



STOP THE VIOLENCE

STOP CHILD ABUSE

Report 2023



Against all violence

In 2019, we opened an Anti-Violence Unit within Kanyama Hospital, located in one of the poorest and most deprived areas of Zambia. We aimed to assist women who otherwise would not know where to turn to escape a life of despair and violence. We were aware of the complexity of gender-based violence, which has its roots in poverty, ignorance, moral degradation, and the prevailing patriarchal culture in many African countries. However, over the years, the scale of the problem has tragically exceeded our expectations, and not just in terms of the number of victims: it has become increasingly evident that children are even more vulnerable and defenceless victims of sexual, physical, and psychological violence. From the Stop the Violence project, which was initially launched to support women victims of violence, in 2023, Stop Child Abuse was developed to protect and promote the rights of children and adolescents in Zambia.



In the three-year period from 2021 to 2023, the Anti-Violence Unit assisted 4,792 victims, 1,389 of whom were minors. The violence predominantly affects females. Adult women mostly report physical violence. The abuse of minors is continuously increasing and is approximately two-thirds of a sexual nature.



Stop the Violence: holistic assistance to victims and training for local operators

In 2023, the number of adult victims slightly decreased compared to 2022: 1,054 women and 149 men. The violence almost always occurs in a family context, often on weekends and holidays when alcohol abuse is more prevalent. Women arrive with swollen faces, knife or hammer wounds, and burns. The Anti-Violence Unit welcomes victims and provides them with a range of free services to help them first and foremost become aware of their rights and to identify, together with them, a possible way out of a critical situation or, more often, from a life spent enduring unspeakable violence. At the Anti-Violence Unit, victims find a listening space and specialized personnel for psychological counselling, couples counselling, family mediation, and legal assistance. For example, filing a report with the police requires a series of bureaucratic steps to certify the violence, which someone living in Kanyama, often semi-literate, cannot understand and therefore needs assistance with. Similarly, a woman who has decided to separate from her violent husband or who has been abandoned with her children by her partner and therefore needs to file for child support also needs help. Living conditions in Kanyama, one of the poorest suburbs of the capital Lusaka, are for many at the edge of survival: a single woman with children, often engaged in informal employment such as selling fruits and vegetables on the street, and with a very low level of education, can hardly feed her family regularly.

To ensure a holistic and effective service for victims, over the years a network of relationships has been established with various Zambian public services: Kanyama Hospital and its staff, who provide medical assistance to the victims and the necessary documentation for filing a report; the police forces, essential for arrests or the safety of the Stop the Violence team; and social services and courts, especially when minors are involved.

Assisting victims requires the collaboration of all these actors. To promote a shared purpose and ensure everyone moves towards the same goal, we have organized multiple training seminars for the benefit of local operators with whom we collaborate. Their cultural background often legitimizes the subordination of women and downplays domestic violence as a normal aspect of couple life. Therefore, it is crucial to try to remove the cultural prejudices that could undermine the effectiveness of our intervention.





In 2023, despite a slight decrease in the number of adult victims, violence against minors increased significantly, rising from 481 victims in 2022 to 563 in 2023, 375 of whom were under the age of 14. Of these, 68% of the violence against minors was of a sexual nature. The number of sexual assaults on children under 10 is alarming: 92 girls and 16 boys. To address such a large and vulnerable clientele, in 2023 we launched the Stop Child Abuse project, aimed at offering better assistance to minors, training local public operators involved in cases of violence against minors, and raising awareness among the Kanyama population about children's rights.

An expert Child Protection team was formed, coordinated by a psychotherapist who could provide appropriate psychological assistance tailored to the child's age, necessary for processing the trauma experienced. Measures to prevent further violence have been strengthened by removing the abuser (often a family member) in collaboration with the police, monitoring the minor's family unit, and, when necessary, removing the victim from contexts at risk of further violence.



CHILD ABUSE IS A CRIME

WHERE TO REPORT

- **ANY NEAREST POLICE STATION**
- **ONE STOP CENTRE AT KANYAMA GENERAL HOSPITAL**
- **CALL 116 CHILD HELP LINE “TOLL FREE”
FOR MORE INFORMATION REFER TO THE
CHILDREN’S CODE ACT, 2022**



Child Abuse: Consequences and Prevention Strategies

The psychotherapist provides a safe space for the minor to open up to someone who does not blame her, or in the case of boys, who helps them not feel ashamed when recounting the events. Additionally, the psychotherapist accompanies the minor to court for their testimony against the aggressor.

The violence we witness almost always occurs within the family or neighborhood context. Often, the sexual aggressor is the father, grandfather, or uncle, and in cases of physical violence, it is often the mothers or stepmothers, harming even very young children. In these cases, in agreement with social services, it becomes necessary and urgent to remove the minor from the environment where the violence occurred. Arresting the aggressor is not always possible, either because the perpetrator has fled or due to the guardian's failure to report the violence. A woman rarely reports her husband or a male relative because she would face a series of reprisals from the aggressor's family. Therefore, efforts are made to find shelter in a community for minors or enroll them in a boarding school, where, in addition to receiving an education, the minor can live in a protected and monitored environment.





In cases of sexual violence, victims and their guardians are educated on the medical procedures to initiate a formal rape report, for which medical examination is obviously required. Additionally, victims are, depending on the circumstances, subjected to HIV, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease tests in the office. The staff has rapid kits available for these analyses. In the event of the minor's pregnancy (even in 12-year-olds), the psychologist, along with social services, present the minor and guardians with various options: adoption, where the newborn is immediately placed in an orphanage, foster care (also in orphanages, but maintaining open communication channels with the mother), or abortion. The decision to continue or terminate the pregnancy is made entirely autonomously by the victim and/or their guardians, without any interference from the operators.



The Children's Code Act: A New Weapon Against Abuse

In 2023, training for local operators and awareness campaigns intensified, focusing primarily on Child Protection. Training seminars were conducted for the police forces on Zambia's new legislation for the protection of minors: the Children's Code Act, passed in August 2022, which adheres to international standards. During the training sessions, led by senior Zambian officials and the staff of the Anti-Violence Unit, the significant changes in the law were explained: the Children's Code Act definitively establishes that individuals are minors until the age of 18; a concept not always clear in Zambia, especially concerning customary law, the traditional laws that, for example, permitted early marriages. With the new legislation, marriages contracted before the age of 18 are now punishable by law. The rights of the child were listed and explained, and the concept of "abuse" and its consequences on a child's psyche were explored: it is a complex issue, especially regarding corporal punishment, widely used in Zambia as an educational tool, which unfortunately sometimes constitutes abuse due to its extreme severity.



Raising awareness among the population about the rights of women and minors

Operating within Kanyama Hospital, a large public hospital, the Anti-Violence Unit operators have access to a vast pool of people to whom they can direct awareness efforts: in particular, they regularly conduct brief meetings with expectant mothers at the Family Planning or vaccination services, where informative brochures (in English and the local language) about children's rights and the services offered by the Anti-Violence Unit are distributed. Additionally, awareness campaigns are organized in markets and churches. Another extraordinary vehicle for spreading awareness about Child Protection and gender-based violence is radio. In Lusaka, the capital, there are many local radio stations that are listened to via mobile phones by the population of Kanyama.





It has been a challenging and complex year, full of challenges: at times, we have felt powerless and frustrated, but the smile returning to the faces of the victims, especially the children rescued from violence, gives us the strength and determination to continue our journey.

The Stop the Violence e Stop Child Abuse team

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