

Knowledge and Myths About Child Sexual Abuse in Mexican Women

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a terrible type of maltreatment that occurs in all countries and social statuses, but due to the shame and taboo that it creates, it is still riddled with myths and false beliefs that make it difficult for the population and the authorities to adequately determine its prevalence. The objective of this work was to explore what Mexican women know about CSA. The participants were Mexican women ($N = 499$) who filled out a questionnaire comprising ten items referring to truths and myths about CSA, indicating their degree of agreement with them on a Likert scale. The results showed that although Mexican women have quite adequate knowledge about CSA, they still hold wrong beliefs about the child's feelings toward the abuser or the child victim becoming an adult abuser. Likewise, differences were found in the myths and truths about CSA held by women under 40 and over 40 years of age.

Keywords

child sexual abuse, childhood, maltreatment, women, myths, knowledge

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Introduction

The existence of myths about a phenomenon hinders society's knowledge and understanding, therefore, the least understood and visible phenomena are surrounded by the most myths (D'Huy, 2016; Ferragut et al., 2022; Goldsmith et al., 2008; Lichtenberg, 2019; Weiser, 2017). Myths are defined as incorrect beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions about a phenomenon, which are widespread among the population (DeMarni & Goldsmith, 2010; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Myths and beliefs about how the world works or the meaning of things have a direct impact not only on our knowledge about them but also on how we relate to the phenomenon. Research has shown that myths are a multidimensional construct that fulfill different functions (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010). Thus, for example, myths created around rape are useful for denying that rape exists, mitigating the rapist's guilt, and blaming or discrediting the victim (Chim, 2019; Cromer & Freyd, 2007, 2009; Hall et al., 1986; Weiser, 2017).

A problem especially surrounded by myths is child sexual abuse (CSA). Sexual abuse is a taboo topic worldwide. Scientific literature has shown for decades that CSA occurs in practically all countries and it is universally silenced (Chen & Chen, 2005; Cromer & Freyd, 2007; Helweg-Larsen & Larsen, 2005; Machia & Lamb, 2009; Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; Pereda et al., 2012; Ramabu, 2020; Rheingold et al., 2007; Sawrikar & Katz, 2017). CSA is a type of maltreatment recognized by the World Health Organization [WHO] (2006, 2016), in which the child is "used" for the sexual pleasure of an adult or a person superior in age, maturity or authority, where the victim does not give consent, or this cannot be given (Berliner, 2000; Cantón-Cortés & Rosario, 2015; Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; Lameiras et al., 2008). The nature of this mistreatment causes suffering and serious psychological consequences for the victim and their family (Campbell et al., 2008; Cantón-Cortés & Rosario, 2015; Chen et al., 2007; Cromer & Freyd, 2007; Horner, 2010; Lameiras et al., 2008).

For society and the victims themselves, CSA implies shame, guilt, taboo, rejection, and fear, which makes it difficult to determine its real prevalence (Madrid et al., 2020; Pereda et al., 2012; Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; UNICEF, 2017; Walsh et al., 2012; Weiss, 2010). This means that research cannot cover the full complexity of the phenomenon, preventing studies from obtaining consistent results (Madrid et al., 2020; Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; Smallbone et al., 2008; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the existing scientific literature estimates that the global prevalence of CSA among women ranges about 20% and around 10% among men (Pereda et al., 2009b; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011), although these data are significantly higher in other studies

(Barth et al., 2013; Pereda et al., 2009a) Thus, for example, the European Council estimates that one in four girls and one in seven boys are victims of CSA.

In Mexico, as in the rest of the world, there is a lack of information about CSA (Frías & Erviti, 2014; Pineda-Lucatero et al., 2008) and a higher prevalence among women than men (Gasman et al., 2006; Quintero-Hernández, 2017). The studies carried out in Mexico have concluded that around 7.9% of women who attend health services have suffered sexual abuse before the age of 15 (Frías & Erviti, 2014; Gasman et al., 2006), with the prevalence among men being 5.07%. These data are in line with most international studies that confirm a higher prevalence of CSA among women than men (Frías & Erviti, 2014; Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b; Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). As in many other countries, there are still difficulties in Mexico to raise awareness and address CSA, potentially due to cultural aspects related to gender roles and the development of sexuality. For example, for men, sexual contact with another men is highly stigmatized and they are expected to be (hetero)sexually active once they start puberty. In contrast, women “should” avoid sexual contact before marriage (Marston, 2001; Marston & Juárez, 2003). These implicit beliefs contribute to obstacles in exposing possible cases of abuse (Frías & Erviti, 2014; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). The results of previous studies find that only 7% of persons who disclose an abusive situation report it to the authorities (Frías & Erviti, 2014), the main reasons for nondisclosure among women being the fear of not being believed and being punished. This fact highlights the existence of a myth about the tendency to blame the victims as having provoked the abusive situation (Frías & Erviti, 2014; Quintero-Hernández, 2017; Weiss, 2010).

Several myths about CSA are widespread cross culturally. One of them states that *if the minor enjoys the sexual situation*, it is not considered abuse, an idea that contradicts the very definition of abuse (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; WHO, 2006). In many societies, such as the Latinos, obedience and submission to adults are encouraged in children. This makes it unlikely for a child to dare to disclose that they are being abused, thus perpetuating the secret (Fontes, 2007; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Münzer et al., 2016; Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001; Weiss, 2010). If they disclose the abuse, they risk not being believed because another widely disseminated myth (especially in the legal context) is that *children tend to invent stories about sexual abuse*. This myth persists despite studies that show the prevalence of false complaints does not exceed 2% (Brown et al., 2001). The myths that *an abused child becomes an abuser* or the stigma of homosexuality also contribute to the maintenance of secrecy (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Leach et al., 2016). Additionally, the ideas that *CSA only happens to girls* (Cromer & Goldsmith,

2010) or that *providing children with information about sexuality can scare them* maintain the attitude of secrecy and taboo around the topic (Chen & Chen, 2005; Ferragut et al., 2022).

Contrary to other phenomena of a sexual nature, such as rape, the myths surrounding CSA have not yet been studied in depth (Ferragut et al., 2022; Rueda et al., 2019). The research carried out by Cromer and Goldsmith (2010) revealed that the media play a very important role in the formation of beliefs, attitudes, and myths. For example, abuse committed by someone outside the family or by a stranger receives much more visibility than abuse committed within the family (despite the latter being much more frequent), thus perpetuating an incorrect stereotype of the abuser and of the act itself. Visibility, knowledge, and the approach to CSA are intrinsically linked to society's beliefs not only about the phenomenon itself but also about sexuality, gender roles, family, childhood, and religiosity (Barnett et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2001; Ferragut et al., 2022; Mortimer et al., 2019; Prina & Schatz-Stevens, 2020; Quintero-Hernández, 2017; Weiser, 2017). For example, a widely held belief or myth is that *the occurrence of CSA is infrequent* (Ferragut et al., 2022; Pereda et al., 2009a, 2009b) or that *it only occurs in disadvantaged contexts or low economic levels* (Echeburúa & Guerricaechevarría, 2000). Deeper discussion of these myths can be found in the study by Ferragut et al. (2022).

Culture seems to be a key factor to consider when analyzing beliefs about CSA. In previous investigations in Latin countries, victims' reluctance to report the abuse or the families' hesitance to take actions once they know, are relations to safeguarding the family's honor and protecting it from being considered a family (especially the mother) that cannot adequately care for its offspring (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Frías & Erviti, 2014). The very nature of the phenomenon, linked to these myths and fear, shame, guilt, and the scarce education that children receive in this matter, makes the visibility and society's knowledge of CSA continue to be inadequate (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010; Goldsmith et al., 2008; Münzer et al., 2016; Weiss, 2010). The silence and misunderstandings about CSA further jeopardize children's safety (Sawrikar & Katz, 2017).

Mexico, after having joined all the international child protection treaties in 2006 (Frías & Erviti, 2014) continues to work on the incorporation of the prevention and treatment of CSA into its political agenda, although the media are increasingly reporting cases (Azaola, 2006). However, it is not enough to expose the existence of the problem, it also requires an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon both by scholars and the general population. With the aim to increase this understanding, the objective of this study was to analyze

the knowledge that Mexican women have about CSA by studying the myths and realities that they harbor about it.

Method

Participants

Participants were 499 Mexican women aged between 19 and 76 years ($M=40.28$, $SD=8.64$). Of this sample, 4% had completed primary studies, 79.6% had university studies, and 16.4% fell in the category of other studies. The percentage of men who answered the questionnaire was not representative, therefore, they could not be included in the analysis.

Instruments

The online questionnaire which included myths and truths about CSA recently developed in Spanish (Ferragut et al., 2022) was used. It comprised ten items regarding knowledge about the prevalence of CSA, characteristics of the victims, and the abusers. Seven items referred to myths, in which lower scores indicated a lesser degree of belief in these myths (and thus, better knowledge about CSA), and three items assessed truths, where higher scores indicated better knowledge. All the items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely disagree*) to 5 (*absolutely agree*). Items can be seen in Table 1. Also, sociodemographic questions about age, gender, educational level, and nationality were included. No name or identifiable information was provided by the participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Procedure

The data were collected through online platforms, obtaining anonymous and voluntary responses with a snowball sampling strategy. Requests for collaboration in the survey were sent through social networks and electronic means such as email. Responses were stored on an online platform, to which only the principal researcher had access. No identifiable information was stored. The aims of the study were informed at the beginning of the survey and no sign in or personal information was requested. The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be over 18 years old and had to answer all of the questions of the survey. This study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University. Number 18-2020-H.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed with the statistical package SPSS. Each of the items was analyzed separately as everyone assessed a different myth. In order to explore the age difference in the beliefs in myths, the sample was divided into different generations according to the classification used by the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019): Generation Z (born since 1997; age 23 or younger; $n=29$), Millennials (born 1981–1996; age 24–39 years; $n=195$), Generation X (born 1965–1980; age 40–55 years; $n=247$), and Boomers (born 1946–1964; age 56–74 years; $n=26$). To homogenize the participants' n in each group, two age groups were created, allowing fair comparisons. On the one hand, the group of participants below 40 years old united the two youngest generations: Generation Z and Millennials (18–39 years; $n=224$). On the other hand, the group above 40 years old, comprised Generation X and Boomers (40–75 years; $n=273$). The percentages of agreements and disagreements on each item and their relationship with the generations were examined using the chi-square test.

Results

Descriptive data (means and standard deviations) of each of the items assessed are shown in Table 1, divided into those referring to myths, where lower scores of agreement indicate better knowledge about CSA; and the three items with truthful information where higher scores of agreement indicate better knowledge.

Concerning the myths assessed, the myth in which the sample presented the lowest agreement was “if the children enjoy the sexual contact, then is not considered an abuse.” However, the myth that received the highest agreement was the false belief that “children who have suffered CSA always hate the adult who has abused them.” Regarding truths, the truth with the highest agreement was about the victim–abuser relationship. Participants had a clear idea that “the person who abuses a child is usually someone close to them.”

Figures 1 and 2 show the agreement (Likert answers 5 and 4), disagreement (Likert answers 1 and 2), and neutral (Likert answer 3) percentages of each item referring to myths and truths, respectively.

In five out of the ten items, participants' scores showed that an important percentage of the sample had adequate knowledge. More than 86% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the following myths: “If the child enjoys the sexual contact, it is not considered abuse,” “Children sometimes make up stories about abuse,” “Abuse victims are always girls,” and “Children should not know much about sexuality or

Table 1. Descriptive Data (Means and Standard Deviations) of the Items for the Entire Sample.

	Items	M (SD)
Myths	<i>Children should not know much about sexuality or abuse because they can get scared (Children’s knowledge)</i>	1.53 (0.95)
	<i>Abuse victims are always girls (Gender)</i>	1.37 (0.89)
	<i>CSA is more common in families with low socioeconomic level (Socioeconomic status)</i>	2.09 (1.22)
	<i>Children sometimes make up stories about abuse (Children’s inventions)</i>	1.40 (0.76)
	<i>If the child enjoys the sexual contact, it is not considered abuse (Children’s enjoyment)</i>	1.21 (0.78)
	<i>Children who have suffered CSA always hate the adult who abused them (Hate abuser)</i>	2.97 (1.41)
	<i>Children who suffer abuse become abusers in adulthood (Future abuser)</i>	2.15 (1.17)
Truths	<i>About 20% of the population have suffered CSA (Prevalence)</i>	3.36 (1.14)
	<i>Abusers do not have to be mentally ill (Abuser’s health)</i>	3.34 (1.62)
	<i>The person who abuses a child is usually someone close to them (Abuser relationship)</i>	4.41 (0.88)

Note. N=499; All items were scored from 1 to 5.

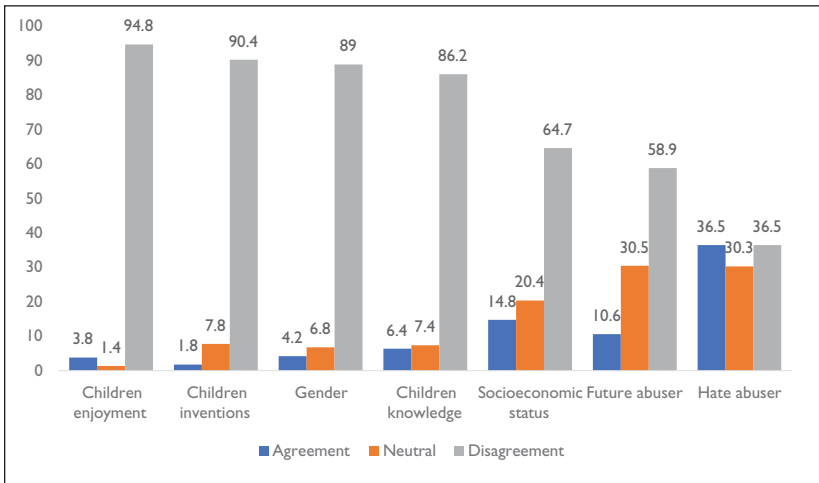


Figure 1. Percentages of agreement, neutral, and disagreement in each item referring to myths.

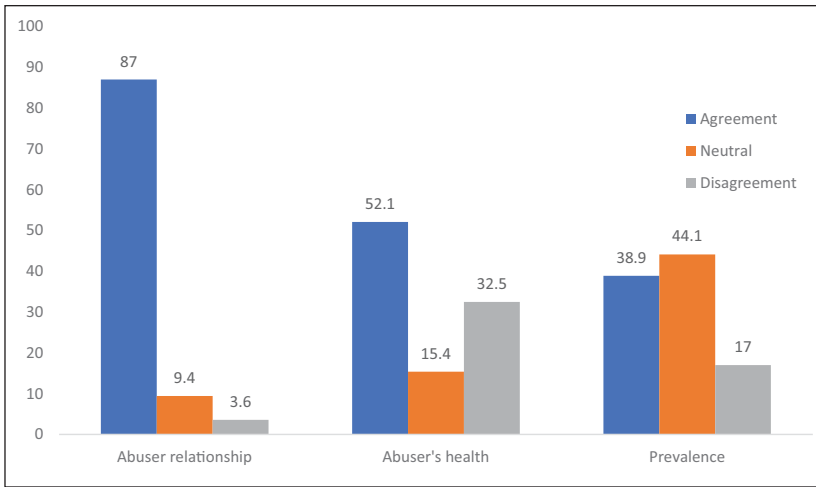


Figure 2. Percentages of agreement, neutral, and disagreement in each item referred to truths.

abuse because they can get scared.” The truth “The person who abuses a child is usually someone close to them” also obtained strong percentage of agreement by the participants.

Nonetheless, some items remained unclear: 20.4% of the participants responded neutrally to the myth “CSA is more common in families with low socioeconomic level,” and 30.5% did not have a clear idea about the myth “Children who suffer abuse become abusers in adulthood”. The item “Children who have suffered CSA always hate the adult who abused them” was the most controversial, with the participants being divided into three almost equal categories. Finally, the item about CSA prevalence also had high variability, indicating a lack of knowledge.

Table 2 presents the statistics for the chi-square test comparing the responses of each item between the two age groups, which was significant. The data showed that two groups of generations were statistically different in the percentages of agreement in three out of the ten items assessed. The youngest participants presented lower percentages both of agreement and disagreement in the myth about the victims’ socioeconomic status, with higher percentages of neutral responses, indicating that this aspect is unclear for them. Participants aged below 40 years disagreed in a higher percentage and agreed in a lower percentage with the myth about the future of the victims as abusers, and the same tendency was found for the truth about the abusers not being mentally ill.

Table 2. Results of the Chi-Square Test for the Items With Significant Differences.

		Generations				χ^2
		N	%	< 40	> 40	
Myths	Socioeconomic status: CSA is more common in families with low socioeconomic level					5.78*
	Agree	73	14.7	12.9%	16.1%	
	Neutral	101	20.3	25%	16.5%	
	Disagree	323	65	62.1%	65%	
	Future abuser: Children who suffer abuse become abusers in adulthood					14.11**
	Agree	53	10.7	7.1%	13.6%	
	Neutral	151	30.4	25%	34.8%	
	Disagree	293	59	67.9%	51.6%	
Truths	Abuser’s health: Abusers do not have to be mentally ill					5.74*
	Agree	259	52.1	47.8%	55.7%	
	Neutral	77	15.5	14.3%	16.5%	
	Disagree	161	32.4	37.9%	27.8%	

Note. *p = .05. **p < .01.

Discussion

To address a problem, it is necessary to know about its existence and understand what it is. Only by understanding the phenomenon can effective intervention strategies be designed. The objective of this work was to explore Mexican women’s degree of knowledge about CSA, through the evaluation of their degree of agreement or disagreement with a series of myths and truths on this subject. The myths and truths found in the scientific literature on CSA were analyzed through ten items (Ferragut et al., 2022), and we concluded that Mexican women have fairly adequate knowledge of the reality of CSA, although some key aspects need to be clarified.

Knowledge about CSA is reflected through the highest percentages of disagreement with the myths and the highest percentages of agreement with the truths presented. Mexican women of our sample did not believe myths such as “if the child enjoys the contact, it is not abuse,” the general idea that “victims are always girls,” or that “children make up stories about abuse”. They also showed general agreement with the reality that “the abuser is usually someone close to the child.” However, some confusion was found regarding some myths and truths about CSA: these women did not have a clear idea of children’s need for knowledge about sexuality; and on another hand, the lack of

knowledge about the socioeconomic level of the families where CSA occurs is especially striking (maintaining the false belief that it is more common in families with a low socioeconomic level). They also showed some degree of belief in two other myths: “*Children who have been abused will become abusers when they become adults*” and “*Children always hate the adult who committed the abuse*,” this being the myth where the participants showed the greatest confusion (with which they agreed the most). As for the truths, Mexican women of our sample did not know much about the prevalence of CSA and the fact that the abuser does not necessarily have a mental illness.

To determine whether knowledge about CSA is influenced by age, differences between the scores obtained on the items by the different generations of these Mexican women were analyzed, dividing them into two groups: under 40 and over 40, following the above-mentioned Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019) classification. Of all the items analyzed, significant differences were only found between these two age groups in two myths and one truth: the false belief that CSA occurs more in families of low socioeconomic status, the false belief that victims will become abusers, and the truth about the mental health of the abuser (who does not have to be mentally ill).

In two of these items, participants over 40 years of age showed more accurate knowledge than those under 40, with higher percentages of disagreement and lower percentages of neutral responses to the socioeconomic level myth, as well as a greater degree of agreement and less disagreement with the truth about the abusers’ mental health. Tentatively, it could be said that the more accurate knowledge shown by the participants over 40 years could be due to their greater awareness and sensitivity to the phenomenon, and more opportunities throughout their lives to have heard and known stories of abuse (Ferragut et al., 2022; Marston, 2005). However, the women under 40 believed less in the myth that abused children will become abusers, apparently feeling being more confident than the older women that victims will break the cycle of abuse.

This study provides results on Mexican women’s knowledge about CSA, which are in line with that previously reported in the Spanish population (Ferragut et al., 2022). Both studies agree that the most present myths concern the socioeconomic level in which CSA occurs, the future of abused children (the belief that they will become abusers), hatred towards the abuser, and the prevalence of abuse. Specifically, the belief that children who have been abused will become abusers seems to have a high prevalence in the Latino culture (Fontes, 2007). This myth seriously contributes to the fear both of victims and society to talk about CSA. The scientific literature supports the fact that CSA can occur in any sociocultural environment, not finding great differences in the prevalence between socio-economic levels

(Echeburúa & Guerricaechevarría, 2000). Fontes and Plummer (2010) described some of the cultural factors that influence disclosure of sexual abuse by the child. Some of these factors are personal and family shame, beliefs about sexuality and virginity, and the taboos that are generated about them, the status of women in this culture, honor, and religious values. It is reasonable for these community values to have a great impact when it comes to exposing CSA, contributing to the maintenance of myths or false beliefs about it. Thus, for example, children who have suffered sexual abuse fear talking about it, even as adults, because they may be labeled as homosexuals or promiscuous girls (Frías & Erviti, 2014).

This study also confirms previous ones (Ferragut et al., 2022) that revealed the lack of knowledge about the prevalence of CSA and the mental health of the abuser. Research has shown that, despite its high prevalence (Walsh et al., 2012), CSA remains poorly understood by the general population. Our study points out the need for further rigorous studies to investigate the prevalence of CSA because it is much higher than the general population believes (Ferragut et al., 2022). The aim, far from creating alarm, is to sensitize the population about the need to protect minors and encourage community involvement. For this purpose, it is necessary to refute the ideas that CSA is limited to low socioeconomic levels or that the abuser is always a person with a mental disorder, because these ideas only hinder the understanding of CSA.

Both the prevalence data available worldwide (Mathews et al., 2016) and the serious consequences of CSA for the physical, psychological, and social development of the victim leave no room for doubt about the urgent need to design programs aimed at adults and children in which they obtain: (a) adequate knowledge of what CSA is; (b) strategies for its prevention; (c) tools for detection; and (d) knowledge that favors an adequate treatment of the victims to promote their recovery and that of their families (Fontes, 2007; Rueda et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2012).

To make it easier for children and adults who are victims of abuse to disclose their abuse (thus allowing them to receive adequate psychological help and favoring a better understanding of the real prevalence of the problem), it is essential to banish myths such as the one stating that children invent stories about abuse or that abused children will become abusers; and to understand the affective ambivalence that children may feel toward the abuser, given that, in 85% of the cases, it is perpetrated by someone close to the child (Fontes, 2007; Frías & Erviti, 2014; Marston, 2005).

The results with Mexican women confirm aspects that were also found in the Spanish population, which supports the idea that improving knowledge about CSA is a global need. Fortunately, easy access to scientific information through new technologies and ways of communication favors the

understanding, visibility, and prevention of problems of all kinds, especially the psychological and social ones. However, it is essential both for the authorities and the general population to generate and have access to such truthful and contrasted information, to avoid the spreading of myths and false beliefs that worsen the problem and continue to stigmatize the victims (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010).

This study contributes to clarifying the knowledge that Mexican women have about CSA, but it has some limitations. The main one is that the sample is comprised exclusively of women with a high educational level. Despite having distributed the questionnaire massively online and that it only took a few minutes to complete, the percentage of men who completed the survey was not enough to be included in the analysis. The low number of responses from men has been found in previous studies, which reinforces that women have a greater awareness of CSA and men a greater taboo or reluctance to deal with CSA (Chen et al., 2007; Ferragut et al., 2022; Tang & Yan, 2004). Another possible explanation for the low response from men is that the invitation to participate did not appeal enough to men. Future studies are needed to examine the obstacles to men participation in CSA studies and effective strategies to overcome those obstacles. It is also possible that gender stereotypes and cultural beliefs about men and CSA (as was discussed earlier in this study) are playing a role, preventing men from feeling comfortable and engaging in this subject. Future studies should take this into account and delve into men's participation in this kind of studies.

Another limitation of this study is that participants were not given information about what CSA is, which may have allowed for subjective interpretations of some of the items, even though the results are consistent with the findings of previous studies (Ferragut et al., 2022). The use of self-report measures is usually considered a limitation of the studies but in this case, we consider it the most appropriate way to ask participants, given the nature of the problem and the need to respect their privacy and anonymity. Nonetheless, using online questionnaires presents some drawbacks, such as the lack of control of the conditions during their completion or the relevance of the platform used for the participants. It should be also considered that maybe this type of questionnaire does not reach population with low socioeconomic status.

In Mexico, great strides are being made on the path to make CSA visible to protect children. That is why clarifying this phenomenon based on pre-existing knowledge is essential to inform society and political authorities in order to design and implement rigorous prevention and intervention programs for this serious type of abuse (Fontes, 2007; Marston, 2005). Our study contributes to improving the design of these prevention policies and programs by identifying the myths and truths that exist in Mexican women about CSA.

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