NO ONE EXCLUDED

Zambia

Stop the violence

Report 2022

PRO.SA ONLUS ONG

Social hardship and violence on the outskirts of Lusaka Zambia

In 2022, the Anti-Violence Unit, which opened in 2019 at the only public hospital in the Kanyama compound, recorded a sharp increase in cases of violence against women and children. The team at Ulemu, the Zambian NGO that runs the Unit, assisted a total of 1726 victims of physical, sexual, economic, and psychological violence. In the face of such barbarism, we are left speechless and wonder what could be the reasons for such frequent and savage beatings of children and abuse of little girls. These are not isolated incidents, but rather the consequences of widespread and severe social hardship related to extreme poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, and despair over the lack of life prospects. The weaker sections of the population are concentrated in Kanyama and the surrounding areas, which are compounds where people migrate from the countryside in search of better opportunities, but often fail to escape the vicious cycle of poverty and resort to various forms of deviance.

In 2022 Stop the Violence assisted 1726 victims, a 33% increase compared to 2021

Patriarchy and gender-based violence

Violence against women and children has deep cultural roots, which stem from patriarchy. Zambia is still a patriarchal country where a woman's life, in all its dimensions, depends on her father and then on her husband. Women undergo rituals and initiations from childhood that aim to teach them to be submissive to men and always please them. Unfortunately, many women are not even aware of their rights. They reach the hospital with injuries, broken limbs and teeth caused by violent beatings they have suffered. These women believe it is quite normal to be beaten by their husbands. Their bodies bear the signs of a life spent amid unspeakable violence.

Women who seek assistance from the Anti-Violence Unit are often illiterate or have a very low level of education. The most challenging part of our work is not providing them with assistance but rather making them aware of their rights.

The most helpless victims: minors

Children often witness violence and, unfortunately, sometimes they are themselves victims of it. In Kanyama, the situation of children is even more tragic and helpless than that of their mothers. Corporal punishment is still widespread in Zambia and sometimes reaches terrible levels of savagery. It is not uncommon for physical violence to be perpetrated by women, such as an aunt who is the child's guardian or, more often, the second wife of the father. Two-thirds of child abuses are of a sexual nature, and unfortunately, sexual abuse mostly occurs within the family, including the father, grandfather, uncle, mother's partner, or even a neighbor. The victims are mostly preteens and teenagers, some of whom are already pregnant at the age of 12 as a result of constant violence. Absurd beliefs struggle to disappear, such as the crazy idea that sexual intercourse with a virgin is a healing or propitiatory rite, or that early marriages of girls, often performed after rape, can heal the situation.

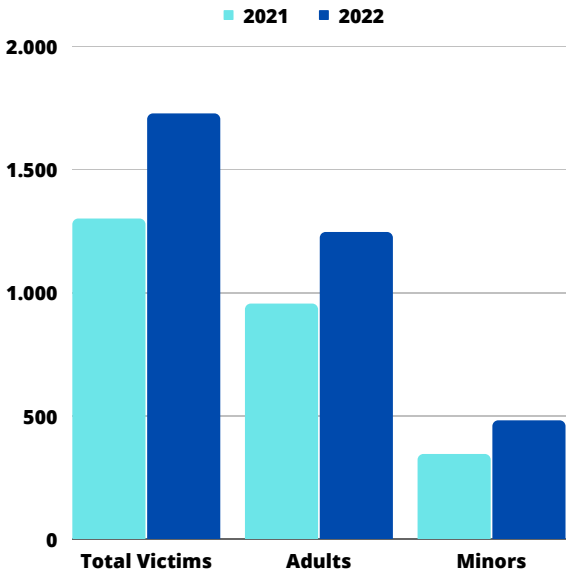
In 2022, there were 481 cases of child abuse, which accounted for nearly one-third of the total. These abuses were mostly sexual and involved preadolescent girls.

Although to a minimal extent, adolescent males are also sexually abused, and sometimes forced to have sex with adults who exercise certain authority over them. However, it should be pointed out that the phenomenon of rape against males is much more widespread than what appears from Anti-Violence Unit data. If it is extremely difficult for a young girl to report abuse, something the Stop the Violence team deals with on a daily basis, it is even more distressing and humiliating for a male, raised in a patriarchal context, to report being sodomized. Victims assisted by the Anti-Violence Unit often have intellectual disabilities or mild delays, making them easy prey for unscrupulous people ready to take advantage of them. In such cases, efforts are made to place the victim in safer settings. Stop the Violence has also started to raise awareness in the community about the rights of people with disabilities, in collaboration with local disability organizations.

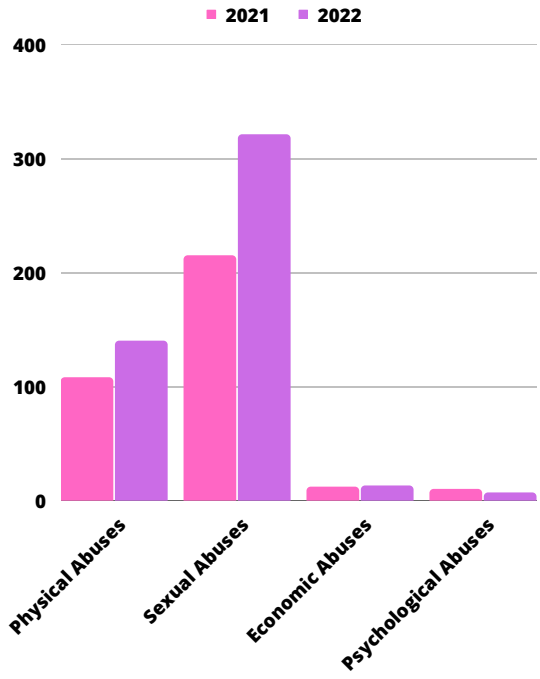
Unfortunately, people with disabilities are at much greater risk of being victims of sexual violence.

Victims on the rise, but...

In 2022, the number of victims assisted by Stop the Violence workers increased by 33 percent compared to the previous year. The increase was even more significant for minors, with 481 cases in 2022, up 39 percent from 2021. Most of these cases were related to rape, which increased by 49 percent. Paradoxically, the increase in reported cases is related to the presence of the Anti-Violence Unit and the services it provides. Prior to 2018, Kanyama Hospital had no assistance services for victims of violence. When a woman was beaten or a child was raped, they would go to the hospital for medical treatment and then return home, where the violence would likely continue. Even if the nature of the injuries was obvious, the victim had no one to turn to for help except for the police, who rarely intervened in domestic violence cases. Additionally, it is still a common practice among police officers to accept bribes from families to not report violence against women and minors. The presence of Stop the Violence and the opening of the Anti-Violence Unit within Kanyama Hospital created conditions not only to assist the victims but also to bring attention to the scale of domestic and child violence in Kanyama.



Number of victims: 1726



Child abuses: 481

...today they are not alone

At the Anti-Violence Unit, victims are met with compassionate and experienced staff who offer a range of services. The most essential service provided is seemingly the most simple: listening. Victims of abuse, both adults and minors, often open up for the first time to someone who will listen to them without judgment. Children, in particular, may feel a deep sense of shame about what has happened to them and may not talk about it with anyone, although signs of discomfort inevitably emerge for those who are able to read them. It is not uncommon for a teacher to accompany a girl to the Anti-Violence Unit because they have noticed a drastic change in behavior and school performance, which may be the result of sexual violence. The staff initiate a series of actions tailored to the specific situation of the victim, which may include accompanying them to the hospital for treatment of injuries or for HIV or pregnancy testing, reporting to the police, testifying in court, family mediation, couples counseling, legal advice to obtain child support from the abusive partner, or identifying a facility that can accommodate the victim who is at risk of harm. All of these actions are taken in close cooperation with Zambian institutions, including the Kanyama Hospital, police stations, and social services. Thanks to the outreach efforts both inside and outside of the hospital, more people are now aware of the existence of Stop the Violence and the Anti-Violence Unit in Kanyama. The team has also noticed a growing public awareness of gender and child protection issues, which is encouraging. The team has received volunteer offers from people who are willing to help, including young graduates, who have become a vital contribution to the daily work of Stop the Violence.

At the Anti-Violence Unit, victims find a holistic service tailored to their needs

2023: Stop Child Abuse

An abused child may grow up to exhibit the same destructive behaviors they experienced in childhood, perpetuating a cycle of harm that can ripple through society. Consequently, any effort to safeguard a child's physical and moral well-being is a critical contribution to fostering a more tranquil and united community, even in difficult circumstances like those found in Kanyama.

When Stop the Violence was founded in 2018, its primary focus was to protect women's rights. However, as time passed, it became increasingly clear that the situation facing Kanyama's children was, if anything, even direr. As a result, we have developed a targeted initiative to defend minors that will commence in 2023 and integrate with the activities carried out by the Anti-Violence Unit. The Stop Child Abuse project seeks to enhance the psychological support service for child victims of abuse, providing them with the necessary tools to overcome their traumatic experiences, prevent repeat offenses by removing the abuser (often a family member) in coordination with the police, monitor the minor's family unit, and, when necessary, relocate the child to a residential or boarding facility during emergency situations. In August 2022, the Children's Code Act, which reflects international standards for child protection, was enacted.

In order for this legislation to have an impact beyond mere words on paper, it must be disseminated among police, social workers, and health professionals. Thus, Stop Child Abuse also includes instruction on the new Child Protection laws by a legal advisor. Finally, the project involves raising awareness of children's rights within the Kanyama community, with a particular emphasis on specific groups (teachers, community leaders, and religious representatives responsible for churches). The awareness campaign will make use of neighborhood committees established over time by Stop the Violence personnel, composed of influential community members who are effective mediators between operators and the populace and serve as agents of social surveillance concerning families, minors, and disabled individuals who are experiencing significant hardship and distress (e.g., abuse, malnutrition, exploitation, abandonment).

ULEMU
NO ONE EXCLUDED

Ulemu team members include:
Italian coordinator and CEO Alessia Defendi,
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paralegals Stephen Banda and Harriet Phiri,
and volunteers Ireen Kunda, Joan Mwanza, and Karen Meno.

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