

Child Helpline Data to support legislation and policy reforms on Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract:

Children face violence and abuse all over the world irrespective of their location. This paper is an analysis of the data collected by Child Helpline International in 2010 from its members operational in 133 across the globe. The data demonstrates that violence and abuse are the main reasons for which children seek the assistance and support of child helplines. Amongst violence and abuse a large proportion of children, mainly girls, are victims of sexual abuse. The data also confirms the findings of several research studies that in majority of cases of sexual abuse the perpetrators are persons related to the victims or known to them. The group of perpetrators comprises parents, relatives, peer group, teachers and others. We recommend that governments, multilateral organisations like the UNICEF, international and national non-governmental organisations, and civil society organisations use the data collected by Child Helpline International to develop policy and legislations as well as design interventions to address the issue of child sexual abuse and fill the gaps in the child protection systems.

1. Introduction

Children all over the world are affected by violence and abuse. The contacts made with child helplines around the world indicate that this trend is increasing and every year increasing number of children affected by violence and abuse are seeking help.

There are several forms of sexual abuse, including sexual penetration, which consists of sexual intercourse with a child; the intentional exposure of a child to sexual activity, such as showing and/or taking sexually explicit or implicit pictures of the child, telling jokes or stories of a sexual nature; tickling in erogenous zones and demanding to be tickled in return. Pressure is usually exerted by an adult or another child in a position of authority. Sexual abuse includes rape and incest, as well as commercial sexual exploitation in all its forms¹. (Sources: CHI Glossary and UN CRC)

1.1 Child Helpline International and Child Helplines

1.1.1 Child Helpline International

Child Helpline International is the global network of 155 child helplines operating in 133 countries, which together received nearly 27.7 million contacts in 2010 from children and young people in need of care, protection and support. Child helplines are most often the first point of contact for children who are in need of support and protection. Child Helpline International collects data and this knowledge base is used to advocate on behalf of children to make their lives safer by highlighting the gaps in the child protection systems.

Child helplines have been in operations in the later part of the 19th century, mostly in the United States of America. However, the concept became very popular as civil society organisations recognised the importance of child helplines and established them in different countries, some working at the local, regional and national levels depending on the capacity of the organisation operating the helpline and the support it received from the government and other civil society organisations.

In 2003 Child Helpline International was established in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, as the central secretariat of a network of child helplines with a membership of 43 child helplines. Over a period of nine years the network witnessed exponential growth and today it has members from all over the world. Efforts are underway to establish child helplines in many countries where they do not exist. Child Helpline International is working with UNICEF, Plan and several other international and national organisations to increase the number of helplines and to strengthen the services of the existing members through capacity building initiatives and seeking toll-free, easy to remember telephone numbers that will facilitate easy access for children.

Child Helpline International

Vision

A world where technology allows children to be heard, one by one, and through their voices shape the world and realise their rights.

Mission

To respond to children in need of care and protection and voice their concerns to policy and decision-makers.

CHI's work is grounded in a firm belief in the rights of children, as explicitly laid out in internationally recognised and binding documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

1.1.2 Child Helplines

Child helplines offer several services to children, the foremost of which is to uphold their Right to be heard and the Right to have freedom from all forms of violence as enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹.

¹ Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Children contacting child helplines are offered counselling services and if their needs are greater child helplines refer them to partner organisations. Child helplines do not operate in isolation, they have formal arrangements with other child focussed organisations and governments in their areas of operation so as to be able provide holistic support to children in need of care and protection.

In Africa 16 child helplines are operational in as many countries. Some offer their services at the national level while others are currently working in regional spaces and making efforts to scale up their operations with the support of the national governments, UNICEF, Plan and other international and regional non-governmental organisations. In Ghana a project is underway to establish a national child helpline. Similarly in Burundi, South Sudan, Djibouti and many other countries Child Helpline International is working towards setting up of helplines.

1.1.3 Profile of the children contacting child helplines

Analysis of contacts made with child helplines in 2010 suggests that slightly more girls tend to contact child helplines than boys. There are, however, some variations across regions. Most significantly, in both the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and European regions many more girls contact child helplines than boys. In Europe the difference between girls and boys contacting child helplines is around 15%, and in the MENA region 26%. In Europe the bulk of contacts are from girls between 13-15 years old, and in the MENA region from girls of 18 years and older. On the contrary in Africa the contacts made by girls (44%) were less than the contacts made by male children (56%).

2. Methodology

For over a century academic research has been undertaken on the issue of child sexual abuse. While most of the research was conducted in the developed world, substantial work has also been done in Africa, especially in Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. However, there remains a gap in terms of availability of data on child sexual abuse on the continent because of the very nature of the topic and social stigma attached to it. Not many victims and their families are willing to report the incidents fearing social stigmatisation and outcome of reporting these cases.

Article 12 of the UNCRC

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or

(b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

Child helplines systematically record all the contacts made with them by children or on behalf of them. The data is collected according to the data questionnaire² prepared by Child Helpline International, which annually collates the data and publishes it in the form of “Connecting to Children” and “Violence against Children” reports.³

The findings in this paper are based on the data of contacts received by child helplines around the world in general and in Africa in particular in 2010. This data has been collated by the Policy and Research Department of Child Helpline International.

Children and young people are very innovative and use several methods to contact with child helplines – phones, emails, chat, text messages – for the sake of this paper contacts made with child helplines over telephone have been taken into account

2.1. Unique Data

The data presented here is unique as it is voluntarily provided by children contacting child helplines seeking support and protection from violence and abuse. It is collected by child helplines based on the telephone contacts they received and does not include any other data collated other sources such as researchers or the national law enforcement agencies. Child helplines are bound by a confidentiality clause and cannot reveal the names of the children without seeking permission from them.

This data is merely the tip of the iceberg, and reflects the magnitude of the child sexual abuse prevalent in different countries.

3. Findings: Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse

3.1. Global Scenario

The data collected by Child Helpline International from its member child helplines over the past 10 years indicated that violence and abuse is one of the most important reasons for children to contact child helplines. This trend is similar in all regions of the world irrespective of the economic and social development in the countries. Abuse and violence against children transcends cultures, ethnicities, income levels and nationalities. (Child Helpline International, 2012)⁴.

² Data questionnaire prepared by the CHI includes several topics of which sexual abuse is a subset. The definitions of violence and abuse are based on UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

³ Connecting to Children and Violence Against Children Reports can be accessed on www.childhelplineinternational.org

⁴ The report can be accessed on www.childhelplineinternational.org

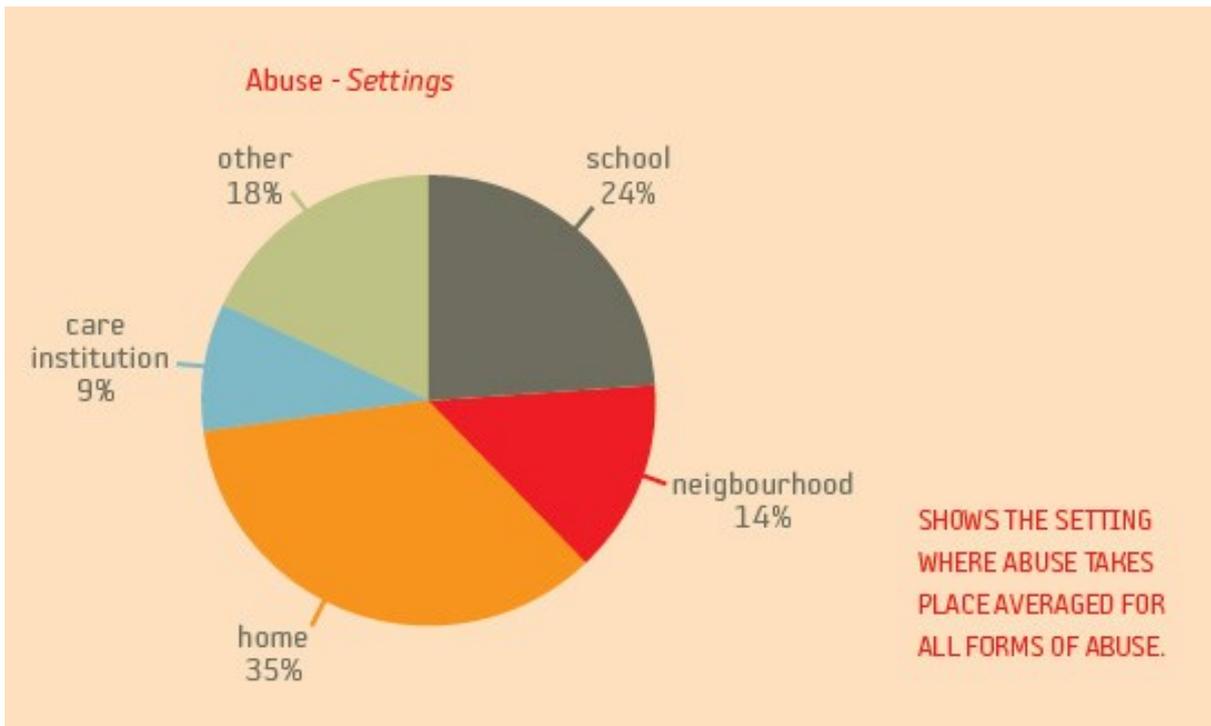


Figure 1: Where abuse happens

The analysis of data received from child helplines indicates that there is an alarming increase in sexual violence and exploitation through the internet. Europe, Asia Pacific and the Americas and Caribbean regions have thus far seen the greatest increase in cyber-bullying and cyber-abuse cases involving children.

In 2010, child helplines worldwide received 74,303 contacts on sexual abuse. This amounted to approximately 18% (the same as in 2009) of all contacts and emerged as the third important reason for contacts on violence and abuse received overall.

Sexual abuse was the third most commonly reported reason on sub-category of abuse and violence in 2010. Both the data and accounts from individual child helplines suggest not only an increase in the number of sexual abuse cases reported to child helplines, but also in their severity. Child helplines cite the global economic crisis and resulting job-losses, stress and hardships on families as one possible explanation (similar to the increase in reports to child helplines on child labour, also likely caused to some extent by difficult financial times for families).

In reality sexual abuse of children occurs at a much larger scale than reflected by the statistics collected by Child Helpline International. In most cases sexual abuse is part of the physical abuse and domestic violence in the society; therefore the percentages mentioned above may not give a complete picture of the situation. If the data for physical abuse and domestic violence is included then the figures are much higher. Taking into account contacts made by children about physical abuse and domestic violence the situation appears to be much more serious. Around 61% female and 48% male children were affected by physical and sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

In the Americas and Caribbean 9% of all contacts about violence and abuse to child helplines were about sexual abuse, while in Europe sexual abuse cases accounted for 21% of all reported abuse cases. In Africa this was around 20%, in the Asia Pacific region 10%, and the Middle East and North Africa Region the figure was 12%.

3.2 Victims

Differentiated by gender the data shows that relatively more girls contact child helplines about sexual abuse than boys, across all regions. Boys tend to contact child helplines on bullying.

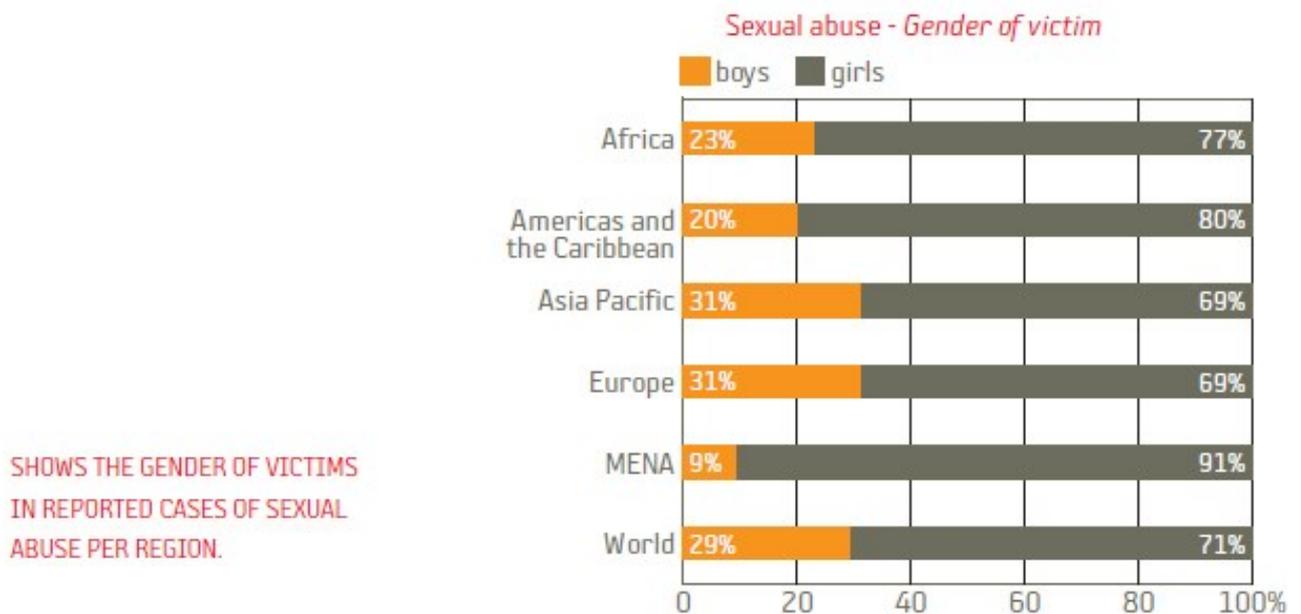


Figure 2

Girls were the victims in the vast majority of the cases of sexual abuse reported to child helplines in 2010, accounting for 71% of all reported sexual abuse cases worldwide. Compared to other forms of abuse, sexual abuse disproportionately affects girls. In the MENA region girls were the victims in 91% of reported cases and in the Americas and Caribbean girls were the primary victims in 80% of the cases. There is no significant difference in victim-gender ratios for different HDI levels when it comes to sexual abuse. In countries with medium HDI levels girls were the victims of the sexual abuse in 80% of all reported cases, while in low HDI level countries girls were the victims in some 65% of all sexual abuse cases and in very high and high HDI level countries in 70% of all sexual abuse cases.

3.3 Perpetrators

All over the world men and boys were indicated to be the perpetrator of sexual abuse in close to three quarters of all sexual abuse cases reported to child helplines in 2010. Across all HDI levels and in all regions, the majority of sexual abuse was committed by men and boys. This figure is even higher when looking only at those cases involving girls.

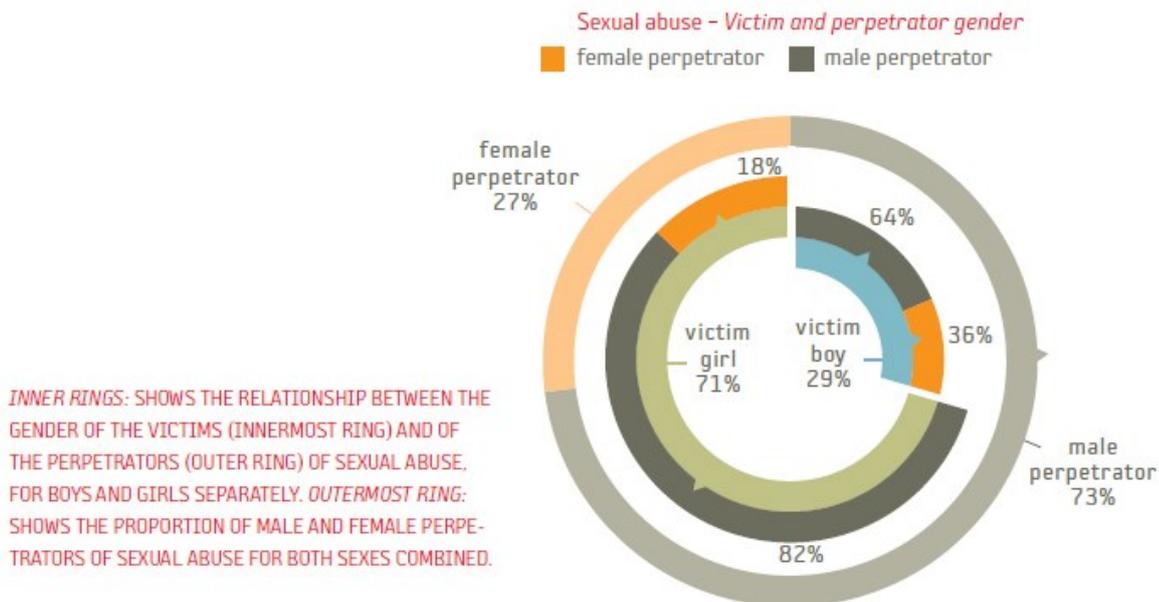


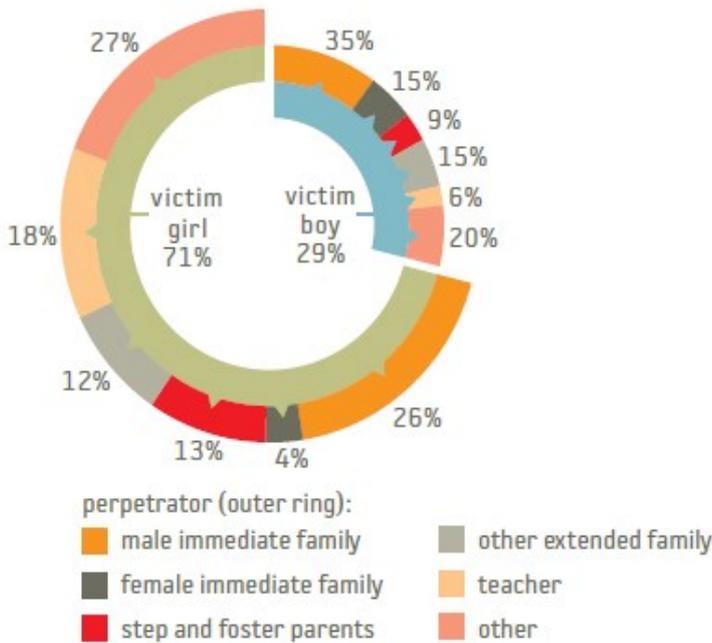
Figure 3

The data indicates that in 73% of the perpetrators are men and 27% women. In case of sexual abuse of girls the percentage of male perpetrators is much higher (82%). As Fig 3 demonstrates 29% contacts made with child helplines about violence and abuse related to sexual abuse of boy and in this case too, the number of male perpetrators is much higher than female perpetrators.

In four out of ten cases the sexual abuse reported to child helplines in 2010 was committed by a member of the victim's immediate or extended family. The male members of a child's immediate family (brothers and fathers) made up 18% of all cases. This confirms findings of most of the academic research conducted so far.

The cases gathered by child helplines clearly demonstrate that children often become victims of sexual abuse by the very people whom they depend on for protection and support. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why many cases of sexual abuse go unreported as children are hesitant to complaint against those in whom they have faith and trust

Sexual abuse - Relationship between victim and perpetrator



SHOWS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE.

Figure 4

Besides immediate family members, children often become victims of sexual abuse by their teachers. The data shows that in as many as 18% cases the perpetrators are teachers. In the case of girls the largest number perpetrators are immediate male members of the family and then others, which includes boys of the peer group, and persons known to the victim. When it comes to sexual abuse of boys once again it is the male immediate family members and then the teachers.

In countries with a very high HDI level the average share of contacts on sexual abuse involving a brother or father was over half. Looking only at cases in which the victims were girls, this number is even higher, with more than two thirds of all sexual abuse cases in very high HDI levels involving a brother or father. The proportion of sexual abuse cases reported to child helplines that were committed by a male immediate family member is significantly higher in Europe than in other regions.

3.4 Setting

Sexual abuse takes place mainly at home, at school and in the street or neighbourhood. Unfortunately most cases reported indicate the place of abuse is often where children should feel the safest, like homes, child care facilities, friends' homes, organised sports activities. Many cases occur on the streets too. The data indicates that in High HDI countries the proportion of sexual abuse taking place at other locations (child care facilities, friend's homes or during organised sporting activities for children) is less as compared with homes.

19 Sexual abuse - Settings

SHOWS THE SETTINGS WHERE REPORTED SEXUAL ABUSE CASES TAKE PLACE.

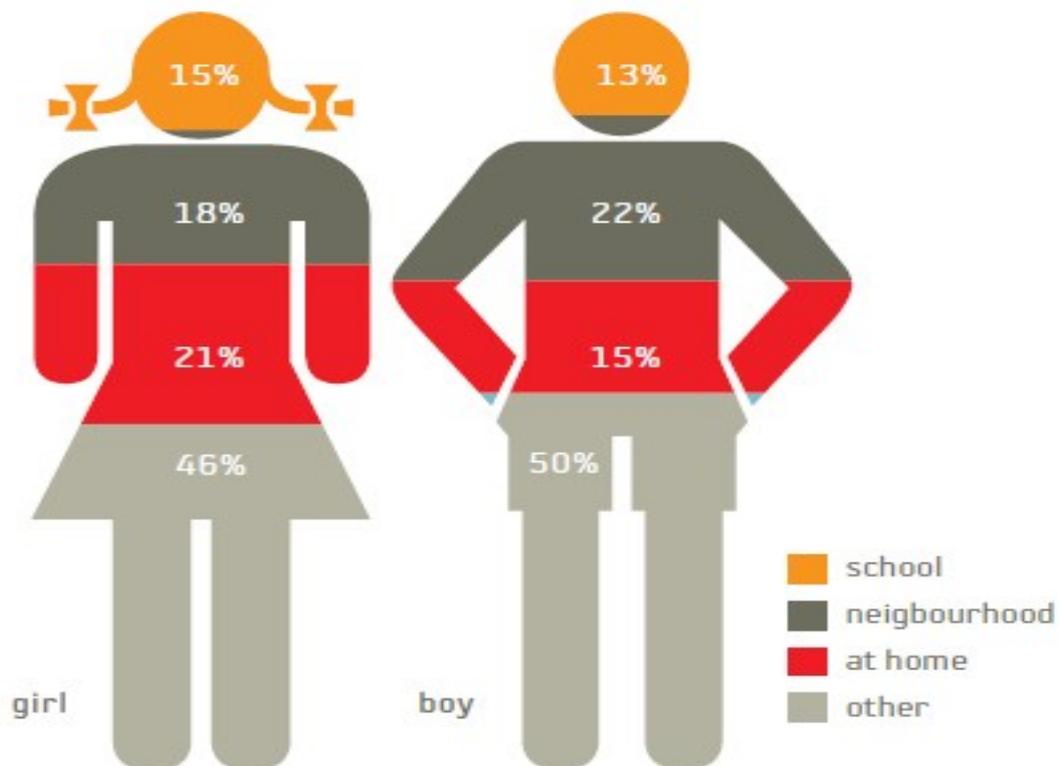


Figure 5

3.5 African scenario

To present a fairly accurate picture of the child sexual abuse on the African continent in this paper, the data from some North African countries has been collated with the data from rest of Africa. An analysis of this data shows that Africa follows the global trend in sexual abuse, but the prevalence could be even higher and cannot be captured by the statistics provided by child helplines as many cases go unreported because of the reluctance of the victim and family members.

While there are 18 child helplines in as many African country, for this paper data from 16 child helplines has been considered for analysis. These 16 child helplines received nearly 54,800 contacts regarding violence and abuse from children or on behalf of them, of which nearly 19% were about sexual abuse.

Case Studies – Abuse and violence

"A 15-year old girl called the child helpline because her adoptive father was violating her. The girl's adoptive mother did not believe her story. With the girl's permission, the child helpline reported the matter to the appropriate medical services and the police. They verified the story and the child was transferred to a safe place." - Africa region

The data collected by child helplines in 2010 when disaggregated according to gender and reasons for contact presents an alarming level of sexual abuse of girl child in Africa. As many as 33% female and 10% male children contacting child helplines regarding violence and abuse stated sexual abuse as the reason for seeking help and advice. The statistics underscores that in Africa too more female children are subject to sexual abuse when compared with male children.

The highest number of contacts for sexual abuse were reported from the child helpline in Guinea Conakry (5190) followed by Zimbabwe (1398).

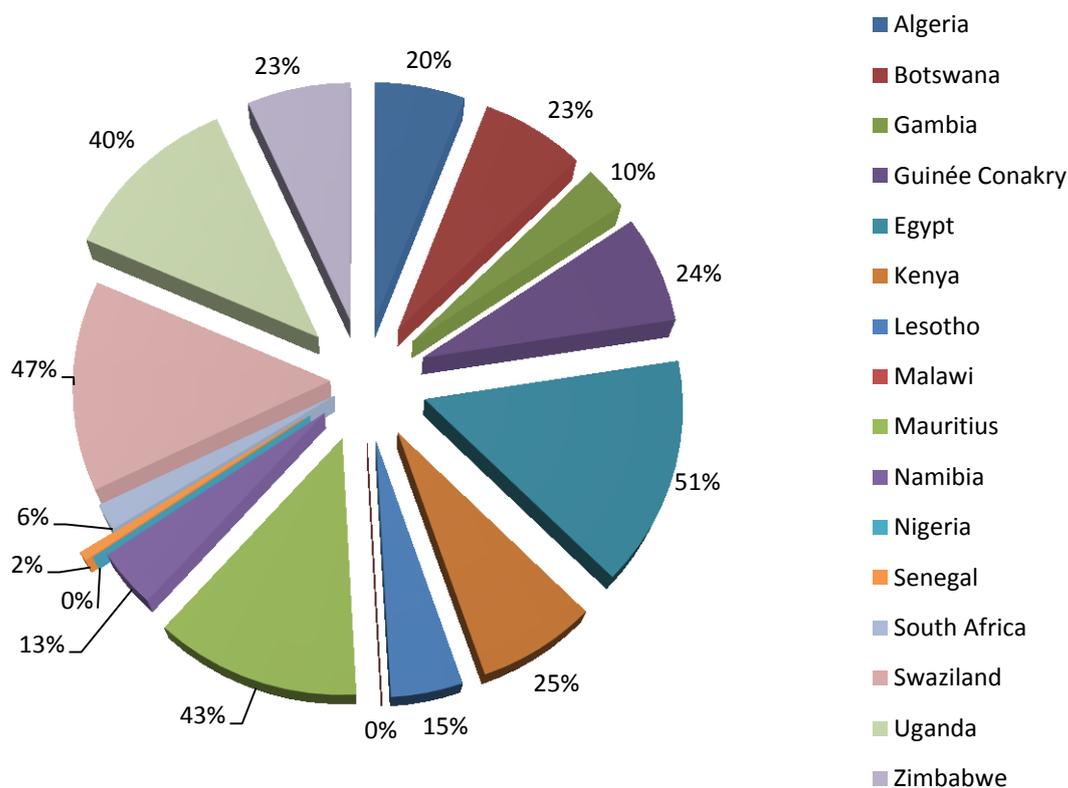


Fig 5

When the data is collated according to the percentage of calls on sexual abuse the results show that the highest percentage was reported from Egypt (51%) followed by Swaziland (47%), Mauritius (43%), and Uganda (40%). The percentage of calls on sexual abuse in many other African countries as shown in Figure 5 averaged around 23%.

While all the data is based on the contacts made with child helplines, a vast majority of children are unable to reach helplines for reasons beyond their control, including lack telecommunication infrastructure, poverty, lack of awareness about the existence of child helplines etc.

Child helpline services

Most child helplines provide active listening, counselling and referral services to victims of sexual abuse. Compared to other forms of child abuse, more child helplines tend to provide supplementary services such as intervention, education and legal services to victims of sexual abuse. At the same time, the number of child helplines providing additional services does tend to decrease with increasing HDI levels, mainly because there are more partner organisation available in the child protection system to refer children to for help.

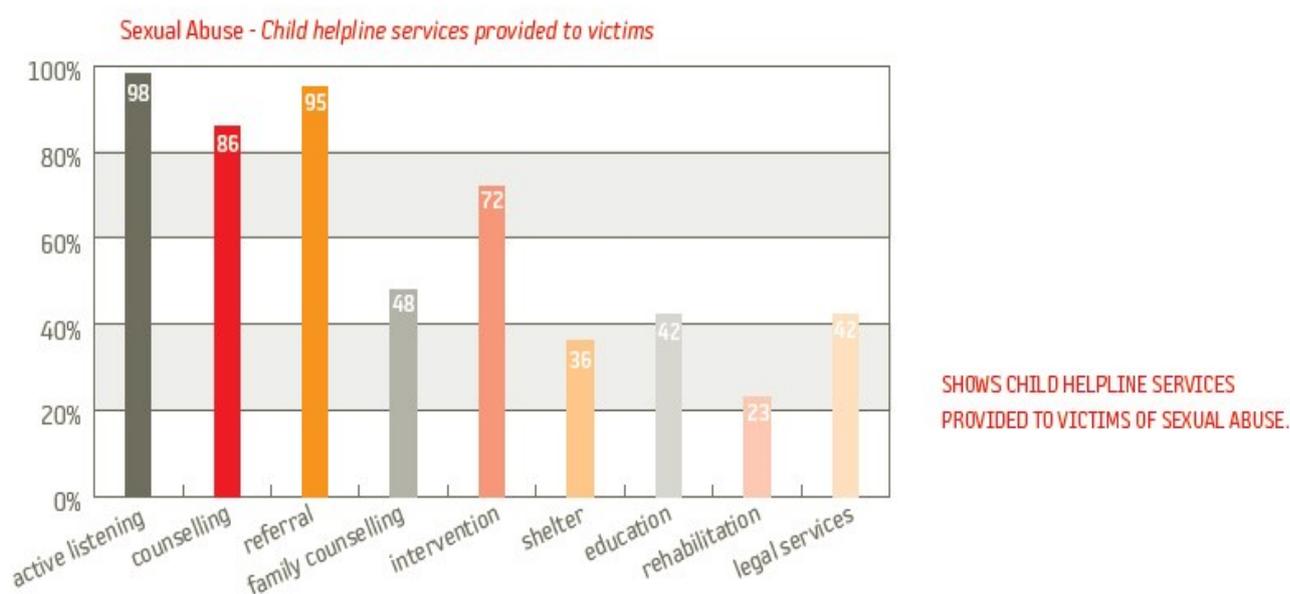


Fig 6

Recommendations

The data collected by Child Helpline International from its member child helplines is invaluable and unique that can fill the gaps in the empirical research. It comes directly from the children who voluntarily share the information with helplines. The data provides an insight into the abuse and violence suffered by children around the world.

- The data underscores the urgent need to address the increasing problem of child sexual abuse at all levels and settings in the society.
- Policymakers can use the Child Helpline International's data to design policies and legislations to deal with cases of child sexual abuse at the national level.

- Mechanisms need to put in place by government with the cooperation of civil society organisations for the effective implementation of policies and legislations addressing child sexual abuse.
- International and local nongovernment organisations should use the data for developing programmes to address the issue of child sexual abuse.
- Civil Society Organisations should take up awareness and behavioural change campaigns at the grassroots level to empower children with information and outlets to approach when faced with threat of sexual abuse.
- Schools managements should implement orientation programmes for teachers to reduce incidents of sexual abuse in school setting.
- Government and multilateral organisations and international non-governmental organisations should support establishment of child helplines and strengthening the existing helplines as these offer crucial support and protection services to children in crisis.
- Governments and private telecom companies should support child helplines with easy to remember, toll-free numbers so that all children can access them.
- Governments and civil society organisations should support child helplines in their outreach activities so that children around the country become aware of the presence and services of child helplines.

Acknowledgement

Child Helpline International is grateful to all its member child helplines operating in 133 countries for providing data for this paper and other publications that serve to highlight the importance of strengthening child protection systems. We are also thankful to governments around the world, UNICEF global and regional offices, regional and country offices of Plan, Oak Foundation and all other organisations that support child helplines and Child Helpline International in carrying out the task of listening to children.