



Break the Silence end child sexual abuse

FACT SHEET: CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual violence is a gross violation of children's rights that occurs in every country in the world.

In 2002, the World Health Organization estimated that globally at least 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years had experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact.¹ In several Caribbean countries, the first sexual experience of young girls is often forced; studies have shown that this was the case for 42.8% of girls below age 12.²

The true magnitude of sexual violence against girls and boys is unknown. Accurate data concerning child sexual abuse is difficult to collect due to differing legal definitions of abuse and issues of underreporting. It is estimated that less than 50% of all sexual assaults on children are reported to the police.³ Although data in reports often varies, the figures are consistently alarming. An extensive study on child sexual abuse in the Caribbean stated that respondents presented a disturbing picture of an escalating social problem.⁴

Sexual violence against girls and boys takes a variety of forms. Child sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to rape, sexual intercourse with a child, incest; it also consists of non-physical contact and non-penetrative activities, such as involving children in watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually explicit ways and exposing them to inappropriate sexual material.⁵

Sexual violence has serious short- and long-term physical, psychological and social consequences on the victims, as well as on their families and the community as a whole. Victims suffer from an increased risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy, psychological distress, stigma, discrimination and difficulties at school.⁶ Their families may experience increased domestic violence and intergenerational abuse.

Child sexual abuse, especially against young girls, has been one of the main factors that contributes to HIV infections, in addition to the spread of HPV and other STIs in the Caribbean. The region has one of the highest incidences of HIV and AIDS worldwide; unprotected sex is one of the primary modes of transmission. Young people account for 420,000 infections in the Caribbean (and Latin America);⁷ it is estimated that 11,000 children under 15 are living with the virus in the Caribbean.⁸

All girls and boys are at risk of sexual violence. Child sexual abuse is a global reality that occurs across all social, economic and age groups and happens in homes, schools, other institutions, and on the streets.⁹ Studies suggest that the abuse of children often begins while the child is below the age of 10 years old and continues for years, well into a child's adolescence.¹⁰ Although most reported victims are girls, especially in single-parent households boys have also shown to be at particular risk, namely between the ages of 5-9 years old.¹¹ In several countries in the region there are serious concerns that sexual abuse against boys is not even recognized; in many Caribbean countries, there is a rise in abuse against boys, in and outside the home.¹²

¹ WHO, 2004.

² Source: Adolescent health survey in nine Caribbean countries, PAHO, 1998.

³ Floric, MaryLee and Matthew Broyles. 2012. *Sexual Abuse*. New York, NY: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc

⁴ Action for Children, UNICEF and University of Huddersfield. Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean. Study carried out: October 2008 to June 2009.

⁵ This definition of child sexual abuse is most commonly used in protection materials.

⁶ UNICEF. Refer to: www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58006.html?p=printme. Numerous reports on child sexual violence address the range long and short-term impacts on children's lives.

⁷ "Children and HIV/AIDS in Latin America and the Caribbean." UN-ECLAC. Number 7, July 2008.

http://www.cepal.org/dds/noticias/desafios/3/33663/Challenges7_Ing.pdf

⁸ Ibid: 2.

⁹ UNICEF. http://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_58006.html?p=printme

¹⁰ Action for Children, UNICEF and University of Huddersfield. Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean. Study carried out: October 2008 to June 2009:232.

¹¹ Caribbean Youth Development: Issues and Policy Directions', The World Bank, Washington D.C., 2003. Available: <http://wbn0018.worldbank.org>

¹² UNICEF. Violence against Children in the Caribbean. Regional assessment. Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children. 2006.



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Most abusers are often known and trusted adults. In a World Health Organization study, 47.6% of young women and 31.9% of young men claimed that their first intercourse was forced or somewhat coerced by family members or persons known to their family.¹³ In the Caribbean, usually the main perpetrators of child sexual abuse are men; it is not restricted to men from one age group or social, professional or educational status.¹⁴

Violence against children remains hidden. Often there is a social tolerance and acceptance of child sexual abuse because of stigma, fear and sometimes lack of trust in authorities. In many cases, the non-abusive parent remains silent and is reluctant to file charges against the perpetrator, because it brings shame to the family household. Surveys covering several countries in the Caribbean have shown a high percentage of the non-abusive partners who turn a “blind eye” when children are sexually abused in their family.¹⁵

There are no innocent bystanders. Violence is often perpetuated by non-abusing adults through their complicity, silence, and denial of not taking appropriate action to protect children.¹⁶

Children often don't tell. Most children are too ashamed or afraid to report incidents and do not disclose abuse to a parent or other adult. If they do confide in someone, it is usually a friend or peer.¹⁷

A wide-range of cultural, social and personal variables contributes to child sexual abuse. In the Caribbean, gender inequality, social norms, patriarchal values, domestic violence, and the economic dependency of women influence the rates of child sexual abuse.¹⁸

UNICEF and partners are working to protect children against child sexual abuse and the risks of HIV. In the Caribbean, efforts are underway to create and strengthen child protection systems– including laws, legal processes, policies, regulations, and reporting mechanisms and the provision of comprehensive services to child victims. UNICEF and partners have also developed advocacy and communication initiatives for awareness raising on child sexual abuse and the implications of HIV for community mobilization to change behaviours, attitudes, norms and practices that are harmful to children.

The Break the Silence Initiative is a multi-pronged approach to protect children against sexual abuse. On the one hand it aims to reach victims and their families with a message to speak out and denounce, to break the stigma and shame that surrounds this issue as a first step to seek help. At the same time, the initiative is an advocacy platform directed at policy makers, health workers and police authorities to create the protection and treatment services needed to support and care for the victims available. First launched in Trinidad and Tobago in 2010 by the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of West Indies, Break the Silence will be rolled-out by UNICEF and partners in several countries and territories across the region.



¹³ WHO. “A Portrait of Adolescent Health in the Caribbean.” 2000. Other studies have shown that 40% of children are abused by parents or step-parents; 25% by relatives; and, 10% by strangers.

¹⁴ Adele Jones and Ena Trotman Jemmott, April 2009. Study of Perceptions of, Attitudes to, and Opinions on Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean. Executive Summary of Findings Interim Report. The study covered 6 countries in the Caribbean.

¹⁵ Ibid:10.

¹⁶ Action for Children, UNICEF and University of Huddersfield. Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean. Study carried out: October 2008 to June 2009:232.

¹⁷ Most recent indicates that children often are too afraid to communicate the abuse to adults.

¹⁸ Action for Children, UNICEF and University of Huddersfield. Child Sexual Abuse in the Eastern Caribbean. Study carried out: October 2008 to June 2009:232.