victims, as families often prioritize self-protection.

## **1.2 Family dynamics that sustain incest secrecy**

In this section, we present an analysis of the family dynamics that favor incest secrecy. We resort to systems complexity theory to explain what may seem inexplicable at first glance: What happens in families in which a child or adolescent is a victim of sexual violence by a family member?

### **Intergenerational accounts of incestuous trauma**

One of the revealing data from the research is the fact that the vast majority of the survivors' families have incest histories in several generations, including older, younger, and even members of the same family generation.

*"Years later, I told my mother what happened to me because, at some point, I didn't know how to tell her. My mother confessed to me that she had also experienced something similar when she was a child. She never told me at what age, but she mentioned to me that it happened in her own house...she never told me who it was or how it happened, I think that is something very painful for her and she started to cry." (Individual interview, August 8, 2023).*

*"If I tell my dad, he will sum it up in 5 minutes and he will tell me: "But you are fine, it happens to everyone", he will say that because I just found out that an uncle wanted to abuse my dad recently...". (Individual interview, August 18, 2023).*

The presence of incest in older and younger generations demonstrates that sexual violence can cross generations. This finding highlights the complex dynamics of intergenerational incest, which not only involves current victims but also highlights the urgent need to address the deep roots of this problem in the family and social structures in order to break the cycle of its transmission.

The trauma generated by incest can have significant consequences for victims when it comes to defending younger victims. As evidenced by the testimony, a mother may shirk the responsibility to protect her daughter because she does not know how since no one protected her as a child.

## Same-generation incest victims

The coexistence of multiple incest victims in the same generation underscores that these incidents do not occur in isolation but are intricately linked to the family environment. This finding suggests the existence of underlying family dynamics that perpetuate this issue, as illustrated by the following testimony: *"We were lying down chatting with my brother, each in his bed. When, all of a sudden, my cousin came in lay down next to me, and started touching me..... I was extremely uncomfortable and when I left my brother warned me: 'Don't do that, don't let yourself become what he wants us to be.'"* (Individual interview, August 11, 2023). This "open" secret may persist in the family because multiple victims experience the assault together, discouraged from disclosing due to fear, shame, and lack of coping resources.

On the other hand, the study demonstrated experiences in which incest was normalized. The normalization of these experiences within the family environment can lead to victims not recognizing them as abuse, which makes it even more challenging to identify and communicate these episodes. A testimony illustrates this phenomenon: *"I confided in my cousin about what had happened, even after leaving school, and it was the first time I shared my experience with someone. Her response was surprising, as she told me, 'I don't know why you feel bad or blame yourself...that's normal, all siblings do that.'"* (Individual interview, August 18, 2023).

This lack of understanding of what does or does not constitute abuse has a significant impact on the victims since it leads them to normalize the violent behaviour experienced in their home environment. This fact, in turn, reduces their resources to identify sexual violence occurring outside the family. As related in another testimony: *"I saw it as normal, when I was 12 years old, in Argentina, I met a 29-year-old man and I was with him. For me, that was normal at that time, but today I realize that this was a crime and I saw it as normal."* (Individual interview, September 5, 2023).

## Power dynamics that establish secrecy

Incest is revealed as an extreme manifestation of the disparity of power between the aggressor and the victim, establishing a dynamic of domination and control in which imbalances are intertwined not only related to age and gender but also to the position of authority that the aggressor holds within the family. In this context, three fundamental aspects stand out that facilitate incest while at the same time hindering its disclosure:

a) The symbolic position of the aggressor within the family, which allows the establishment of the abusive dynamic; b) the stigmas associated with the victims based on their gender; and c) the blaming of the mother for the incest that occurred.

a) The symbolic position of the aggressor is intrinsically related to the notion of parity, which privileges the position of the male within the family. In many cases, this leads to the formation of alliances with the aggressor, of which the victim is aware and thus feels more significant pressure to keep the incest secret. These alliances with the perpetrator are often rooted in the perpetrator's position in the family structure, including his role as an economic provider. In situations where violence is revealed, the family may choose to cover it up to protect the perpetrator and the stability he provides:

*"We already knew that our abusive father had been released from prison, and that made us fearful. However, the most shocking thing happened when my sister shared an experience with us: 'You know what, girls? I saw Daddy and Mom eating at the kermesse'. My sister was furious and scolded him: 'How can you allow this? They are your daughters...' Then, my mother replied, 'We need the money...'"* (Individual interview, September 5, 2023).

*"My grandfather was like the patriarch of the family, everyone loved him. I remember I was taking a shower, it was a normal shower, and all of a sudden I saw my grandfather watching me while I was taking a shower. It looked like he had come into my room and was watching me. I told my mom about what happened in the shower with my grandfather, but she didn't seem to believe me;*

*she said something like, 'No, I don't think it happened like that.'*" (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).

*"My mom tells me that she knows we have been through all this, and she asks for our forgiveness. But she has told me that we beg her partner to come back to her, for him to come back to us."* (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).

The central position of the aggressor in the family is not limited to males in authority roles. An example of this can be seen in a case where the younger daughter was constantly abused by her older brother, who, being her mother's favourite and considered a "miracle child" because he was born prematurely and survived, had the protection of his parents. The resigned victim emphasizes that she was sure that if she revealed the abuse, they would never believe her: *"I felt that discomfort, then...when he lay down next to me or anything else, I was ready to go to another room and close the door, so he told my parents that, that I was going to another room, and my parents told me: you have to be with your brother"*. (Individual interview, August 11, 2023).

To prevent disclosure, aggressors employ two different strategies: the first is camouflaged abusive interaction, in which the aggressor employs various manipulative strategies so that the victim does not understand the abuse, disguising it as a game or care: *"Then he would tell me - let us play a game - there were two types of games: one game was the one he called the little horse, and it was played on a bed. Another game was to mark dots on the body and give a kiss where it was marked. I didn't really see what was wrong.* (Individual interview, August 11, 2023). The second form of approach is direct and undisguised and is usually accompanied by threats to prevent the victim from defending herself or revealing the abuse: *"He warned me that if I talk about what is going on, you know what I am capable of doing to your mother. If I catch you talking and I find out about it, I'm going to have to kill your mom and your little brother, and it will be your fault."* (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).

The finding reveals the forces interacting within the family that contribute to the perpetuation of the incest-related secret. On the one hand, the expectations associated with the perpetrator are at play, while on the other hand, the risks that the family assumed in deciding to take action following the disclosure are confronted. In this way, a balance is struck between the costs and benefits of disclosure, both for the victims and for the families themselves, culminating in the consolidation of the incestuous secret.

b) The position of the victim determined by gender stereotypes: This finding refers to the fact that, of the 27 survivors, 26 are women; incest is a gender issue. If we delve into this situation, the testimonies reveal that the victims were accused of having seduced their aggressors: *"I remember one time he told me: it's your fault we are like this, without money. You provoked your father into doing all this to you."* (Individual interview, September 5, 2023). Another survivor emphasized, *"None of them supported me, they all turned their backs on me and, well, they blamed me, didn't they, for what happened?"* (Individual interview, August 8, 2023).

On the other hand, in the only case within the study in which the survivor was male, another type of stereotype that reinforced the reluctance to disclose incest came into play. First, the fear of being judged homosexual for not having been able to defend himself against a woman could result in rejection by the family and his community. The only male survivor recounts his experience: *"Some people told me that they thought that because of the incest, I was becoming gay."* (Individual interview, August 10, 2023). These testimonies illustrate how gender stereotypes and patriarchal expectations can further complicate the experience of incest victims by creating additional barriers to speaking up and seeking support.

c) The last aspect identified in the narratives is the gendered power relationship. This finding is manifested in the differentiated roles, positions, and expectations assigned to male and female family members: *"My family is very sexist, the man takes care of the man, and the woman takes care of the man, but who takes care of the woman?"* (Individual interview, August 11, 2023). About maternal and paternal roles, an inequitable distribution of responsibilities based on gender is observed. The father's role is mainly

characterized by providing for the family economically and ensuring its material needs are met. On the other hand, the mother's role is defined as the primary caregiver of the children; however, in many cases, mothers also assume the responsibility of contributing to the family economy, a situation that implies an excessive demand on the maternal figure, which is evident in some testimonies that mention the absence of the mother due to her overload of functions:

*"My dad supposedly didn't work for a while. Then he went to the United States and came back with money and he says he was missing all day. My mom, from what she says, had to pay for daycare, my food and take care of me more, so, she was a little absent"* (Individual interview, August 23, 2023).

*"My mother is a good mother, but she has always been a bit of a distant mother, especially at that time, she used to make us play and everything, but she has always been working. So, I didn't tell her a lot of things either because I was working. right?"* (Individual interview, August 8, 2023).

Contemporary society values the production of capital (Federici, 2018), and, in this sense, the role of the father's provider is in line with the social function of production, since fatherhood does not affect his productive capacity. However, in the case of mothers, a strong incompatibility is found between their work responsibilities and the functions associated with motherhood, which include caring for children and the home. Thus, the mother is at a constant crossroads regarding balancing work and care. Her financial responsibilities force her to be away from home for many hours, and upon her return, she is the only one assigned to housework and caregiving, establishing what Wanderley (2012) identifies as the double workday.

Under this configuration, when incest occurs, most of the time, the reproach and social sanction fall on the mother because she *"was not there" to protect her children. Paradoxically, this is precisely one of the reasons why the victims decide not to reveal the incest since they do not want society to blame them. The following testimony is proof of this: "I didn't tell my mother everything that happened to me. I don't want to tell her and generate all those emotions that she doesn't deserve. I will only tell my family when she dies"* (Individual interview, August 19, 2023).

## **Coexistence of multiple forms of violence**

The presence of multiple forms of violence within survivors' families points to a complex web of interrelated factors contributing to their experiences. Among the most prevalent forms of violence is psychological abuse, where survivors recount enduring constant fear and punishment:

*"They never hit me, but their reactions were violent, instilling fear in me."* (Individual interview, August 8, 2023).

Neglectful parenting exacerbates the situation, with children feeling neglected and lacking supervision:

*"We had a lot of freedom; sometimes they made us feel like orphans."* (Individual interview, September 5, 2023).

Physical violence, often stemming from parental conflicts, further traumatizes children:

*"I witnessed my father hitting my pregnant mother, and she instructed us to hide during their fights."* (Individual interview, August 18, 2023).

Parents' alcohol consumption exacerbates violence, creating an unsafe home environment:

*"My parents were heavy drinkers, making it unsafe for us to be around my father due to his violent behaviour."* (Focus group, June 20, 2023).



In extreme cases, parental intoxication leaves children vulnerable to abuse, as illustrated by a survivor's account of her uncle's assault while her father was inebriated:

"One night, my father was drunk, and despite the chaos, I slept beside him. Unbeknownst to him, my uncle took advantage of the situation." (Individual interview, August 10, 2023).

The narratives reveal a continuum of violence, with survivors experiencing polyvictimization. In some instances, survivors face threats from their abusers, perpetuating silence and hopelessness:

"My stepfather threatened to kill my stepsister if I disclosed the abuse. His past violent behaviour towards my mother made the threat credible." (Individual interview, date).

This continuum of violence within families not only enables but reinforces incestuous abuse, leaving survivors in a perpetual state of fear and isolation.

### **Fuzzy boundaries within the family**

Another characteristic of the survivors' families is the presence of diffuse boundaries among its members. Such boundaries, in the context of incest, emerge as an important element due to their significant influence on perpetuating incest. Family boundaries, which delineate each member's expectations, roles, and responsibilities, are fundamental for maintaining orderly structures and healthy relationships within the family group.

In families affected by incest, boundaries may be compromised in multiple dimensions. Firstly, the presence of a sexual offender within the family distorts the perception of appropriate boundaries. Offenders often transgress the personal boundaries of their victims, violating the healthy boundaries of the family environment. The unbalanced power dynamics in incest can undermine the ability of other family members to establish effective boundaries, leaving victims feeling trapped in a cycle of abuse and silence, hindering their ability to seek help or set boundaries. This fact is particularly evident in cases where victims are young children lacking the linguistic and cognitive resources to identify incest.

However, even at a young age, there is an intuitive perception that something is amiss and that what is happening goes against their well-being. For example, one survivor recalls an episode in which she found herself in a wet bed with her brother. Though unable to fully comprehend what occurred, she sensed it was negative.

*"What I remember is that my brother used to touch me, and...I didn't know it was bad, but I felt bad (...). When we were older he apologized to me, when his daughters were born. He told me: 'I'm sorry, sister, I know I did wrong and I took your life'"* (Individual interview, August 24, 2023).

*"Mmm, it was like I wanted to replicate those feelings because you don't understand that it's wrong."* (Individual interview, August 24, 2023).

On the other hand, the lack of limits regarding privacy and intimacy in the family environment is evident. This phenomenon manifests through parental behaviours exposing sexual activities in front of their children, who, upon witnessing such behaviours, may perceive them as usual and subsequently replicate them. Two illustrative testimonies highlight this dynamic:

*"I have lived experiences related to the sexual part because I have seen that my parents had this type of behaviour, and obviously, that aroused my curiosity"* (Individual interview, August 18, 2023).

*"What happened to me was watching my parents have sex. My parents didn't have a care, even though I was there. It's like they could be on the side of the bed having sex or I was sitting there chatting with my dad while my mom was doing things to him. If a child sees these things, they won't think it's anything weird or bad. You can think that they are playing, that's how people treat each other, that's how they have*

*to treat you"* (Individual interview, August 23, 2023).

This lack of boundaries regarding privacy and intimacy can create an environment where personal boundaries and sexual behaviours become blurred, contributing to the normalization of inappropriate behaviours within the family. This aspect is highly relevant since normalized sexual behaviour may prevent both the victim and the aggressor from recognizing such behaviour as violent.

### **Absence of receptive attention**

The final dynamic identified in families maintaining the secrecy of incest is the absence of responsive care. This form of attention entails caregivers being physically and emotionally available for their children, engaging in prolonged conversations and play, and providing leisure spaces. When consistently present, these interactions allow caregivers to detect behavioural and emotional changes, address possible difficulties, and foster positive social relationships, ultimately ensuring the child's safety and well-being (UNICEF, 2018).

However, in many of the survivors' family experiences, a lack of responsive care was evident, along with a dearth of affectionate expressions and a lack of interest in family members' feelings. While parents often fulfil their children's basic needs, they neglect their emotional well-being, making it challenging to recognize emotional changes in victims, potentially allowing incest to go unnoticed.

"My mom never asked me why I had changed. She used to see me playing, but after this happened, suddenly, I stopped" (Group interview, June 20, 2023).

"My mom would worry about my appearance, but never asked why I seemed sad or lonely, or what was bothering me" (Group interview, June 20, 2023).

The lack of responsive care extends beyond a willingness to listen to family members' problems; it also involves family members assuming they should not share their feelings or concerns. Family mandates discouraging children from expressing emotions from an early age create an environment where even evident signs of discomfort go unnoticed. One survivor shared feeling uncomfortable sitting on her grandfather's lap but felt unable to express it due to these family norms, contributing to a reduced likelihood of disclosing abuse.

*"If something hurts you, it's your problem, and you don't have to tell others about it"* (Individual interview, La Paz, August 2023).

## **4. Discussion**

Up to this point, various family dynamics influencing incest have been identified. However, these factors alone are insufficient to fully explain this phenomenon and the perpetuation of secrecy. While it may seem intuitive that a lack of communication and trust within the family would make disclosing the abuse brutal, cases were found where families exhibited healthy relationship dynamics and open communication. Yet, victims still struggled to disclose the secret early on. This finding indicates that there are other, more complex and abstract factors at play, spanning the experiences of the victims, their families, and society at large, contributing to the maintenance of secrecy.

Through the analysis of interviews, three overarching organizational schemas were identified that intersect with the phenomenon of incest: fear, shame, and guilt. These elements play pivotal roles in perpetuating the secrecy surrounding incest.

## **Fear as a measure of cost and benefit**

During the analysis of the testimonies, it became evident that fear plays a pivotal role in victims' decisions not to disclose the violence they endured. This fear encompasses various aspects, including the fear of causing pain to their parents, fear of triggering conflict, and fear of potential harm they may face as a result of disclosure. Essentially, this fear revolves around the potential impact that disclosing the abuse could have on their social environment. Thus, fear functions as a balancing act for victims, where they weigh the costs and benefits of speaking out about the violence, leading to a challenging dilemma of whether it is worth breaking their silence.

While silence may serve as a survival strategy in some cases, particularly if the victim feels physically threatened by the aggressor or fears a violent reaction from their parents, the act of revealing the secret ultimately puts the family at risk. The family is regarded as a fundamental institution responsible for nurturing and safeguarding children, and the risk of destabilizing it by exposing violence outweighs the importance of protecting the victim. The revelation of incest challenges notions of familial duties, moral integrity, and well-being, prompting the question of what remains of the family if it fails to fulfil its protective role.

Through the qualitative study's interviews, it was evident that incest victims are unwilling to sacrifice their families, even at the cost of their own suffering. Consequently, many victims choose silence as a means to preserve the notion of family unity.

However, the price of silence is substantial, burdensome, and enduring, persisting throughout the victims' lives even after the violence ceases. While some survivors may eventually disclose the secret to partners or therapists as a form of personal liberation without burdening their families, many others struggle with the overwhelming consequences of silence, which can severely impact their mental well-being.

## **The silence that runs through all systems**

In the context of incest, two interrelated phenomena emerge: the concealment of incest within the family and the complicity of current legislation in perpetuating victims' silence. Secrecy becomes a survival strategy adopted by families. At the same time, the lack of specific legislation addressing incest reflects a systemic failure to address the issue adequately despite the majority of child sexual violence cases being perpetrated by family members.

Despite increased awareness of the issue through various channels such as schools, media, and prevention campaigns, the predominant discourse often focuses on the notion that potential aggressors are outsiders rather than family members. This failure perpetuates a fallacy surrounding child sexual violence, emphasizing the fear of the "strange man" and neglecting the reality of abuse within familial settings. Alerts about child trafficking and warnings to avoid contact with strangers contribute to this perception, creating a false sense of security by positioning danger outside the family environment.

This ingrained notion of the protective family versus the dangerous stranger can lead families to deny evidence of incest, even when it is apparent. For instance, a mother may attribute her daughter's emotional and behavioural changes to external influences rather than acknowledging the possibility of incest within the family.

## **Guilt and shame: the two other threads that perpetuate secrecy**

Shame and guilt, experienced by both survivors and their families, exert significant pressure to maintain secrecy surrounding incest. The fear of judgment by others and the potential social condemnation for the criminal act drive some families to reject any attempt at disclosure by the victim, opting instead to cover up the violence in order to preserve the façade of a model family. Similarly, many victims may hesitate to disclose the abuse due to the profound sense of shame and worthlessness that accompanies being violated by a trusted figure from whom protection was expected.



The societal stigma associated with shame also impacts the victim, who may, despite understanding their lack of culpability, internalize some level of responsibility for not responding effectively to the abuse. It is unfortunately common for victims to face scrutiny and questioning for not disclosing the incest sooner. This burden placed on the victim is further perpetuated in prevention discourses, which often emphasize individual responsibility for safeguarding personal safety, placing the onus on children and adolescents to prevent abuse.

## The unspeakable of incest

In this final section, we delve into the concept of the inexpressible within the context of incest—those aspects that evade easy articulation in words and serve as an additional barrier to sharing the secret. We previously explored how this dimension inhibits younger victims from reporting the abuse due to their limited linguistic resources to recognize and name incest. These victims may sense that something is amiss or experience discomfort without being able to fully explain why. Often, they acquire the language to comprehend the violence they endured years later, leading to a shift from initial confusion to feelings of shame and guilt.

However, the dilemma of the inexpressible extends beyond very young victims. Children and adolescents who experience incest, regardless of their level of understanding of sexuality and the nature of the abuse, grapple with the contradiction between their mental image of the perpetrator—who, as a family member, is expected to provide protection and love—and the harm inflicted upon them. These contradictions blur the lines between normal, affectionate physical contact within family relationships and inappropriate physical contact seeking sexual gratification from the perpetrator, making it challenging to articulate and name the abuse.

Moreover, the unspeakable nature of incest encompasses those hidden aspects that remain engraved in the minds and memories of survivors who may struggle to verbalize their experiences. For many, expressing the full extent of what they endured is impossible, leaving gaps in their narratives. Ultimately, the conclusions of this study are presented in the final chapter, inviting readers to explore further insights therein.





## Chapter 4

### QUANTITATIVE STUDY

#### TALKING TO PROTECT: KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND PRACTICES ON THE PREVENTION OF CHILD SEXUAL VIOLENCE

##### 1. Introduction

As emphasized by van Vugt & Garofalo (2021), the family constitutes a crucial arena for addressing the issue of Child Sexual Violence (CSV). Parents, mothers, fathers, and caregivers play pivotal roles in protecting children and adolescents by fostering safe environments and open communication spaces (Rudolph et al., 2018). However, a significant portion (66.3%) of sexual violence incidents that affect children and adolescents (aged 10 to 17) have never been disclosed to any adult, let alone family members (Gewirtz-Meydan & Finkelhor, 2019). Establishing preventive communication about CSV is essential, as it encourages children and adolescents to disclose incidents of sexual violence, thereby fostering a perception of the home as a safe environment where confessions are met with attention and support (Guerra et al., 2021; Alaggia et al., 2017). Qualitative studies with survivors of CSV further support this notion, highlighting the lack of information and communication about sexual violence as a prevalent factor in survivors' accounts.

Despite a clear interest and concern among mothers and fathers to create open and trusting environments for discussing CSV with their children, several factors impede the fulfillment of these conditions. These factors include limited access to knowledge, difficulties getting appropriate information tailored to the age of children and adolescents, embarrassment associated with discussing CSV, and structural issues such as beliefs and social stigmas surrounding sexuality and childhood "innocence" (Prikhidko et al., 2020; Noorman et al., 2023; Livingston et al., 2020). Consequently, many parents and caregivers shy away from discussing CSV with adolescents or with their children.

Recognizing the significant role of mothers and fathers as the primary source of information on CSV, previous studies have examined the knowledge, attitudes, and communication practices for prevention and protection that parents have with their children and adolescents (Zhang et al., 2020; Salloum et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2019). These studies provide insights into family dynamics concerning prevention and identify strengths and weaknesses that require comprehensive addressing to ensure that responsible adults facilitate communication about CSV to protect children and adolescents.

To further explore the situation of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), particularly violence within families and current discussions on the issue within Bolivian families, a national-level online survey was conducted. The survey aimed to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of parents and primary caregivers regarding prevention and protection. The survey sought to understand participants' perceptions of their knowledge, attitudes toward acquiring and transmitting preventive information, and how they practice prevention through communication.

The following sections present methodological details outlining the dimensions, instruments and sample characteristics. Additionally, results are provided to identify the mechanisms employed by caregivers to protect children and adolescents from Child Sexual Violence.



## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Type of research

From a quantitative approach with descriptive scope, information about the knowledge, attitudes and practices to prevent and protect children and adolescents against intrafamily child sexual violence of mothers, fathers and caregivers of children and adolescents living in Bolivia. The categorical and numerical information was collected through an online survey with an exploratory and cross-sectional scope.

As part of the study and taking into account the background of the qualitative study, the term Child Sexual Violence (CSV) was used to refer to any action or behavior that affects the sexual freedom and integrity of a child or adolescent (Child and Adolescent Code). Intrafamily child sexual violence was also used in the items, pointing out and referring to incest (See Annex 2). The word incest was not included as such, due to its absence in the regulations and definition in the Bolivian context.

### 2.2 Participants

The sample size was obtained through the calculation for samples of infinite universe<sup>9</sup>. With 90% confidence and a 5% margin of error, a total sample size of 267 mothers, fathers, and caregivers was needed. Using non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling, a population sample of 381 participants was accessed. The inclusion criteria were: a) residing in Bolivia at the time of answering the form, and b) being a mother, father, or caregiver of a child or adolescent. The virtual questionnaire was disseminated through the Facebook page of Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento (IICC) and Save The Children's WhatsApp work and advocacy groups.

The 81.9% of the sample was made up of mothers and caregivers, the remaining 18.1% corresponded to fathers and caregivers. One of the main characteristics of the participants is their high level of education. 81.1% have a bachelor's degree or postgraduate studies. Despite the high levels of education of the sample, more than half (64.6%) considered that their income was barely sufficient to cover their basic needs. This is very important if we take into account that the survey was disseminated digitally, a medium through which biases could be generated due to the constant access to the Internet. However, the perception of income level allows us to cushion these effects (see Table 7).

9. According to the Household Survey of the National Institute of Statistics, Bolivia has 2,390,000 mothers (2018).

Table 7. Demographic information of the sample

		N	%
Sex	Woman	321	81,9
	Man	69	18,1
Actor	Mother	265	69,9
	Father	53	13,9
	Caregiver	16	4,2
	Caregiver	47	12,3
Educational Level	Secondary	23	6
	Senior technician	49	12,9
	Bachelor's Degree	144	37,8
	Post-university studies	165	43,3
Perception of economic difficulties	It is either insufficient to cover my basic needs or it is sufficient to cover them.	246	64,6
	I can live comfortably	135	35,4

The data collected also made it possible to identify that the sample of mothers, fathers, and caregivers is in charge of the protection of 585 children and adolescents. Their ages are grouped into four categories: 29.7% of the sample is in charge of children between 0 and 5 years of age (early childhood); 36.4% is in charge of children between 6 and 12 years of age (school-age children), followed by 26.3% of caregivers and parents of adolescents between 12 and 18 years of age, and 7.5% of mothers, fathers, and caregivers responsible for children over the age of majority. It is important to clarify that this last group of participants are, in turn, caregivers of minors, so they remained part of the sample and were used for the analysis.

## 2.3 Instrument

Consisting of 55 questions, divided into 6 sections corresponding to sociodemographic information and the 5 dimensions of interest of the study: a) knowledge, b) practices, c) attitudes, d) prevention history, and e) reasons for not reporting child sexual violence. The items that were selected to construct the survey are presented below (see Table 2). To consult the survey in its entirety, see Annex 2.

### Knowledge

To address the knowledge regarding sexual violence held by mothers, fathers, and caregivers, 7 items were selected, proposed by Zhang et al. (2020) with adequate internal consistency indices ( $\alpha=.63$ ). Three items developed by Salloum et al. (2020) were also added. In total, knowledge was measured through 10 items. The response categories allowed participants to indicate "1=Yes", "0=No" or "0=I don't know" to each of the items presented to them. Higher score levels reflect higher levels of knowledge.

### Attitudes towards CSV prevention

The information regarding attitudes towards the prevention of CSV was obtained through 6 items formulated by Guo et al (2019) with a reliability of  $\alpha=.75$ . To identify the attitude that the sample has towards the role of children and adolescents concerning CSV 5 items suggested by Save The Children and the IICC team were added too. In addition, 4 items were selected from the study by Salloum et al. (2020), carried out in El Salvador to understand the specific involvement of parents in the prevention of CSV and the attitude towards this problem in Bolivia. In total 15 items were used to measure attitudes. The response options were Likert-type, with "1= totally disagree" and "5= totally agree".

## **Prevention history of mother, father, or caregiver**

We included three dichotomous items (response categories "0= No", "1= Yes") proposed by Walsh et. al (2013) to know the history of mothers and fathers regarding the information they received about sexuality and about the prevention of CSV since they were children until they started caring for a child or an adolescent. In addition, three multiple choice questions allows to identify the principal source (or person) through which mothers, fathers, and caregivers received information about CSV and sexuality at three points in time: childhood, adolescence, and since they are caregivers.

## **Communication practices**

Twelve items were used to investigate the preventive communication about CSV that mothers, fathers, and caregivers maintain with children and adolescents. The items were adapted from the work of Zhang et al., (2020) and Guo et al., (2019). The response options "1=Yes" and "0=no" to identify the total number of preventive practices carried out. In order to filter the mothers, fathers and caregivers, the participants were asked beforehand if they had "talked to their child/children or the children and adolescents in their care about the prevention of CSV in childhood"; those who answered in the negative went to the "reasons for not communicating about CSV" module of the form.

## **Reasons for not communicating**

Ten items added from Deblinger et al. (2010) to delve deeper into why mothers, fathers, and caregivers decide not to address the issue of CSV as a preventive and protective measure. The response categories allowed the participant to indicate "1=Yes" or "0=No" according to the reasons exposed.

## **2. 4 Validation and adaptation**

The survey was validate by a group of experts in the field of children and adolescents and experts in quantitative methodology and instrument validation. Also, the lenguaje validation was made by a pilot test with eight parents of children and adolescents. According to the pilot test, questions with denials in the knowledge section changed their way to be positive.

## **2. 5 Data analysis**

A descriptive analysis was performed to identify the frequencies and percentages of variables. Also, we present the differences in the score distributions and disaggregate the data by the age groups of their child/children presented. Knowledge, attitudes and practice items were added together to create composite items. With these, we proceeded to a correlational analysis, using Spearman's Rho correlation coefficient to indicate the relationship between knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The scores obtained from the composite items were dichotomized by the highest values of each item as the cut-off point, being 8 for knowledge, 10 for attitudes, and 10 for practices. Finally a bivariate logistic regression was tested. Due to the size of the sample there weren't any significant results.

## **2. 6 Ethical considerations**

In order to safeguard the right of mothers, fathers, and caregivers to participate, an informed consent form

was presented before starting to fill out the survey, explaining the implications of participation, the possibility of leaving the questionnaire at any time, and the anonymity of the information collected. The data obtained were stored guaranteeing access only to the researchers of the study and their safe handling.

**Table 8. Definition of variables**

Variable	Definition	Items
Knowledge	Recognition of the importance of the problem, risk factors that increase the probability of child sexual violence, and the signs and situations that occur when a child has been a victim of child sexual violence.	10 items adapted by Zhang et al., (2020) and Salloum et al. (2020).
Attitudes	Attitude towards receiving and providing information to children and adolescents on sexuality and preventive information on sexual violence. The role of the school as an institution that disseminates information was emphasized. Likewise, the attitude of mothers, fathers and caregivers with respect to sexual violence was also included. The importance of addressing it together with family members.	13 items selected from the work of Guo et al., (2019) and the study of Salloum et al. (2020).
Prevention history	Data of the information or teaching that the father, mother and caregiver received in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, regarding child sexual violence and sexuality.	4 items proposed by Walsh et. al, (2012).
Practices	Understood as the topics that mothers, fathers and caregivers have communicated about CSV to their child(ren) or family members to prevent child sexual violence.	12 items from the work of Zhang et al., (2020) Guo et al., (2019).
Reasons not to talk about CSV	List of reasons why mothers, fathers and caregivers do not communicate with their child/children about CSV.	10 items adapted from the study by Deblinger et al. (2010).

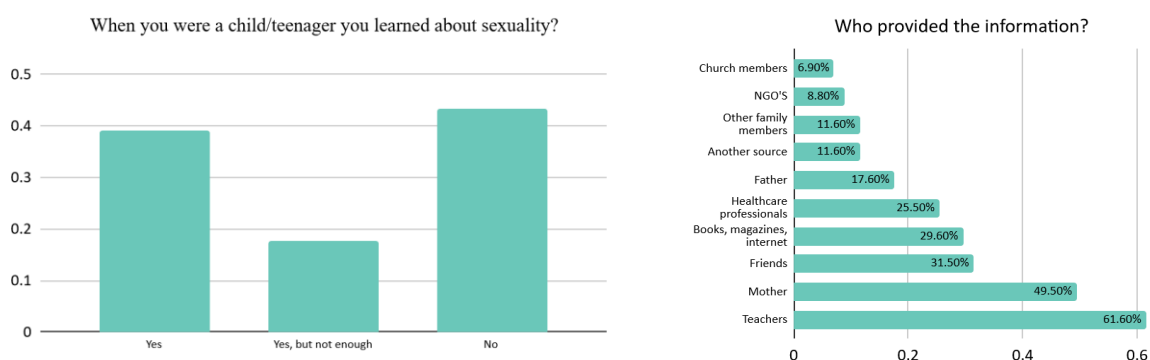
Source: Own elaboration based on instruments reviewed.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Prevention history of mothers, fathers, and caregivers.

The data collected regarding the information that mothers, fathers, and caregivers received about sexuality and CSV for preventive purposes identified that more than half of the sample (56.1%) learned about sexuality during their childhood and/or adolescence. Of these, 17.6% considered that the learning they had was not sufficient. The main sources from which they received this information, according to the participants, were teachers (61.6%), mothers (49.5%) and friends (31.5%).

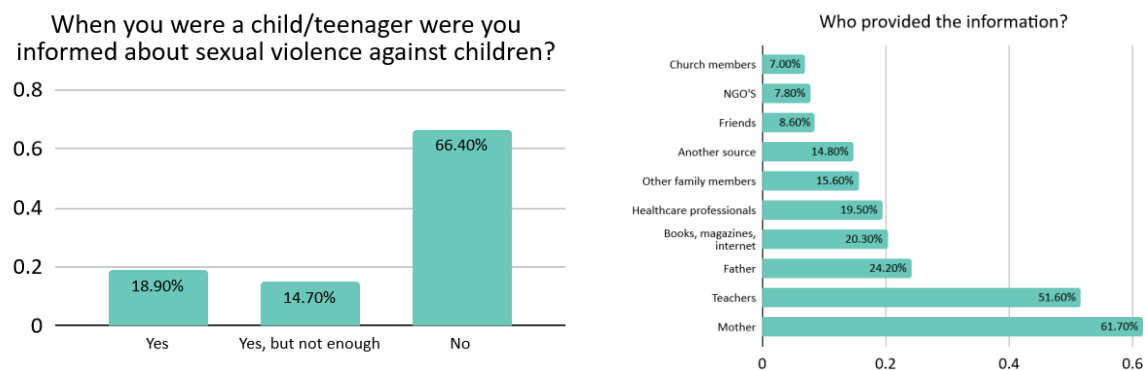
**Percentage of mothers, fathers and caregivers who received information on sexuality in childhood and adolescence and the source from which the information was obtained**



Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

When asked about the information they received regarding CSV during their childhood and/or adolescence, only 33.6% had access to information and 18.4% considered that the information received was not sufficient. Once again, the main sources of information transmission were the mother (61.7%), then teachers (51.6%) and fathers (24.2%). It is important to mention that 50% of the participants who learned about sexuality had also received information about CSV, having continuity with the acquisition of knowledge during their childhood and adolescence ( $p < .000$ ).

**Percentage of mothers, fathers and caregivers who received information on sexuality in childhood and adolescence and the source from which they obtained it.**

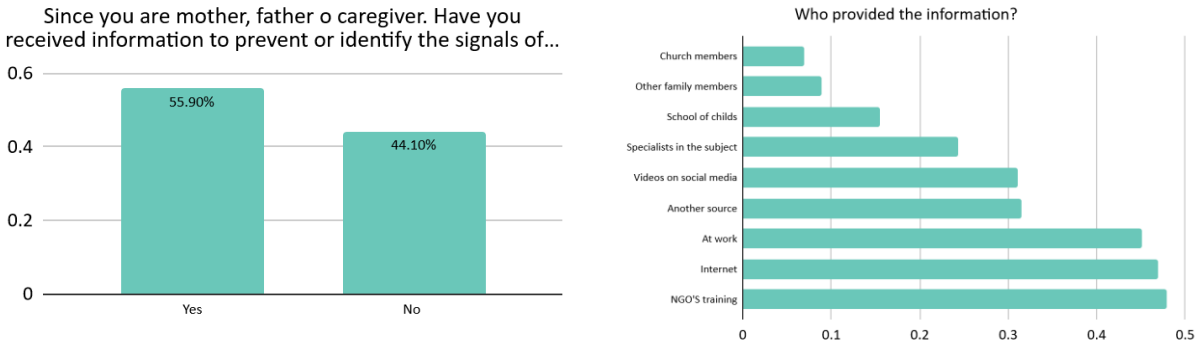


Source: Own elaboration based on a survey of mothers, fathers, and caregivers.

We also asked whether participants obtained information on the prevention of CSV while they were caring for children and adolescents, to which 55.9% of the sample indicated that they did. The main ways of acquiring information during adulthood were training by NGOs (47.9%), the Internet (46.9%) and training at work (45.1%)



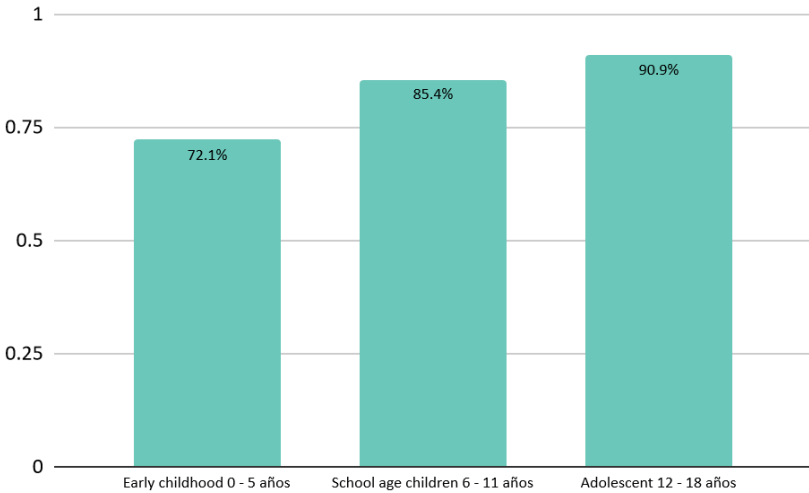
**Percentage of mothers, fathers, and caregivers who received information on the prevention of child sexual violence since they have been caring for children and adolescents.**



Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

Finally, the participants were asked if they talked or communicated with their children or the children in their care about prevention of CSV where 81.1% reported that they did. From the age of the child or adolescent onwards it is observed that the tendency to talk about CSV increases. 72.1% of mothers, fathers and caregivers who have children in early childhood reported having talked about CSV. The percentage increases for mothers, fathers and caregivers who are caring for children between 6 and 12 years of age, as 85.4% reported having communicated about CSV. In the group of adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, 90.9% of mothers and fathers said that they had talked about CSV in order to prevent it.

**Figure 5. Frequencies of mothers, fathers and caregivers talking about CSV with children and adolescents**



Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

**3.2 Mothers, fathers and caregivers knowledge of CSV.**

As part of the module on knowledge of CSV, the participants were asked about the person or persons they considered most likely to assault their children and adolescents. The results show (see Figure 6) that the main person recognized as a possible aggressor by 78.2% of the participants was the stepfather, followed by family friends (73%) and some other family members (68.8%). The age of the child/children does not seem to interfere in the recognition of these actors, since the percentages are the same. The caregivers, mothers, and fathers, recognize as the main aggressors those who do not share consanguinity with the

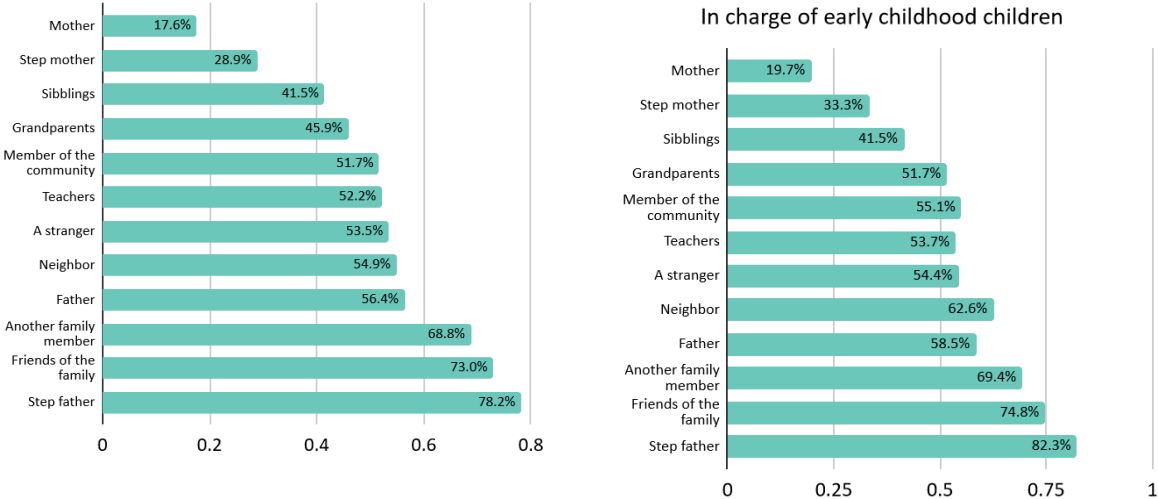
children and adolescents (at least not to a direct degree) and, much less, if they are female actors such as the mother or stepmother; two possible aggressors named by less than 35% of the sample. On the other hand, 82.2% of the sample recognized that women also attack children and infants, despite the knowledge of this, part of the sample considers that women are not possible aggressors of children and infants.

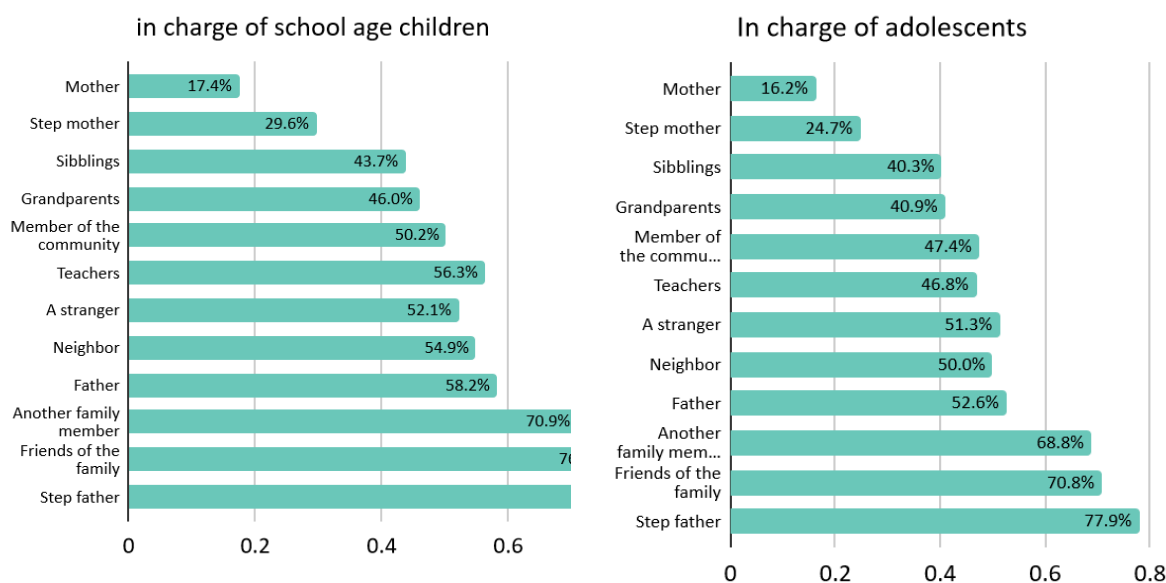
With regard to knowledge about CSV, it was observed that the majority of mothers, fathers and caregivers showed high levels of knowledge. The understanding of the complexity of the problem is highlighted, since 99.5% of participants recognize that CSV is a problem of great magnitude that takes place in all parts of the world. In addition, 95% of the sample recognized that children and adolescents who are sexually assaulted find it difficult to disclose the aggression because the abuser prevents them from doing so. The knowledge of 100% of the sample that boys and adolescents can also be victims of sexual violence is an encouraging result that indicates that parent and caregiver have knowledge of the diversity in which the problem affects children and adolescents.

Risk factors were also recognized by the participants, 98.7% recognized that a person who sexually assaulted a child is likely to do it again. 85.6% of the parents identified intimate partner violence as a factor that can lead to the occurrence of CSV, thus recognizing that in homes where there is violence by the parents (or by the partner of one of them), there is a greater risk.

The 59.6% mothers, fathers and caregivers consider that children are more likely to suffer sexual violence than adolescents. Likewise, 55.9% of the sample indicates that in most sexual aggressions there are physical signs on the body of children and adolescents. Both response frequencies point to knowledge that should be reinforced in mothers, fathers and caregivers. Other results regarding the distribution of the sample are presented in Table 9.

**Figure 6. Identification of possible aggressors of CSV towards children and adolescents according to mothers, fathers and caregivers responses**





Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

Table 9. Knowledge of mothers, fathers and caregivers

	Total Sample		In charge of children in early childhood		In charge of children of school age		In charge of teenagers	
	N=381 (%)		N=147 (%)		N=213 (%)		N=154 (%)	
	Correct %	Incorrect %	Correct %	Incorrect %	Correct %	Incorrect %	Correct %	Incorrect %
Child sexual violence is a problem that exists throughout the world	99,5	,5	99,3	,7	99,5	,5	99,4	,6
A person who has sexually assaulted a child before is likely to do it again	98,7	1,3	98,0	2,0	100	,0	96,8	
If a child has experienced a type of sexual violence, there will usually be physical evidence	55,6	44,4	63,9	36,1	53,1	46,9	55,2	44,8
Women can sexually abuse children and adolescents	82,2	17,8	87,1	12,9	87,3	12,7	77,3	22,7
Children (boys) can be sexually abused	100		100		100		100	
Children who have been sexually abused, in most cases, are unable to disclose the fact because the abuser prevents them from doing so.	95,0	5,0	93,9	6,1	96,2	3,8	96,1	3,9

Adolescents are more likely to suffer sexual violence than boys and girls	59,6	40,4	61,2	38,8	60,6	39,4	53,2	46,8
Children and adolescents living in homes where there is domestic violence are more likely to be victims of sexual violence	85,6	14,4	86,4	14,3	85,4	14,6	83,8	16,2
If your child has been sexually assaulted, do you know who you should report it?	78,5	21,5	76,9	23,1	79,3	20,7	76,0	24,0

Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

### 3.3 Attitudes of mothers, fathers, and caregivers

The findings from the survey of mothers, fathers, and caregivers underscore a consensus regarding the importance of education about sexual violence as a preventive measure, with 84.8% of respondents agreeing on this premise. Similarly, a high percentage (96.3%) acknowledged the importance of acquiring information on sexual violence, and 96.1% recognized their responsibility to educate the children and adolescents in their care to prevent sexual violence, emphasizing the need to provide this education proactively rather than waiting for children to acquire the information as they grow older.

Moreover, a significant majority of the sample (85.6%) agreed that schools should provide information to children and adolescents to prevent sexual violence, with 76.6% advocating for comprehensive sexual education within the educational system. However, despite the agreement on the importance of preventive sexual information, concerns were raised about the content of this information as 57% of respondents expressed worries that it could lead their children to know too much about sex. Interestingly, when examining responses based on the ages of children and adolescents, it was observed that a considerable portion (59.9%) of caregivers of children aged 0 to 5 years did not share this concern and did not perceive the preventive content as detrimental.

In terms of intrafamilial intimate partner violence (IPV), the majority of respondents (86.4%) disagreed with the notion that cases of intrafamilial IPV are few and therefore do not require prevention efforts. Nearly all participants (94.2%) acknowledged the importance of their role in preventing IPV by establishing limits on the contact that family members have with their children or adolescents. Specifically, caregivers of children in early childhood and school age exhibited the highest agreement with this statement.

Encouragingly, 94.8% of the sample expressed willingness to file a complaint in the hypothetical scenario where the children and adolescents in their care experienced incestuous aggression. However, attention was drawn to the remaining 5% of respondents, suggesting a need to strengthen responses to children and adolescents who have experienced such aggression, promoting the creation of safe and protective spaces to facilitate disclosure.

Regarding misconceptions about children and adolescents' roles in cases of child sexual violence (CSV), 61.4% of participants disagreed with the idea that children and adolescents can fabricate events of intrafamilial sexual violence. However, 38.6% still held onto this belief. Additionally, a concerning 9.7% agreed with the notion that children can provoke sexual violence based on their attire, with a slightly higher percentage (13.6%) considering that adolescents could provoke sexual aggression due to their behavior.

Finally, attitudes toward how CSV is addressed in the country were predominantly negative, with 67.7% of respondents disagreeing that the authorities' protection of children and adolescents is effective in cases of sexual aggression. Moreover, an overwhelming 86.4% disagreed with the notion that the issue of incest is adequately addressed in Bolivia. These findings suggest a need for improved protection measures and responses to sexual violence, particularly within the familial context, as perceived by mothers, fathers, and caregivers.

**Table 10. Attitudes of mothers, fathers, and caregivers towards prevention of CSV and incest**

	General sample		In charge of children in early childhood		In charge of children of school age		In charge of adolescents	
	N= 309		N=106		N=182		N=140	
	DA % DA	% DES	DA % DA	% DES	DA % DA	% DES	DA % DA	% DES
He agrees that education about child sexual violence is the way to prevent it.	84,8	15,2	82,3	17,7	85,0	15,0	83,8	16,2
You agree that the school should provide comprehensive sexuality education to your child/children or the child/children you care for.	76,6	23,4	72,8	27,2	76,5	23,5	76,6	23,4
You are willing for your child/children or the child/children you care for to receive information to prevent child sexual violence at school.	85,6	14,4	82,3	17,7	84,5	15,5	86,4	13,6
You are concerned that preventive information about child sexual violence may lead your child/children or the child/children you care for to know too much about sex.	57,0	43,0	40,1	59,9	62,0	38,0	54,5	45,5
As a parent or caregiver, it is important to learn about child sexual violence in order to prevent it.	96,1	3,9	96,6	3,4	95,3	4,7	94,2	5,8
As a parent or caregiver it is my responsibility to educate my child/children or the child/children I care for about their sexuality to prevent child sexual violence.	96,3	3,7	94,6	5,4	95,3	4,7	95,5	4,5
It is not necessary for me as a parent or caregiver to provide information about sexuality to my child/children or the child/children in my care as they will learn this information as they grow up.	15,2	84,8	15,0	85,0	16,9	83,1	18,2	81,8
Children and adolescents can invent events of intrafamilial sexual violence.	38,6	61,4	38,8	61,2	37,6	62,4	42,9	57,1
Sexual violence may be the fault of children, due to the way they dress and behave.	9,7	90,3	8,8	91,2	12,2	87,8	11	89
Sexual violence may be the fault of adolescents, due to the way they dress and behave.	13,6	86,4	14,3	85,7	16,0	84,0	13,6	86,4



As a parent or caregiver it is my responsibility to set limits on the physical contact that family members have with my child/children or the child/children I care for.	94,2	5,8	95,2	4,8	94,4	5,6	90,3	9,7
I believe that the cases of sexual violence that occur in the family are few, so it is not necessary for my child/children or the child/children I care for to learn how to prevent it.	13,6	86,4	10,2	89,8	13,6	86,4	15,6	84,4
If I report a case of child sexual violence within the family to the authorities, I am sure that the child will be protected.	32,3	67,7	29,9	70,1	33,3	66,7	33,8	66,2
If any of my child/children or the child/children I care for were a victim of sexual violence by a member of my family, I would be willing to report it.	94,8	5,2	94,6	5,4	93,0	7,0	93,5	6,5
Child sexual violence within the family is a problem that is being adequately addressed in Bolivia.	13,6	86,4	15,0	85,0	14,6	85,4	13,6	86,4
Note: AR= Agree; DIS= Disagree.								

### 3.4 Communication practices for prevention

According to the reported communication practices of mothers, fathers, and caregivers, a significant portion of the sample (81.1%) engaged in discussions with the children and adolescents in their care regarding some of the 12 practices aimed at preventing sexual violence against children and adolescents, as consulted in the survey. The most prevalent practice discussed was related to intimate parts (94.8%), which involved warning children and adolescents about inappropriate touch (98.1%), as well as informing them about the importance of disclosing any instances of such touch to a trusted adult (95.5%). However, it is notable that these discussions were less frequent among caregivers of children aged 0 to 5 years, a group particularly vulnerable to assault according to the research.

Additionally, communication regarding setting limits and warnings for children and adolescents was common, with the most prevalent practices including prohibiting contact with strangers or accepting gifts from them (93.5%), advising against going out with adults without parental permission (91.6%), and cautioning against meeting people contacted through the Internet (85.1%).

Direct communication about intrafamilial sexual violence was also prevalent, with 92.9% of participants discussing the importance of disclosing such violence if experienced. Furthermore, there was an acknowledgment of the risk posed by even family members perpetrating sexual aggression against children and adolescents (80.3%), with this discussion being more prevalent among caregivers of adolescents (86.4%). Similarly, 89.6% of the sample engaged in dialogue about establishing limits on physical contact with family members, with such conversations being particularly common among caregivers of children aged 0 to 5 years (71.1%).

Interestingly, a substantial portion of respondents (68.3%) stated that they did not "blame" infants in the event of sexual violence incidents, while only 25% held this view regarding adolescents. This discrepancy suggests possible biases in attributing responsibility to adolescents in instances of sexual violence.

Despite the evident willingness of parents to engage in conversations about private parts with their children, there remains a stigma associated with such discussions. This is evident in the least frequent practice, where only 40.1% of participants provided books or other materials to facilitate learning about sexuality and associated preventive measures. This practice, particularly limited among caregivers of adolescents (10.7%), may hinder the acquisition and active learning of information by children and adolescents, potentially impeding their ability to understand and prevent sexual violence.

Table 11. Preventive communication practices

	General		In charge of children in early childhood		In charge of children of school age		In charge of teenagers	
	N=309		N=147		N=213		N=154	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that their private parts cannot be touched by others or family members.	98,1	1,9	97,2	2,8	95,1	4,9	94,3	5,7
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that if someone touches their private parts and asks them to keep it a secret, they should not obey and should tell a trusted adult.	95,5	4,5	98,1	1,9	98,4	1,6	98,6	1,4
I talked to my child/children or the child/children I care for about their private parts.	94,8	5,2	89,6	10,4	89,6	10,4	94,3	5,7
I talked to the child/ren I care for about not accepting gifts from strangers unless they have permission from their mother or father.	93,5	6,5	91,5	8,5	92,9	7,1	95,0	5,0
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that if they experience sexual violence they should tell a trusted adult.	92,9	7,1	88,7	11,3	92,3	7,7	93,6	6,4
I talked to the child/ren I care for about not going out with other adults, even familiar adults, unless they have permission from their parents.	91,6	8,4	88,7	1,3	95,6	4,4	95,0	5,0
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that, if someone insists on seeing their private parts, they should refuse and leave no matter who the other person is.	90,3	9,7	32,1	67,9	37,4	62,6	46,4	63,6
I set limits with family members or other adults about physical contact with my child/children or the child/children I care for.	89,6	10,4	71,7	28,3	86,8	13,2	97,9	2,1
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for to not to meet people they meet online.	85,1	14,9	95,3	4,7	95,6	4,4	96,4	3,6
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that even acquaintances or family members can sexually violate them.	80,3	19,7	76,4	23,6	79,7	20,3	86,4	13,6
I told my child/children or the child/children I care for that in the event that they suffer sexual violence, there is nothing wrong with them.	68,3	31,7	63,2	36,8	67,6	32,4	25,0	75,0
I have provided access to books or audiovisual material to my child/children or the child/children I care for about sexuality to prevent sexual violence.	40,1	59,9	95,3	4,7	89,0	11,0	,7	89,3

Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers, and caregivers.

### 3.5 Reasons not to talk about CSV

Among the subset of mothers, fathers, and caregivers who indicated that they did not communicate with children and adolescents (18.9%) about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), reasons for this omission were explored. The primary reason cited was the belief that children and adolescents are too young to understand sexual violence, with 61.1% of participants expressing this viewpoint. Interestingly, while it might be expected that caregivers of children in early childhood would find it challenging to broach the subject of SGBV due to its sensitive nature, the data revealed that caregivers of school-age children (10 to 12 years old) were more likely to cite this reason as an impediment (45.2%).

Another significant barrier identified was a lack of knowledge on how to discuss CSV, with 33.3% of respondents expressing uncertainty in this regard. This challenge was particularly pronounced among caregivers of adolescents between 12 and 18 years old, with 71.4% indicating this reason. Moreover, participants highlighted the difficulty of communicating about CSV and finding appropriate ways to broach the topic, with 15.3% citing this as a barrier. This difficulty was especially prominent during the school-age years (22.6%) and with adolescents (21.4%).

Furthermore, a notable proportion of participants (12.5%) felt that they lacked sufficient knowledge about CSV, while 19.4% admitted to not considering discussing it with their children and adolescents. Though these percentages do not constitute the majority of the sample, they still represent a considerable portion, exceeding one-third of those who do not engage in discussions with their children.

However, it is encouraging to observe that fear or embarrassment about discussing the topic were less prevalent reasons, with responses in this category comprising less than 6%. This suggests a level of openness among mothers, fathers, and caregivers towards acquiring and transmitting sexual information and knowledge about CSV, providing a promising foundation for future efforts to address the issue.

**Table 12. Reasons for not talking to children and adolescents about CSVs**

	General sample		In charge of children in early childhood		In charge of children of school age		In charge of teenagers	
	(N=72)		(N=41)		(N=31)		(N=14)	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
They are too young to understand about sexual violence.	61,1	38,9	82,9	17,1	45,2	54,8	14,3	85,7
I don't know how to explain sexual violence to the child/children I care for.	33,3	66,7	19,5	80,5	45,2	54,8	71,4	28,6
It has not occurred to me to talk about sexual violence with the child/children in my care.	19,4	80,6	7,3	92,7	16,1	83,9	64,3	35,7
I find it too difficult to talk about sexual violence	15,3	84,7	9,8	90,2	22,6	77,4	21,4	78,6
I have not been able to find materials to help me talk to the child/children I care for about sexual violence.	12,5	87,5	7,3	92,7	25,8	74,2	14,3	85,7
I don't know enough about sexual violence	12,5	87,5	9,8	90,2	19,4	80,6	28,6	71,4

The subject could frighten the child/children I care for.	5,6	94,4	4,9	95,1	3,2	96,8	7,1	92,9
I am ashamed to talk about sexual violence with the child/children I care for.	2,8	97,2	2,4	97,6	6,5	93,5	,0	100
The child/children I care for do not seem to be interested in the subject.	2,8	97,2	2,4	97,6	3,2	96,8	7,1	92,9
The subject of sexual violence is too painful for me to discuss with the child/children I care for for personal reasons.	5,6	97,2	2,4	97,6	6,5	100	14,3	185,7
The child/children I care for are not at risk of sexual violence.	1,4	98,6	,0	100	3,2	96,8	,0	100
The children I care for are not at risk of sexual violence.	1,4	98,6	,0	100	3,2	96,8	,0	100
Talking about sexual violence is against my religion.	,0	100	,0	100	,0	100	,0	100

Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

### 3.6 Differences in practices according to the type of actor and gender

When examining the relationship between the composite variable of practices and the type of actor, statistically significant differences were identified ( $p < .000$ ). The results are as follows:

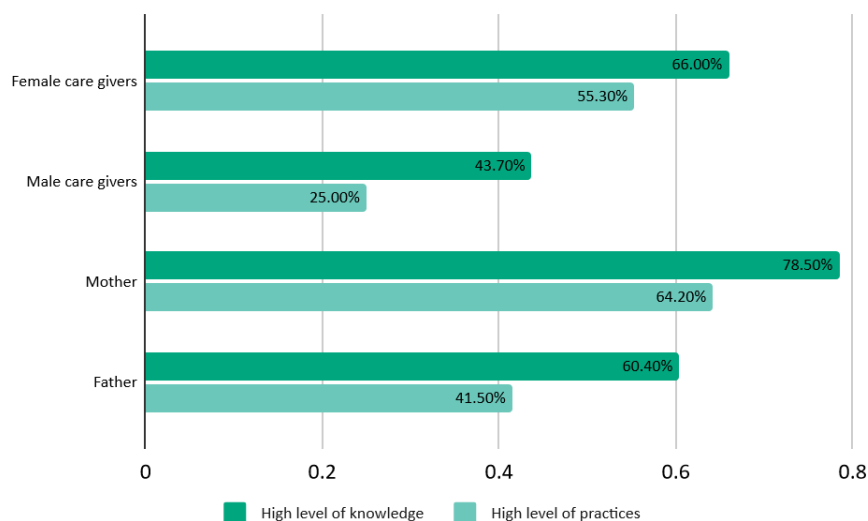
Among parents who participated in the survey, it was observed that 60.4% demonstrated a high level of knowledge about child sexual violence (CSV); however, only 41.5% of them exhibited a high level of practice in preventing CSV. Despite the high levels of knowledge, some factors still hinder father's communication about this issue.

In contrast, among mothers, a significantly higher proportion (78.5%) demonstrated a high level of knowledge about CSV, and 64.2% of them engaged in a high number of communication practices to prevent CSV. These differences suggest that mothers take on a greater responsibility in educating about child sexual violence prevention, as they tend to possess better knowledge and engage in more preventive practices.

Turning to caregivers, 43.7% of men in this role had a high level of knowledge about CSV, while only 25% reported engaging in a high number of preventive practices. In comparison, among female caregivers, a higher percentage (66%) demonstrated a high level of knowledge, and a significant proportion (55.3%) engaged in a high number of preventive practices by communicating with children and adolescents to prevent CSV.

In summary, it was found that 62.8% of mothers and caregivers demonstrated a high number of preventive practices. Female participants, in particular, were more likely to engage in a high number of preventive practices, suggesting their active involvement in preventing child sexual violence through communication and education. and talk more frequently and significantly about the prevention of CSV in contrast to 62.3% of men (parents and caregivers) who have this practice ( $p < .000$ ).

Figure 7. Differences between the level of knowledge and practices according to the type of stakeholder.



Source: Own elaboration based on survey of mothers, fathers and caregivers.

### 3.7 Relationship between knowledge, attitudes and practices

Significant differences ( $p < 0.000$ ) were identified between the level of knowledge and practices; 64.9% of people with high knowledge also have a high number of preventive communication practices, compared to 85% of people with low knowledge. In the case of attitudes, it was identified that 62.9% of people who have a greater number of favorable attitudes toward CSV prevention also have a high amount of communication practices about CSV's, opposed to 57.2% of people with unfavorable attitudes toward CSV prevention. These differences, although indicative of the behavior of the variables, do not suggest significant differences ( $p > .05$ ).

In order to identify the relationship of the composite items and due to the sample distribution, a Spearman's Rho bivariate correlational analysis was performed for nonparametric tests. The analysis showed a positive and significant relationship between practices and knowledge; therefore, as knowledge increases so does the probability to communicate about the prevention of CSV ( $r = .164$ ;  $p < .01$ ). On the attitude side, a weak relationship was identified for practices; although it is positive, it is not a significant relationship, so we can not affirm that when attitudes are more favorable behaviors increase ( $r = .074$ ;  $p > .01$ ).

## 4. Discussion

This study focused on examining the knowledge, attitudes, and preventive practices related to child sexual violence among mothers, fathers, and caregivers of children and adolescents in Bolivia. Based on the sample obtained, we present the main results obtained from a highly educated sample that, in turn, subscribes to the information channels of NGOs that promote the care and protection of the rights of children and adolescents. This information is important because it allows us to understand sample answers based on their knowledge.

Participants demonstrate favorable attitudes towards the prevention of CSV through the transmission of information on CSV and sexuality, both at home and at school. A result that is striking for the Bolivian context, since in 2022, for example, different platforms of mothers, fathers, and educators demonstrated a profound rejection of the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education as part of the school curriculum in Bolivia (Los Tiempos, 2023); since the topic is still a taboo built around misconceptions associated with promiscuity; in addition to the shame involved in talking about sexuality. These factors



not only affect school education but also prevent the discussion of CSV and sexuality within the family (Coordinadora de la Mujer, 2023).

The results also highlight a concern among mothers, fathers, and caregivers regarding how to manage the dosage of sexual and preventive information according to the age of their children, aiming to prevent them from acquiring excessive knowledge about sexuality. Discussions about sexuality often arise when children come home with questions or when parents perceive that their children have gained some knowledge on the topic from sources such as television, friends, or the internet (Stone et al., 2017).

This finding presents a significant challenge for decision-makers and organizations working on the issue, as it underscores the importance of understanding parents' concerns to develop strategies that promote communication about child sexual violence (CSV) within the home, tailored to the age of the children. To achieve this, training programs must be clear and designed for the target population using accessible language. Establishing a connecting channel between communication in schools and within families can facilitate the acquisition and transmission of information, enabling parents to become adept at addressing their children's inquiries. Moreover, efforts should be made to systematically debunk taboos among parents about the consequences of providing information, particularly in contrast to the potential overexposure to information that children and adolescents may encounter through digital channels.

Regarding the knowledge demonstrated by the sample, it is noteworthy that most participants recognized that the primary aggressors against children and adolescents may belong to the family. Specifically, step-parents and parents were identified as aggressors, followed by other family members. These findings align with theories suggesting an association between these figures and higher prevalence rates of CSV. Additionally, these perceptions are consistent with those of adolescents in Bolivia, who also identify fathers and stepfathers as perpetrators of sexual violence within the family environment.

While more than half of the sample acknowledged that women can also perpetrate sexual violence against children and adolescents, mothers and stepmothers were less frequently mentioned as potential aggressors. Previous studies have indeed shown a lower prevalence of female perpetrators; however, it is essential to acknowledge the possibility of female aggression, especially among family members. This recognition is crucial, particularly concerning male victims who may be victimized by individuals of any gender. Additionally, there is an urgent need to recognize siblings as potential aggressors, as growing evidence suggests a significant rate of sexual aggression perpetrated within this group.

The qualitative study conducted as part of this report identified that assaults, as recounted in testimonies, were often perpetrated by a sibling or cousin, individuals who are typically not perceived as potential aggressors. Consequently, protective actions are often not taken when children and adolescents interact with their cousins, let alone their siblings. While the sample predominantly identified family members as potential aggressors, over half of the participants also identified external individuals, such as family friends, teachers, neighbors, or strangers, as perpetrators of sexual aggression. This underscores the need for mothers, fathers, and caregivers to strengthen their perception of the risks children and adolescents face within the family environment. By solely attributing aggression and danger to external sources, warning signs within the family may be overlooked. Proximity and consanguinity can facilitate the persistence of incestuous abuse over time, often leading victims to remain silent (Said et al., 2019).

Moreover, recognition of the signs of sexual violence is crucial. Only half of the sample recognized that sexual violence doesn't always leave physical marks, such as bruises. This highlights the urgent need to enhance awareness and understanding of the less overt signs of sexual violence. The prevalent misconception that intrafamilial sexual violence always leaves visible physical evidence contributes to the underestimation and underreporting of cases, misinterpretation of warning behaviors, and perpetuation of abusive situations. Caregivers must comprehend that signs of sexual violence can also include behavioral changes, such as questioning rules or expressing discomfort around certain individuals or family members (Margrete et al., 2013).

In terms of communication practices, almost all participants reported taking actions to discuss child sexual violence (CSV). However, the age of the child significantly influences the number of communication

practices undertaken by mothers, fathers, and caregivers. Providing educational materials accessible to children and adolescents remains an uncommon practice, making it challenging for them to construct and internalize preventive information. Furthermore, a quarter of the sample expressed uncertainty about how to explain CSV, acknowledging the difficulty of discussing such a sensitive topic and lacking available materials to assist them. These concerns align with previous studies indicating parental discomfort and societal stigma surrounding discussions about sexuality and child sexual violence (Prikhidko et al., 2020; Livingston et al., 2020).

Despite high scores in perceived knowledge levels, the sample appears to lack confidence in their ability to effectively communicate this knowledge to their children and adolescents. Additionally, perceived effectiveness in discussing CSV with children and the perceived adequacy of their knowledge significantly influence the frequency of communication about CSV within the home (Rudolph et al., 2018; Navaeial et al., 2018). Strengthening these factors is essential to promote more frequent and effective communication about CSV within families.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed two prevalent themes regarding mothers, fathers, and caregivers' conceptions of sexual violence. Firstly, there was a tendency to associate adolescence with sexual violence, despite adolescents being a population highly vulnerable to such violence. Additionally, some respondents attributed blame to adolescents for incidents of SGBV, and there was a notable lack of discussion about cases where adolescents are not assumed to be at fault for experiencing assault. Addressing these misconceptions is crucial to fostering a more accurate understanding of SGBV dynamics and supporting effective prevention efforts.

The observations regarding conceptions and attributions of responsibility regarding sexual violence highlight the significant harm caused by such beliefs. Adolescents, particularly preadolescents, who are victims of SV often delay disclosing the events due to feelings of shame and fear, compounded by the complexities associated with their developmental stage (Kellogg et al., 2020). The burden of guilt is particularly acute for adolescent girls, especially in cases of recurrent assaults, as they may feel pressured to take action to stop the violence, further exacerbating their trauma (Theimer et al., 2017).

Another important theme identified is the influence of gender on prevention and protection practices. The findings indicate variations in communication practices between female participants, primarily mothers and caregivers, and male participants. Similar studies have also shown that women, particularly mothers, play a crucial role in initiating conversations about CSV with children and adolescents (Guo et al., 2019). The significance of women's roles, particularly mothers, is underscored by the implementation of specific preventive programs targeting schoolgirls, which have resulted in significant improvements in knowledge when mothers are involved in delivering the information (Khoori et al., 2020).

The gender disparity in caregiving responsibilities, with mothers often bearing the brunt of these duties, not only impacts prevention efforts but also influences societal perceptions of responsibility in cases of sexual aggression against children and adolescents. Mothers frequently face blame and shame from society, and they often internalize this blame, questioning their own abilities and feeling ashamed for not having recognized signs of sexual aggression against their children (Serin, 2018). Furthermore, societal constructions of motherhood tend to absolve fathers of responsibility, even in cases where they may be absent, uninvolved in caregiving, or perpetrators of incestuous abuse (Azzopardi, 2020).

These findings underscore the urgent need to encourage fathers to become more actively involved in conversations about CSV with their children to foster the creation of safe environments. Protection should be viewed as a shared responsibility that extends beyond mothers alone. Preventive education should not solely focus on physical aspects but should also address emotional and cognitive dimensions. Children need to learn about attachment, boundaries, security, and care within trusting relationships (Cacciatore et al., 2019). Moreover, prevention efforts should shift the focus away from children and adolescents themselves and towards the spaces and individuals responsible for caring for and protecting them from CSV. Recognizing that CSV is a complex issue often involving power dynamics and manipulation within family structures is essential for developing effective prevention strategies (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2018).

## 5. Limitations

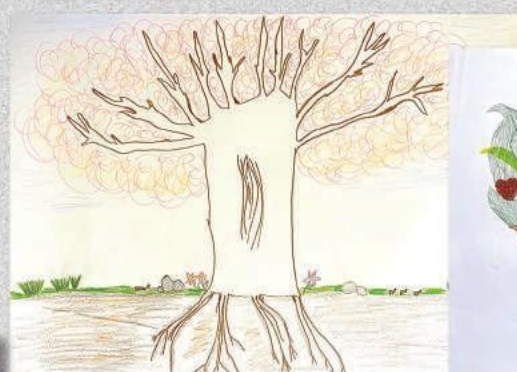
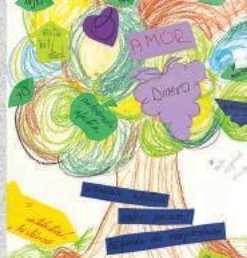
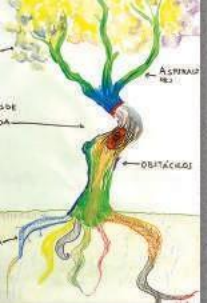
The challenges encountered in obtaining a representative sample of Bolivian mothers, fathers, and caregivers highlight important considerations for future research endeavors. The decision to conduct an online survey, while aiming for national representation, inadvertently limited participation to individuals with consistent internet access, potentially excluding segments of the population with limited connectivity. Additionally, the sensitive nature of the topic, coupled with societal stigma, may have influenced respondents' willingness to participate and provide honest answers, leading to potential biases in the data collected.

Moving forward, it is recommended that future research employ a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to child sexual violence (CSV). Qualitative methods can provide valuable insights into the reasons behind caregivers' behaviors and attitudes, offering a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face in addressing CSV within their families. By delving into the lived experiences and perspectives of caregivers, researchers can better identify barriers to communication and develop more effective interventions tailored to the needs of the population.

Moreover, researchers should remain mindful of the limitations inherent in self-report surveys, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as CSV. Strategies to mitigate social desirability bias, such as ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, should be implemented to encourage respondents to provide authentic responses that accurately reflect their experiences and practices. Additionally, efforts to increase accessibility and inclusivity in data collection methods, such as utilizing community-based approaches or incorporating offline modes of participation, can help overcome barriers to participation and ensure a more diverse and representative sample.

Overall, addressing the limitations encountered in this study and adopting a comprehensive and inclusive research approach will be crucial in advancing our understanding of CSV and developing effective strategies for prevention and intervention in Bolivia and beyond.









## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was to analyze the factors contributing to the perpetuation of incest and the maintenance of secrecy surrounding it among children and adolescents in Bolivia. Two distinct studies were conducted to achieve this goal: the first aimed to explore the family dynamics enabling secrecy and perpetuating abusive incestuous relationships, while the second sought to identify the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of mothers, fathers, and caregivers regarding the prevention of sexual violence, including intrafamilial incest. Although each study had unique objectives, they complemented one another, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. By collaborating, these studies aim to inform interventions by institutions and organizations involved in addressing incest, emphasizing the perspectives of survivors. The overarching aim is to catalyze effective changes that challenge the social taboo surrounding incest and pave the way for access to justice for victims and survivors.

In the following sections, we will first present the findings from the study on the life histories of incest survivors. Subsequently, we will delve into the results of the survey examining the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of mothers, fathers, and caregivers regarding the prevention of intrafamily sexual violence. Finally, we will analyze points of complementarity and divergence between the two studies, synthesizing the evidence to generate recommendations for action.

#### **Chapter Conclusions: Navigating Family Dynamics after Incest-Exploring Intertwined Secrets**

The primary objective of the first study was to delve into the experiences of survivors to uncover the family dynamics fostering secrecy and inhibiting the disclosure of incest. The findings unveiled recurrent patterns in family dynamics that intertwine and reinforce each other.

Firstly, the research highlighted that incest is not an isolated incident but rather a recurring pattern spanning multiple generations. Many of the survivors' mothers, who were also victims during their childhoods, faced similar feelings of helplessness as their daughters later did. These patterns persisted across generations, from grandmothers to mothers to daughters, particularly in terms of reactions to discovering the truth about incest.

Secondly, the study revealed that incest is a systematic practice perpetuated within patriarchal structures, where power imbalances within the family contribute to its establishment and the maintenance of secrecy. The dominance exerted by the aggressor extends not only over the victim but the entire family, often through manipulation, fear, or the elevation of the aggressor's authority.

Thirdly, the coexistence of multiple forms of violence among family members—physical, psychological, and sexual—was evident. Survivors often experienced a continuum of violence, leading to scenarios of polyvictimization where various forms of violence reinforced or enabled incest.

Fourthly, blurred boundaries within intrafamily relationships emerged as a significant factor. Family boundaries, crucial for establishing expectations and roles, became distorted in the presence of a sexual aggressor. This lack of clear boundaries, coupled with the exposure to inappropriate sexual behaviours within the family, contributed to the confusion experienced by incest victims, especially children.



Lastly, the study highlighted communication dynamics within families maintaining incest secrecy. These families often imposed taboos on communication, prohibiting the frank expression of emotions and showing limited interest in members' feelings. This communication barrier hindered the identification of emotional changes in victims and impeded the exploration of underlying causes of distress, contributing to the maintenance of secrecy.

These dynamics create a complex web of relationships characterised by undisclosed edges and unclear dynamics, making them difficult to articulate. The secrecy surrounding incest is rooted in the ineffable and indescribable nature of the experience, reinforced by fear, shame, and guilt. However, the few victims whom their families protected upon disclosure were those who confronted shame, guilt, and fear head-on, prioritising the safety of their daughters. In contrast, fear, shame, and guilt often operate as silencing forces across social and legal systems, with incest often overlooked or treated as a minor detail within legislation on child sexual violence.

### **Conclusions on the study: Talking to protect - Exploring knowledge, attitudes and practices of fathers, mothers and caregivers for the prevention of intrafamilial sexual violence**

The second study aimed to identify the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of mothers, fathers, and caregivers regarding the prevention of child sexual violence (CSV) in Bolivia, as well as to identify the main obstacles and challenges in this regard. The survey results shed light on the dynamics of safeguarding against CSV within Bolivian households.

Firstly, the findings highlighted a high level of knowledge among participants and their willingness to receive further information to deepen their understanding of the issue. Participants recognized the importance of transmitting information about this type of violence both at home and in schools.

Secondly, a significant concern shared by parents and caregivers was the uncertainty about how and when to appropriately share preventive sexual information based on the age and developmental stage of their children. Despite nearly all participants affirming that they undertake preventive actions, children under five years old were found to receive the most minor preventive guidance due to these uncertainties.

Thirdly, despite a general acknowledgement that perpetrators of CSV may belong to the family unit, over half of the sample identified external individuals as the most likely perpetrators. This lack of clarity in identifying potential perpetrators within the family environment poses a risk factor that could impede the implementation of effective prevention and protection strategies. Close individuals may not receive the same attention and preventive vigilance, potentially resulting in neglect of potential risk situations within the family environment.

Another risk factor identified was the misconception that CSV inevitably leaves physical marks. Despite the participants being well-informed, erroneous beliefs such as this were evident, which may downplay the significance of subtle signs presented by victims of CSV.

A concerning fallacy was also observed regarding the erroneous perception that adolescents may bear partial responsibility for CSV. Some parents and caregivers attributed blame to adolescents themselves based on behaviours and clothing choices, further complicating efforts to address incest and CSV.

Finally, the study revealed a notable gender disparity between mothers and fathers in preventive practices. While there were no differences in the level of knowledge about CSV prevention between men and women in the sample, significant differences were observed in implementing preventive practices, with women exhibiting a more significant number of practices and playing a more active role in preventive strategies than men. This disparity underscores the importance of addressing entrenched gender roles and promoting active and collaborative participation of both genders in incest prevention efforts.

### **Overall conclusions: integrating both studies**

The first conclusion highlights the vulnerability of children under five years of age and school-age children to incest, with 54% of cases occurring in early childhood and 37% in school-age children. However, preventive measures for these age groups are lacking, with parents expressing concerns

that providing preventive information may expose children to inappropriate knowledge about sexuality. This gap in prevention efforts leaves children at risk of encountering abusive situations without adequate safeguards.

The second conclusion addresses the misconception that teaching children self-protection methods will prevent incest. Survivors' stories reveal that despite receiving guidance on self-protection, they often could not prevent incestuous abuse. Instead of empowering survivors, the emphasis on self-protection can instil a sense of guilt, leading them to believe they could have avoided the abuse. It is essential to shift the blame from survivors to perpetrators, recognizing them as solely responsible for child sexual violence.

The third crucial conclusion highlights a significant disparity between the declared intentions of parents and caregivers to prevent incest and their actual responses when confronted with abuse. While quantitative research indicates knowledge, favourable attitudes, and preventive actions among parents, qualitative findings reveal widespread inaction when children disclose abuse. This discrepancy can be understood through the lens of complexity theory, which acknowledges the interconnected and dynamic nature of family responses. Guilt, shame, and fear experienced by survivors become collective burdens for families, often leading them to act contrary to their stated intentions out of a desire to preserve family integrity.

Overall, integrating findings from both studies emphasizes the need for comprehensive approaches to address incest against children and adolescents in Bolivia. It requires understanding the complex family dynamics and acknowledging collective responsibility for prevention and protection.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are oriented toward three specific groups: families, civil society organizations that work on behalf of victims who have experienced this type of violence, and the State. We intentionally left out the recommendations for incest victims, because we understand that there is nothing they could have done to avoid what happened to them, regardless of their level of knowledge about "self-protection strategies".

### Recommendations at the family level

- It is essential to change the traditional perception of the nature of perpetrators and to recognize that the vast majority are family members. This change in perspective is crucial to effectively address the reality of incest.
- We emphasize the need for parents and caregivers to develop a critical sensitivity to identify subtle behavioral and emotional changes in children, thus consolidating a vital tool for the early prevention of incest. Recognizing that the after-effects go far beyond the physical marks is urgent in order to quickly protect the victims and stop the aggression.
- It is essential to demystify entrenched social imaginaries that idealize the family as a perfect space immune to adverse situations such as incest. Dialogue should be encouraged to dismantle the norms that perpetuate silence and taboo about this and other types of violence.
- Promote co-responsibility between fathers and mothers in the prevention of child abuse, thus breaking with the traditional expectations implanted by gender roles that place the burden of care for "sensitive child-rearing issues" on mothers. This recommendation not only aims to protect children; it challenges the structures that perpetuate gender inequality in addressing family issues.

### At the level of civil society organizations working on behalf of the victims

- A critical review of the preventive strategies implemented in the institutions is recommended, focusing on informative workshops that promote self-protection. Rather, it is suggested that workshops be implemented to promote skills in mothers and fathers to identify possible aggressors and their manipulative behaviors. A prominent example is the Talking About Touching program, whose success has been demonstrated in a variety of contexts, including the development of preventive skills, both in the school environment and at home. This program, exemplified by Manheim (2019), is distinguished by its inclusive approach, empowering both teachers and parents to create a safe and protective environment for children and adolescents. It is also suggested to talk about incest and focus on sexual violence prevention towards this crime in an intentional and specific way.
- The importance of establishing training in all spheres of the child's environment is emphasized. This training should focus on providing tools to identify possible emotional and behavioral changes in children and adolescents, such as early signs of the risk of incest or other types of sexual violence.
- It is recommended that a universal prevention approach be adopted that recognizes incest as a social problem that does not distinguish between socioeconomic strata. The planning and execution of preventive programs should not differentiate socioeconomic status, since vulnerability to this phenomenon transcends these barriers. This perspective, supported by various research studies, challenges the erroneous belief that certain social groups are exempt from facing this type of violence. Equity in prevention is not only ethical but also

essential to effectively address this historically underestimated problem on the public and political agenda.

- Implement a preventive approach that fosters a significant change in the perception of incest, promoting the condemnation of the aggressor instead of the victim. Generate an environment in which incest is strongly censured, challenging and challenging the mental patterns ingrained in society to raise awareness about the seriousness of this form of domestic violence.

### **At the state level**

- The research exposes an alarming reality that reinforces the urgent need for the specific criminalization of incest in Bolivian legislation. The inclusion of this not only fulfills a legal function but also contributes to raising social awareness about the seriousness of incest, breaking attitudes of censorship. Taken together, these findings underscore the need to address the complexity of incest not only from a legal perspective but also from the integral nature of social preventive measures, which go beyond a punitive approach in the norms.
- Disclosure of incest does not follow a pre-established timetable. Disclosure involves not only overcoming internal emotional barriers, such as shame, guilt, and fear of retaliation, but also developing a deep understanding of the nature of the abuse suffered. Consequently, it is urgent to promote the approval and enactment of Bill 118-22 CS, which proposes the imprescriptibility of crimes of sexual violence against children and adolescents. This research supports the understanding that the impact of incest lasts over time, so access to justice and care should not be limited by temporal restrictions.

**For all incest survivors:  
"You are the narrator of your own story and incest is just a page, not the whole book."**

"You know what? It's inevitable to go through the pain that this situation produces... However, you can do very bad things, but you can also do very good things." (Individual interview, August 19, 2023).

"In the drawing of my tree, if you notice, my flowers have borne fruit. I have had important moments where I have blossomed, for example, studying and working with my effort." (Focus group, June 20, 2023).

"I know it's a very complicated and complex process. Even now, it's like you're there and all of a sudden things come to your head, and you say, 'Ah, what is this?' But I've always said that, if I heal myself, it will be easier to help heal other people, those who maybe need it." (Individual interview, August 8, 2023).

"I think that from certain bad things that have happened to me, throughout my life in different aspects, I have managed to extract positive aspects that have been helpful to me. Yes, interesting achievements, right?" (Individual interview, August 17, 2023).

"At that moment I reflected on what we should be taught: that each individual can be free to share, with empathy and tact, their own story. They can say, 'I come from this path and I can share something that maybe other people don't yet dare to express.' I am at the stage in my life where I have healed, which allows me to guide someone else." (Focus group, June 20, 2023). "Well, since 2020 I started with a group that helped me a lot to get into activism, the defense of rights. It opened my eyes to the context in which we live. And with what I suffered, I said, "Oh, my God, that's great. I want to do something..." (Individual interview, September 5, 2023).











## References



## Anexes



## Comic and video



### MARCELA LOSANTOS VELASCO

Dr. Losantos, holds a Ph.D. in Psychology from Vrije Universiteit Brussels. She currently serves as the coordinator of the Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento. Her research focuses on social vulnerability and the rights of children and adolescents, earning her the distinction of Summa Cum Laude in 2015. In 2018, she was honored with the Marie Curie Distinction for her outstanding research career by the National Academy of Sciences. Furthermore, in 2021, she was awarded the title of Researcher of the Year by the Universidad Católica Boliviana "San Pablo."



### JAZMIN MAZÓ TORRICO

Specialist in Systemic Clinical Psychology and Brief Therapies. Since 2023 she is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, where she is conducting research on well-being from a rural perspective with a focus on children.

She is currently working as a researcher at Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento of the UCB with experience in research related to children and adolescents in areas such as: violence, well-being, environment and children's and adolescents' rights.



### MANUELA NARAYANI RIVERA TERÁN

Master's degree in Social Psychology of groups and institutions from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana de México, which awarded her the University Medal of Merit in 2018 for her research on "Violence and Indigenous Political Subjectivity". Since 2020, she has been a doctoral student in the Human Rights programme at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, where she is conducting research on gender-based violence. Since 2023 she joined the research project on intra-familial child sexual violence of the Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento.



### M. FERNANDA GARCIA AGUIRRE

Psychologist and researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias del Comportamiento since 2022, she has participated in research projects related to the socio-environmental rights of children and adolescents. In the last year she focused her work on the issue of sexual and physical violence, exploring both the response of the Bolivian Justice System and the experiences of survivors of related crimes.



