

Zimbabwe: Street Children Abused in Harare

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Few report cases to police, as they don't expect to be taken seriously.

Cases of sexual abuse of children living on the streets of the Zimbabwean capital Harare are increasing markedly, although there are no readily-available statistics as most cases go unreported. Street kids are being abused by people in our communities, some of whom hold positions of authority.

A quick survey by this reporter showed that these children are being abused on almost a daily basis, but the chances of them reporting cases to the police remain slim because of the situation they are in.

Privilege Moyo (not her real name), 16, is among the children who experience both sexual and verbal abuse on the streets.

"I started living on the streets when I was six years old, and I am being sexually abused by male peers whom I stay with at a Mbare base. We often have unprotected sex. At times it would be consensual but mostly it would be forced. I have never bothered to go and report them, because I fear that they will chase me away from the base," Moyo said.

She said she was impregnated at the age of 15 by one of the boys at Mbare before she transferred to the Five Avenues Girls' Quarter.

"I was not taking any contraceptives and these boys would take turns to rape me. They would bring food for me which they snatch or beg from the street," she added.

The girl said she was unable to obtain her two-month-old baby's birth certificate because the birth records were confiscated by Harare Central Hospital after she failed to pay the hospital fees.

Felix Magumo, 19, who has been living on the streets for the past five years, said he was engaged by the Streets Ahead programme to work as a peer educator since he faced challenges similar to others.

"There are some police officers who always move around the streets during the night and arrest our peer girls for loitering; they solicit for sex in order for them to get released. The courageous ones go to the police station to report [it], but none of their cases have been taken to court, as we are persons of no fixed abode and we are often referred to as liars by those who are supposed to protect us. It pains," said Magumo.

He added that some of the children living on the streets were infected with sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, herpes and warts.

"Some die before they even access medication or even know their status due to financial constraints. And yet people laugh, saying, 'MaStreet kids anofa nechando, ndivoka vakomana veZed.' [street kids die from illicit alcohol and cold]. And no investigations would be carried out, just because we do not have a place to call home or someone to lean on," Magumo said.

Other children living on the streets, who preferred anonymity, said they were sexually abused by soldiers, security guards, and "sugar daddies" – and women too – who came out at night in flashy cars, with cash.

"What you refer to as an abuse can end up being a wrong definition to us, because once we receive such kind of gifts from the abusers we don't report. We need food, money, lotions and nice clothes, so even if they abuse us, we don't report them because they spare our lives when we are in crisis," said Kelvin, aged ten.

Kelvin lives with a friend in a shack made of pieces of cardboard boxes and plastic at the corner of Samora Machael Avenue and Fourth Street.

"I came into the streets when I was only four, after the death of my mother. My stepmother used to beat me and accuse me of stealing. That is why I decided to free myself, and I am enjoying life here. I was never sexually abused although there are some attempts by some of my colleagues," said Kelvin.

Chitiga Mbanje, a health promoter with Streets Ahead, assists these children with health education, medication and behavioural change techniques.

"Children living on the streets face numerous forms of abuse as compared to those in homes. On a monthly basis in Harare alone, we receive 30-35 cases of these children suffering from STIs [sexually transmitted infections], which is a true reflection that they are being abused or indulging in unprotected

sex,” he said.

He urged society to take a closer look at the plight of these children and help to reduce cases of abuse.

According to a study which Lameck Ngulube from the School of Social Work carried out in 2010 on children living on the streets, girls are the most vulnerable once placed in these circumstances.

The study reveals some of the challenges faced by street kids, such as early exposure to sexual activity, high susceptibility to sexually transmitted infections, lack of adequate information on sexual and reproductive health, and harassment by members of the public and law-enforcement agents.

Boys are sodomised and bullied, while girls are at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, which is manifested in the form of exploitation, bullying, unwanted pregnancies, poor access to sanitary items, and complications caused by unsuccessful or incomplete abortions.

Ngulube said efforts should be made to strengthen the family unit as a step towards addressing these challenges.

He also emphasised on the importance of sex education among children living on the streets, to avoid new cases of STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

The study reveals that 80 per cent of females living on the streets are at risk of being raped while only 18 per cent of boys suffer the same fate. It also states that 28 per cent of sexual abuse among boys occurs at home and 62 per cent on the streets, while 70 per cent of the girls abused are on the streets and 30 per cent at home.

Children living on the streets have to grapple with daily challenges just to survive. Streets Ahead is helping them with physiological support, nutrition, peer-to-peer education and family reunification. However, this support remains hampered by the funding availability.

The executive director of Streets Ahead, Mrs Duduzile Moyo, said the mandate was not to provide permanent assistance to the children.

“We do not provide accommodation for these children, for it’s beyond our area of jurisdiction. We offer them short-term assistance like food and medication, and they go back to the streets at the end of the day. Our goal is to reunite them with their families [so] that they can get the best support,” she said.

Moyo said Streets Ahead received reports of children being sexually abused while living on the streets, and offered them medical and legal assistance.

Duduzile urged society to realise the problems facing these children, and to support them by identifying their talents without discrimination or gender bias.

Obtaining adequate information from this vulnerable group remains a challenge. The fact that sexual issues are intimate and sensitive means that most refuse to open up and talk. According to research carried by Safaids, sexual and reproductive health rights education is critical to achieve an HIV-free generation.

The sexual abuse happening on the streets affects not only the children concerned, but the whole community.

“Children living on the streets also sexually abuse children who live in homes on their way from school, so it’s everyone’s responsibility to assist them, especially through removing them from the street corners and reuniting them with their families,” said the report.

Police Chief Superintendent Andrew Phiri admitted that sexual abuse among children on the streets took place, but he said the greatest challenge was that they did not report it.

“Yes, we are receiving several reports of sexual abuse of both minors and adults, but we cannot know whether they are coming from the streets because they don’t want to be identified as persons of no fixed abode. More so, we do not have statistical data which classifies victims of such abuse depending on the places they reside, because we just combine them,” Chief Superintendent Phiri said.

He added that the picture was confusing as some children came out onto the streets to beg during the daytime, and went back home at night, while others lived permanently on the street. He urged them to report cases of abuse to the police.

“As police, we do awareness campaigns pertaining to sexual abuse in all public places including on the streets where these children live. They have the right to report when wronged, but if they don’t, the police officers would not be able to assist them,” he said.

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