



National Association
Of Non-Governmental
Organisations

Hear the voices of survivors of Sexual Exploitation

As we continue to reflect on the theme of the Day of the African Child "Leave no child behind for Africa's development", we need to go a step further and identify the other groups of children that have been left behind. One such group of children are child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation. Article 3 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child on Non-Discrimination states that every child shall be entitled to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms recognised and guaranteed in this Charter irrespective of the child's or his/her parents or legal guardians race, ethnic group, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status. As such no child should be left behind, all children should be given equal opportunities in order to reach their maximum potential in life.

However, a closer look shows that our programming and development work in Zimbabwe has either intentionally or unintentionally left behind child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation. Some of the reasons why this group of children has been left behind include the fact that there has been little research on sexual exploitation of children in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. Research conducted by Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children (ZNCWC) (2016) noted that the magnitude of sexual exploitation of children in Zimbabwe cannot be quantified, though recently the National Aids Council concluded the Size Estimate Study of Sex Workers which stated that there are approximately 160 000 children involved in sexual exploitation. This shows that there is a huge problem needing to be addressed by Zimbabweans. One scholar once said "we worry more about what our children will be tomorrow, forgetting that they are children now". We have to address children's rights now.

The problem of sexual exploitation of children has increasingly become a major global concern. Research has shown that sexually exploited children in southern Africa are highly vulnerable to HIV, as the risks of being young and female in a high prevalence setting merge with those of commercial sex. Sexually exploited children are less able to negotiate safe sex, more likely to have higher risk sexual partners and less likely to use available health services compared to older sex workers. Sexual exploitation of children is prevalent in HIV hot spots (Hot Spot Mapping Study). A ZNCWC study conducted in 2006 titled Young women in commercial sexual exploitation along two transport corridors in Zimbabwe: Causes, initiation prevalence and use of HIV and social services showed that (18% (52) of participants were under 18 years of age while 64% reported that they starting selling sex below the age of 18. These statistics are a cause for concern and bring to mind the words of a scholar who said "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men or women". There is need to protect children from sexual exploitation as it creates significant trauma for child victims and survivors, which may last a lifetime and that represents a critical, under-addressed issue in child rights and public policy.

One way of tackling this problem of sexual exploitation of children is to give a voice to child survivors of sexual exploitation. The Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) Youth Position Paper gives good examples of how to work with children and youths. There is need to make sure that the voices and perspectives of children in sexual exploitation are heard and listened to, ensure that these children actively participate in programme designing and treat them as primary actors who shape, deliver, monitor and evaluate these programmes, in keeping with the principle of active child participation. Child survivors should be treated as agents of change who work alongside other actors to fight this problem at national, regional and global level. Child survivors also need to be treated as advocates who amplify children's voices, participate in key processes affecting them and their communities, claim their rights, influence policy and monitor the SDGs.

End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) International places the victims and survivors of sexual exploitation at the centre of its attention and work. ZNCWC as a member of ECPAT International has also adopted the same approach. As such policies, programmes and advocacy should benefit from improved access to justice by victims of sexual exploitation, greater protection for children at high risk and their active engagement. It has been realised that the voices and perspectives of victims and survivors communicate powerfully. As such consulting with victims and survivors and bringing their perspectives and recommendations into knowledge generation and advocacy should be prioritised. ECPAT International recognises that urgent efforts are needed to support child victims in becoming aware of their rights, ensuring their access to justice, as well as medical, psychological and social support services tailored to their specific needs in terms of recovery and re-integration.

As was indicated by Graca Machel (2014) "We have to change how we do things and make it work for children". Perspectives and voices of child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation should be heard. In an effort to make sure that the voices and perspectives of child victims and survivors are heard in Zimbabwe, ZNCWC with funding from Comic Relief through VSO has partnered with the government of Zimbabwe through the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare under a project titled "Amplifying the voices of people affected by HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe". The project is aimed at identifying and assisting children in sexual exploitation. In 2017 ZNCWC and Ministry of Labour of Social Welfare rescued 54 girls from sexual exploitation and provided them with rehabilitation services and reintegrated them into the community. The girls are now back in school.

The nation needs to give child survivors of sexual exploitation a voice and develop standardised context specific guidelines and model on the identification, removal and re-integration of children in sexual exploitation into their families and communities. These children should be identified as children in difficult circumstances in need of care as stated in the Children's Act. Once identified there should be removal of these children from sexual exploitation and provision of comprehensive rehabilitation services. This should be followed by facilitation of their full reintegration into community and provision of basic services like enrolling them back into school, followed up with provision of social protection or safety nets and livelihoods support. The nation should reflect on the quote by the great Nelson Mandela "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children". This is a call to action for the nation to leave no child behind for Zimbabwe's development and address the problem of sexual exploitation of children so that we are able to create a Zimbabwe fit for all children.

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