



26 November 2010

Council of Europe campaign to stop sexual violence against children

1. Getting the picture: Sexual violence is a complex, sensitive and alarmingly widespread problem

Available data suggest that about **1 out of 5** children in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence. It is estimated that in 70 to 85% of cases, the perpetrator is known to the victim.

Child sexual violence can take many forms: incest and sexual abuse, pornography, prostitution, trafficking, corruption and sexual assault by peers.

Child victims of sexual violence suffer more than just an intolerable violation of their physical integrity: their mental health can also be affected and their bonds of trust with adults destroyed.

The victims often take refuge in silence because they feel shame, guilt and fear. Some child victims are so young that they have no idea what is happening to them, and very often children do not know how or where to seek help.

The consequences of sexual violence may stay with children during their adult lives – lives which personal accounts often describe as lived out in hidden sorrow and pain.

Most abused children know their abuser. Perpetrators are in the family and community circle: relatives, family friends or carers.

Although it is difficult to obtain accurate figures showing the extent of the problem, the number of court cases relating to sexual abuse committed in child care institutions is rising steadily. No institution is immune. Institutions that lack adequate prevention, protection and monitoring measures are ideal hunting grounds for those who prey on children, who also single out youngsters with disabilities because of their extra vulnerability.

Unfortunately, a child victim's ordeal is not always over when the abuse comes to light. All too often children also fall victim to legal loopholes and to ill-coordinated or inadequately trained justice, social and health care services. The conviction of a perpetrator does not always mean that justice has been done. In cases where images of abuse are not speedily removed from the Internet, for instance, the recovery process of the child concerned may be seriously undermined.

Child victims of sexual violence have the right to adequate psychological and medical treatment.

Perpetrators of sexual violence are not always adults. Children themselves can exhibit sexually harmful behaviour. Research shows that, if properly treated, a child who has sexually harmed another is very unlikely to reoffend. Most child perpetrators are themselves victims of abuse or neglect.

2. A Council of Europe Convention to fight all forms of sexual violence

The entry into force on 1 July 2010 of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse ("Lanzarote Convention") represents a significant advance in the prevention of sexual violence, the protection of children and the combating of impunity.

The convention is anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and is the first international instrument to treat sexual abuse of children as a crime, irrespective of where or by whom it is committed – in the home, in a child care institution, through organised crime networks or via the Internet.

It is open to ratification by non-European countries as well as Council of Europe member states and requires lawmakers to extend the statutory limitation for bringing child sexual abuse cases to trial, in some cases until long after the victim has reached the age of majority.

It stresses the importance of data collection and sexuality education, and calls for the setting up of services enabling children to report abuse. It stipulates that judicial procedures must be child-friendly, taking fully into account the trauma of abuse and the need to safeguard the victims' security, privacy, identity and image.

It recognises the key role of professionals, child rights defenders, the business community, the media and parents. It also calls on countries to develop education about sexual matters as well as awareness-raising campaigns, promoting participation by children in the development of prevention policies and campaigns.

3. An empowering campaign

In Rome (Italy) on 29 November 2010, the Council of Europe will launch a campaign to stop sexual violence against children. Its main objectives will be:

- to promote **signature, ratification and implementation of the Council of Europe Convention** on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse;
- to equip children, their families/carers and societies with knowledge and tools to prevent sexual violence against children and in so doing raise awareness of the full extent of sexual violence against children.

Through the campaign, the Council of Europe wants to empower governments, parliamentarians, professional networks, civil society, parents and children, enabling them to take the necessary steps to stop sexual violence against children.

a. The materials developed for the campaign

Various kinds of awareness-raising and information materials will be developed for the different groups targeted by the campaign:

- Handbooks and brochures about the Lanzarote Convention will help campaign partners as they advocate ratification of this legal instrument;
- Publications, reports and thematic studies will highlight the state of research, good practices and innovative means of tackling sexual violence, whether in the form of sexual exploitation, grooming, sexual abuse or trafficking;
- Material targeting specific groups (parliamentarians, the media, children, parents, teachers, social workers, local authorities, etc).

A specific awareness-raising tool for parents: "The Underwear Rule"

The Council of Europe has developed awareness-raising material which will help parents and carers to talk to children in a positive and child-friendly manner about their right to define their personal boundaries and their right to say no if they are unhappy about being touched, and to explain that children can talk with confidence about this subject to those who look after them.

The awareness-raising concept is called "The Underwear Rule". The concept will be presented in a TV spot, in a children's book, on a website and on posters and postcards.

The 30-second TV spot features two characters: Kiko and the hand. Kiko is a small child, neither girl nor boy, neither black nor white, who comes across the caring hand. Kiko allows the hand to touch hair, hands and nose, but when the hand asks: "May I touch inside your underwear?", Kiko's reply is a firm refusal.

The main message in the awareness raising material is "About one in five children is a victim of sexual abuse". Usually by someone they know. Prevent this happening to your child. Listen and be receptive to your child's feelings. Teach them "The Underwear Rule". A simple rule that makes it clear where your child should not be touched.

Some of the main messages are headed:

- Good secrets make you happy, bad secrets don't.
- Talk to your children and make sure they can talk to you.
- If touching doesn't feel right, it isn't right.

This tool is available in English, French and Italian, and could be translated into other languages as part of the "Building a Europe for and with Children" programme.

b. Campaign partners

In addition to addressing the campaign to parents, carers and children, we have encouraged governments in **the member states** of the Council of Europe to set up national campaign teams comprising all the relevant players: ministries responsible for social affairs, justice, health, education, youth affairs and information and communication technologies, parliamentarians, local and regional authorities, children's ombudspersons, civil society organisations, parents' associations and professional networks (in the medical, teaching, welfare, health, justice and caring sectors).

The intergovernmental sector of the Council of Europe plays a very important part in moving forward policies at national level, preparing co-operation programmes in various areas, such as youth awareness, developing teacher training materials and sexuality education material, promoting child-friendly justice and health and social services for victims of sexual violence.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, by adopting its Recommendation 1934 (2010) on "Child abuse in institutions: ensuring full protection of the victims", decided to support the campaign through a parliamentary dimension aimed at raising awareness and promoting the signature, ratification and implementation of the Lanzarote Convention through national parliaments. A handbook for parliamentarians facilitating the promotion of this essential instrument at national level is currently being prepared for this purpose (expected for January 2011), and a network of contact parliamentarians is being set up and will meet for the first time during the First part-session of the Assembly (24-28 January 2011). Further activities will notably include the preparation of reports related to the issue of sexual abuse of children, as well as the organisation of hearings and debates at European and national level.

Local and Regional Authorities are welcome to join in the campaign by informing and motivating working groups and National Associations for Local and Regional Authorities. Those national associations can join the national campaign teams in their respective Council of Europe member states. At local level they can promote discussions and seminars with local education and child protection officials, decision-makers, the media and parents, with a view to ridding local communities of sexual violence against children. Local and regional authorities have an important role to play when it comes to creating child-friendly multi-agency and pluridisciplinary centres for helping child victims of sexual abuse to avoid secondary victimisation. Political will at this level is therefore extremely important.

Children's ombudspersons are key partners in the campaign, and they can contribute by disseminating campaign material to children and parents through their regular work programme. They also have a crucial role in assisting governments to put in place a strategy conducive to the signing and ratification of the Lanzarote Convention.

Media (TV, radio, print, internet) professionals have been invited to join in the campaign not only by covering its topics and the latest developments regarding ratification of the Lanzarote Convention, but also by helping to define and put into practice their own important role in protecting children against sexual violence. Media professionals, in collaboration with experts on children's rights and protection, can for example organise seminars about the ethical aspects of interviews with children traumatised by sexual abuse. Furthermore, a code of conduct for the reporting of cases of sexual violence against children can be put in the spotlight.

Non-governmental organisations promoting children's rights have a key role to play in the campaign, as they make a vital contribution by supporting and maintaining close relationships with parents and children. They give a better understanding of the needs and the measures to be taken. The Council of Europe aims to co-operate with international and national non-governmental organisations and networks in sharing information, policy and legal advice, as well as child protection practices and tools for the elimination of sexual violence against children. Non-governmental organisations are encouraged to facilitate the sharing of knowledge by disseminating awareness-raising material and by

organising seminars and training workshops in order to develop the capacity of local and national authorities, decision-makers, civil servants, parents and children in respect of issues relating to children's rights, sexual violence against children and child protection. Civil society organisations and groups are also encouraged to participate in national campaign planning and implementation and in the monitoring of results. Furthermore, it is civil society which is in the best position to ensure that children will be heard, protected and respected in their communities. The Council of Europe is encouraging civil society groups to ensure that the voices of children are heard loud and clear and taken seriously as it strives to eradicate sexual violence against children.

European and national **networks of professionals** working in contact with children (notably in the fields of justice, education, health and social services) will be invited to provide advice, disseminate information and help to shape and implement policies.

Public-private partnerships will be able to support the campaign by helping to raise awareness through their own channels. This could be done, for instance, by the tourism industry and airlines, hotel chains, railway and taxi companies. Campaign material can also be used and promoted by the industries that produce children's clothing. There is great potential for involving Internet providers, telephone companies and major websites in helping to create and promote a safe on-line environment for children. The possibilities are limitless – the only condition being that the initiatives must remain within the scope of the campaign and promote the Lanzarote Convention.