

## PRESS RELEASE

### Swaziland Completes First National Survey on Violence against Female Children and Youth

#### Study Takes Important Step toward Creating a Nation Safe for Children

**Mbabane, 12 September 2007** - “3 Men Rape 17 Girls”; “HIV+ Father Rapes Child”; “Thousands Tell Stories of Abuse on Hot-line”; “Teachers Abuse 98 Children in Seven Months”.

Pulled from the pages of daily newspapers in Swaziland, these stories serve as a silent alarm about violence against children in the country. But despite the headlines, little research was conducted to investigate the issues behind the problem. Questions about how pervasive the problem is, what makes someone vulnerable to violence, or who perpetrates it, were asked, but never answered. Until now.

Swaziland's first national survey on violence experienced by female children and youth was recently completed. Carried out as a joint effort by UNICEF and the Centers for Disease Control in the United States, and supported by the Swazi Government, and members of civil society, the survey is the first of its kind in the country.

“This is a momentous occasion for children in Swaziland,” said Honourable Deputy Prime Minister Constance Simelane. “It is evidenced by what we see in the media each day that children are under siege in Swaziland. This laudable effort by UNICEF and stakeholders will give us confirmation of what needs to be done to protect children and help us chart a way forward to stop violence against children in our country.”

Speaking at the dissemination meeting of the survey's preliminary results, the Deputy Prime Minister's voice was soft but her words were powerful. She outlined the compelling reasons for a study of this kind.

“Rape figures have risen nearly 50% since 2004, according to the Swaziland Action Group Against Abuse,” said the DPM. “The Royal Swaziland Police Force's Domestic Violence and Child Protection Unit recorded two child abuse offenses each day in 2006. These statistics drive the point home that this issue is serious and must be put on the national agenda.”

The study surveyed girls between the ages of 13 and 24 on topics such as marriage and sexual behavior, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, risk and protective factors, access to services, community support and HIV and AIDS. The purpose of the study was threefold: to describe the magnitude of the problem of violence against children; to identify potential risk and protective factors for violence against children; and to use data to help guide programs and policies to prevent violence against children.

“Violence against children is a global problem. It doesn't spare any nation, rich or poor,” said Dr. Jama Gulaid, country representative for UNICEF Swaziland. “This study provides needed information to guide our response to violence against children in Swaziland. If we understand the problem and its challenges, we can move forward. If we remain in the dark, we make no progress.”

Eight teams of trained female interviewers visited 1,900 households located in all four regions of the country. One eligible female between 13 and 24 years old was randomly chosen to answer the questionnaire. The survey followed both local and international ethical standards for this type of research, ensuring that all interviews were voluntary and done anonymously. Questionnaire answers are confidential and cannot be traced back to the female that gave them. More than 1,200 interviews were completed with a response rate of 95.7%.

“The response rate on this study was excellent,” said Zodwa Mthethwa, chief of monitoring and evaluation for UNICEF and manager of the study in Swaziland. “This can be attributed to the dedication and passion of the interviewing teams. The women were very well trained and didn't give up easily.”

Key questions on the survey focused on physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse.

“Questions were very comprehensive and covered many situations so we were able to get an accurate picture of all forms of violence against girls and young women,” said Mthethwa.

The preliminary findings showed that one out of every three females between the ages of 13 and 24 have experienced some form of sexual violence before they reached 18 years old. The findings also showed that among 13 to 24 year old females who reported ever having sexual intercourse, only four in 10 described that experience as being “willing.” More than 35% described their first sexual experience as being “persuaded”; 2% described their experience as “forced” and 2.5% described their first sexual experience as “rape”.

In addition, the findings showed high levels of sexual violence within the previous 12 months, with one out of every six females between 13 and 17 years old reporting sexual violence within the previous year, and one out of four females 18 to 24 years old reporting the same.

“These results will be important for developing effective interventions and preventions strategies, and to guide future research, as well as policy and programming interventions,” said Mthethwa.

Females were the focus of this study because they are more vulnerable to sexual violence and abuse than males. However, UNICEF hopes to further study the problem of violence against children in Swaziland which will include both genders.

The comprehensive report will be available in October 2007 and will further describe the prevalence of violence against female children and youth and the circumstances that surround these events.

The study comes at an appropriate time in Swaziland, as the nation recently established both the Children's Coordination Unit and the Children' Portfolio Committee to address children's issues in the country. The study findings will help inform members of each organization and allow them to act on behalf of children using evidence gleaned from the study. The Children's Coordination Unit is housed under the DPM's office and will coordinate all interventions and programming for children in the country. The Children's Portfolio Committee is a Parliamentary committee that will advocate for and establish policies to protect children. In addition, the country is awaiting the passing of the draft Sexual Offenses Bill, which addresses violence and abuse against children. Once again, evidence presented by the study findings will help advocate for the passing of the draft bill.