
**Physical and Sexual Abuse
of
Institutionalized and Street Children:**

Statistics and Recommendations

**Report to the
57th Session of the Committee on the Status of Women**

November 12, 2012

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On behalf of The Fishermen (2011 special consultative status – health/medical initiatives for orphaned children) I wish to draw to the Committee’s attention the issue of physical and sexual abuse of abandoned, orphaned, and street children (for the purpose of CSW57 I will limit my focus to females only). Children of both sexes are at risk for abuse, but the incidence is estimated to be five times more likely for females. According to Battered Women’s Social Services, “Up to 50% of sexual assaults are committed against girls under 16.” Our concern is for the abandoned, orphaned, and street girls ranging from infant to 18 (hereinafter referred to as “children”) whom are at increased risk for abuse due to the lack of family support and protection, and are perceived as easy targets. It is the mission of The Fishermen to be a voice for these children, to raise awareness of their plight, and to assist in providing the tools necessary to assist in the prevention of violence against them.

There are three categories of at-risk children that I will to address in this report:

- Orphan: A child who has lost both parents either through death or abandonment.
- Street: A child residing primarily in the streets of a city without adult supervision or care. He/she may or may not be orphaned.
- Foster: A child without parental support and protection, placed with a person or family to be cared for, usually by local welfare services or by court order.

As reported by UNICEF in 2005, there are as many as 153 million boys and girls around the world who are technically orphaned (having lost one or both parents), of which 13

million are classically orphaned (lost both parents). Eight million live in institutional care. These numbers continue to grow and may reach 400 million by 2015. Studies have found that violence in these residential institutions is six times higher than in foster care, and children are almost four times more likely to experience sexual abuse. In a 2001 report, Human Rights Watch stated that 30% of all severely disabled children living in institutions in the Ukraine died before they reached 18 years of age due to mistreatment and neglect. They are not alone. HRW has also investigated institutions in Kenya, China, Romania, and Russia and uncovered similarly alarming cases of abuse. If their reports are indicative of the plight of orphans world-wide, it can be estimated that at least 20-30% of institutionalized children are being physically and/or sexually assaulted. According to our research, mistreatment is largely due to poor/nonexistent screening of new employees, low to no pay, insufficient training, high stress due to overcrowding and inadequate facilities/services, indifferent management/administration, and ill-defined guidelines on how to handle disciplinary issues.

Street girls may not technically be orphaned, but are at greater risk for abuse and sexual assault since they are unaccountable to anyone and move from shelter to shelter. The exact number of street children is very difficult to measure but is approximately 100 million world-wide. The largest concentrations of street children are found in Latin America, India, and Africa (UNICEF, 2000). It is estimated that 48.5% of street girls in India have been abused. In Africa, the numbers are much higher. It was reported in Rwanda that 95% of girls had been raped, either by street boys or other members of the community. The numbers for Kenya and the Congo are similarly staggering. In

Guatemala, the number of street girls who fled their families due to incest and rape was 64%. Even in a country as affluent as the United States there are an estimated 1.3 million street children, many of whom are victims of violence and abuse.

The final category is children living in foster care. Foster children, unlike orphans, often have surviving parents, but their families can no longer care for them adequately. Their parents may suffer from extreme poverty, debilitating illnesses or be deemed as being “unfit” or “dangerous.” Although these children have been placed in homes they may still have limited contact with their biological parents. Females in foster care programs, though the safest of the three at-risk categories, are still vulnerable to abuse. Although it is difficult to determine the exact percentage of abuse occurring in foster care, several studies conducted in the U.S (Kinship Care Study, 2008), Australia (New South Wales Study, 2008) and U.K (York Outcomes Study, 2005) indicated a wide range of alleged abuse in foster care: 3-37%. The actual numbers of abuse may be much higher as these studies do not examine foster care in high risk regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia.

It must be considered that the above data may be inaccurate and does not reflect the actual extent of abuse amongst institutionalized females and street girls. Aside from highly variable data from international agencies and irregular investigations on issues regarding orphaned and street children, there is the regrettable issue of under-reporting cases of physical and sexual abuse, which is a pandemic problem ranging from orphanages to the aid agencies charged with the task of protecting vulnerable children. In

her paper titled, *No One To Turn To*, Corinna Csaky states that the reason there is insufficient data to substantiate the number of orphans abused by aid workers or NGO volunteers is due to the fact that “Few UN Agencies and NGOs collect detailed information on the abuse of children by their own personnel and fewer make this information public.” If we take unreported cases into consideration, regardless of NGO involvement, the number of abused children would rise substantially. The WHO estimates that each year 40 million male and female children under the age of 15 are victims of family abuse and neglect serious enough to require medical attention. These astounding numbers do not even take into account the cases of abuse occurring within the orphaned, street, and foster child community. Pure speculation of the number of unreported cases of abuse in institutions and foster homes, in addition to the number of abused street children, could increase the WHO’s estimate of 40 million by up to 20 percent, raising the number to 48 million. This is a modest estimate. Even if the number was just one, we should not allow incidents of criminal violence against children to occur when we have the ability to prevent it.

The task of preventing abuse of institutionalized and street children is daunting and there is no perfect or easy solution. However, it is our responsibility to come together and strive to improve their condition. On behalf of The Fishermen, I present the following recommendations for your consideration:

1. Develop and enforce stricter hiring policies and guidelines for UN aid workers and other NGOs which work with the orphan/street girl community. Though it will not eliminate the bulk of possible acts of abuse, it will help reduce the

number of predators seeking access to young women under the guise of humanitarianism.

2. The UN may take a more active role in the prevention of abuse within the orphanage system by implementing a simple and inexpensive routine inspection of institutions utilizing existing local UN resources or participant NGOs. These inspections would be voluntary – government and private orphanages are not obligated to participate – but considering that such inspections may lead to outside assistance from aid agencies they may welcome UN observers.
3. UN aid workers should be trained how to recognize the early clinical signs and symptoms of physical and sexual abuse, how to detect emotional or behavioral aberrations in the children, and receive some basic training in crisis management. We are in the process of creating a handbook entitled *ACT* for the UN and NGO community which will help aid workers, health care professionals, and social workers identify early signs of physical and sexual abuse. The guide is formatted to be user-friendly with several tables, charts and diagrams. Medical and dental descriptions are clearly explained yet kept simple for non-medical aid workers. A sample chapter will be available on our ECOSOC page.

The statistics are staggering and will only grow along with the size and scope of the addressed issues. Though it is beyond our power to lower the number of orphaned and street children, let us work together to reduce the possibility of abuse against them. You

have our recommendations and our thanks for the opportunity to participate in the 2012 CSW session for the “Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls”.