

# UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

## TIMOR-LESTE

### **A PLACE OF HELP AND HOPE FOR CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE**

Timor-Leste can be a lonely place for children to grow up – large families, a turbulent social environment and a poorly functioning social welfare system all mean that children often struggle to find the support they need. This becomes especially evident in the case of child survivors of abuse, including sexual abuse and exploitation.

Although official statistics are limited, reports of partners at the grass-roots level indicate that sexual abuse is a concern of distressing proportions nationwide, especially amongst young girls. In some cases, poverty in outlying villages causes families to send their daughters as young as 10 years old to larger towns to earn money as prostitutes. The younger the girl, the higher the demand and the price. Many of these girls become pregnant and are sent back to their families to give birth. The newborn is then left in the care of the family or sent to an institution while the girl is forced back to prostitution. Children in situations such as these, without the protection of their families and social networks, are especially vulnerable to further sexual abuse and other forms of violence.

Take the case of 14-year-old Maria (not her real name), who in 2006 was raped so violently by a boy in her class that she was unconscious for two full days. When she finally awoke, it was only the beginning of a long and difficult journey, which began with a two-day walk to the nearest available health centre. Psychosocial and legal support were even more difficult to come by; in fact, the police to whom Maria bravely reported her case accused her of provoking her attacker, and encouraged her to turn to traditional justice systems. Such traditional processes often result in the mediation of the victim's marriage to their rapist or the payment of a small fine by the perpetrator, which never reaches the victims themselves.

Luckily, Maria was able to find the support of a small church group, the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, who has provided her with legal advice and the opportunity to learn new skills and acquire self-confidence in their shelter for survivors of sexual abuse. The 'Centre for Hope', located in a remote subdistrict of Covalima, began as a small safe house responding to the extensive needs of women and children in a culture of violence, vulnerability, exploitation and abuse.

With UNICEF support, the Centre for Hope has been able to expand its operations, upgrade facilities and provide services to more vulnerable young girls. Survivors participate in workshops on everything from sewing, cooking, agriculture and candle-making to legal advice, counselling and improving self-confidence. Awareness-raising activities and advocacy at the community level have also caused a shift in the community's attitude towards these victims; where before they were ostracized due to social prejudices, the girls are now increasingly included, for example in volleyball games, with other young people. Moreover, the centre provides a vital link to referral services such as the newly active Child Protection Officer in the district and the Vulnerable Persons Unit of the police. The centre is also active in raising community awareness of what constitutes violence and abuse of children as well as children's right to protection.

Violent treatment and exploitation of children in Timor-Leste is generally accepted and change of these social norms is the first step towards eradicating the problem. UNICEF Timor-Leste works to protect children like Maria in the short term by supporting community-level organizations such as the Centre for Hope, while also strengthening the protective environment for children in the longer-term future by building the social welfare and justice systems at the national and district levels.

Sadly, Maria is still struggling two years later to push her case through the legal system of Timor-Leste; a situation that highlights the myriad problems that remain for children in this new nation.

Maria's journey is far from over. But unlike many young girls in her position, Maria can look forward to the prospect of a brighter future, thanks to the support of UNICEF and a small church group dedicated to the protection of children.