

Lesotho steps up child protection measures

As part of Lesotho's initiative to curb the escalating child abuse, the Maseru Ministry of Health and Social Welfare in collaboration with other partners opened the Child Helpline in Maseru.

The facility, to be housed at Lesotho Save the Children, would enable children to report all forms of abuse and encourage them to raise their views.

Mphu Ramatlapeng, Minister in the Basotho Ministry, said the Child Helpline would add to government's efforts on child protection and also source assistance to vulnerable children.

She said children and young girls are confronted with severe conditions of abuse mainly perpetrated by either parents or guardians and that in most cases perpetrators get away without being brought to the book.

"Although Lesotho had signed and ratified international conventions on the rights of a child, children continue to fall victims of violence," Ramatlapeng said.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) representative, Aichatou Diawara-Flambert said violence against children is still regarded as a taboo in many societies.

She said data from the Child and Gender and Protection Unit is indicative of high rate of sexual violence especially among children and young girls.

"Unfortunately it is also evident that service providers are not well equipped with the skills to identify and recognise symptoms of children who have been violated," she added.

Taking responsibility

She urged all stakeholders to take collective responsibility to ensure the protection of children.

"In the midst of challenges, there is hope looming for thousand of children that are currently hidden in the shadows of violence," she added.

Diawara-Flambert said the facility would put children's needs first with also the opportunity to express their concerns.

"Child Helpline is an outstanding example of the benefits of modern communication tools in helping children and young people to access the information they need," she added.

Although government support is also essential, she said strategies should be made and focused on strengthening the facility.

Lipalesa Mpemi, the children's representative, said the helpline was long over due, adding the helpline would promote culture of respect as children's grievances would now be addressed by trained personnel.

She said children have been crying out for help and their voices were not heard as they had no one to talk to, saying the helpline would change the trend.

"Help is now a phone call away, therefore children should take full advantage of the helpline and use it wisely," she said.

Others speakers at the recent launch said it marked a great milestone in the interface, of Basotho especially for the vulnerable children who are prone to all forms of abuse.

Dependent on good communication

The World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis 2005, highlighted the challenges of digital divide between the developing and developed countries.

"The summit signified the beginning of an implementation process aimed at transforming ideas into concrete actions," said an official of the telecommunications authority, Monehela Phosholi, who added that the success of the child helpline would highly depend on the availability of good communication infrastructure in all corners of the country.

Scholars at a nearby Sefika High School said the facility would give voice to the voiceless and also get to report cases of abuse.

They stated that with the facility in place, children who were victims of violence would get proper counselling from the well-trained personnel.

Although issues around sex and sexuality in families are still a taboo, among a larger traditional Lesotho population, it is believed that the facility would act as a link between children and parents while also giving a platform to the devoured children.

Lesotho has a high record of children categorised as vulnerable, with the national registry of 180,000 orphans, mainly due to the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

The country also has one of the highest HIV and AIDS prevalence estimated at 23.2%.

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