Parliamentary Assembly
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Resolution 1980 (2014)[1]
Final version

Increasing the reporting of suspected sexual abuse of children

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Sexual abuse is the most hidden and under-reported form of violence against children. Most children who suffer sexual abuse do so at the hands of their parents, extended family members, neighbours or family friends. Only very few of those children report the offences themselves, often due to fear of the consequences. Similarly, for obvious reasons, very few perpetrators come forward and seek assistance.

2. Consequently, third parties – in particular professionals working with children – play a key role in breaking the cycle of violence that most children endure in silence, by detecting signs of sexual abuse and reporting it to the competent authorities.

3. The Parliamentary Assembly recalls that the best interest of the child should be given the primary consideration in all measures concerning the safety and well-being of children. Having examined the different arguments for and against both voluntary and mandatory reporting laws, the Assembly is not convinced that one has proved to be more effective than the other in terms of protecting children against abuse.

4. The Assembly notes that, irrespective of whether the system in place for reporting is mandatory or voluntary, many cases of child abuse, including sexual abuse, remain hidden, either because they are undetected or because they are detected but not reported. Under-reporting therefore represents one of the main challenges to child protection systems.

5. While the lack of public and professional awareness is the main reason why many abuse cases remain totally undetected, the conscious decision not to report suspected abuse has several explanations, depending on whether it concerns professionals working with children or ordinary citizens. The most common reasons given by professionals for not reporting include fear of misdiagnosis, fear of retaliation by members of the child's family or by the alleged perpetrator, concern for safeguarding the links between the child and the family, lack of confidence in the child protection system and fear of the consequences of violating confidentiality rules.

6. Ordinary citizens may also be reluctant to report suspected abuse because they do not want to interfere in someone else's family, they fear that their identity will be discovered by the suspected abuser or simply because they think reporting will make no difference or lead to the re-victimisation of the child.

7. The Assembly notes that reporting of child sexual abuse involves additional complications due to the difficulty in detecting it, since, unlike physical abuse, it does not always involve bodily contact and physical harm. It also notes that it is rare for children to make false allegations of sexual abuse. Therefore, for professionals working with children, it is crucial to learn how to recognise behavioural and psychological changes that may result from sexual abuse, to identify possible allegations of sexual abuse by children themselves and to properly react to such allegations.

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 7 March 2014 (see Doc. 13430, report of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Mr Valeriu Ghiletchi).

8. In view of the above, and irrespective of the reporting system in place at national level, the Assembly calls on the Council of Europe member States to create a framework which encourages all professionals working with children and all citizens to report suspected sexual abuse. To that end, member States should:

8.1. organise information campaigns aimed at raising public awareness of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse, its consequences for the victims and for society as a whole; these campaigns should also give guidance on what to do when such abuse is suspected;

8.2. enable professionals to properly identify and assist child victims of sexual abuse and motivate them in their role of intervening in situations of abuse by:

8.2.1. including the subject of child sexual abuse in their curricula, in particular for health and education professionals as well as sports coaches;

8.2.2. developing specific training and continuous education programmes on the subject of child sexual abuse, including the relevant legal framework;

8.2.3. encouraging professionals themselves to set up reporting rules to follow when suspecting child sexual abuse;

8.3. build trust in the child protection system by ensuring that:

8.3.1. reports of suspected sexual abuse are investigated and pursued quickly, fairly and effectively;

8.3.2. the investigation and the judicial process that may follow reporting are conducted in a child-sensitive manner and do not subject the child victim to further harm;

8.3.3. the removal of children from their families as a result of reporting is an exceptional measure;

8.3.4. feedback is provided to those who report suspicions of abuse as far as possible;

8.4. provide legal protection for those who report suspicions of child sexual abuse in good faith, by:

8.4.1. limiting the duty of confidentiality of professionals in such cases;

8.4.2. adopting rules to protect the identity of those who report.