

In Zimbabwe, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador calls for more protection of child victims of sexual violence

8 May 2017 – Drawing attention to the harrowing traumas of child victims of sexual violence, a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has called for greater recognition of the fact that it is “not OK” for children to be touched inappropriately as well as for raising awareness among youngsters that under-age sex can lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

“No woman, and most definitely no child, should ever have to experience sexual violence – especially from someone they trust for protection, such as a family member,” [said](#) actress and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Priyanka Chopra, who is currently in Zimbabwe to advocate for increased support for child victims of sexual violence.

“When I met these survivors, young brave women and children, and listened to their experiences, it just broke my heart [...] I will never forget their stories,” she added, recalling her conversation with a 13-year-old girl who was repeatedly raped by her uncle.

According to UNICEF, sexual violence against children is widespread in Zimbabwe and latest available data has showed that close to one in 10 girls aged 15-17 years old has been a victim of forced sexual intercourse or a forced sexual act.

Approximately two-thirds of victims were first abused by an intimate partner and about a tenth of the victims by a stranger.

Most concerning is that in the case of children, most abuse occurred in situations when the child knew and trusted the adult who abused him or her.

Sexual violence against children is also “mostly invisible” and goes largely undocumented, noted UNICEF, stating that fear of “getting into trouble” as well as shame and stigma all contributed to children not reporting the abuse.

Additionally, many victims were too young or too vulnerable to know what happened to them.

In the case of the 13-year-old girl that Ms. Chopra spoke to, with the help of her mother and neighbours, the incident was reported to the police and the uncle who abused her has been arrested, tried, and jailed for 10 years.

The 13-year-old child received supported by the Family Support Trust, an organization supported by UNICEF, that runs a “one stop” child-friendly clinic providing medical and psychosocial support for sexually abused children.

She also attended a peer support group for teens, and received regular home visits from social workers to provide the help and support she needed.

Approaching trauma with compassion and seriousness

While in the country, Ms. Chopra also visited Childline Zimbabwe, a 24-hour service that provides free, confidential, multilingual counselling to children and those under 18 years of age who have been abused, violated or exploited.

“The counsellors, all volunteers, told me that many calls come from children in hysterics because they had been raped or abused,” noted the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador recollecting her visit.

“Without Childline, they would have nowhere to turn. This is a model that many countries with high rates of violence against children can adopt, because it is a safe place for children to turn to and know that their call will be answered by a compassionate person who will take their complaints seriously and respond.”