

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear friends,

Sexual abuse is an insidious, often hidden threat to children's health. As this Hesperian News discusses, violence—including sexual violence—causes immediate harm and often leaves lasting scars. Like domestic violence, sexual exploitation of children crosses cultural and economic divides. Child advocates estimate that around 30% (1 in 3 girls and 2 in 7 boys) of the world's children are victims of sexual abuse.

Yet, despite its prevalence, sexual abuse is rarely spoken or written of as a threat to child health. Sexual abuse of children is considered so taboo, so distasteful, so intensely intimate a form of violence, that even acknowledging it as a problem makes people extremely uncomfortable. Most of us try hard to avoid talking about child sexual abuse. But unless it is discussed, and acknowledged as a threat to child health—just as domestic violence is now recognized as a threat to women's health—we have no hope of developing strategies to address this type of violence.

At Hesperian we have had our own struggle with this subject. When confronted in 1993 with evidence that children from Mexico in our care were being sexually abused, this was not a problem we wanted to hear about, much less address. Many of us felt conflicted, undecided about what to do. When the children were returned to Mexico, legal action became impossible; then when the staff person involved was asked to resign and left the organization, many wanted to close the book on the subject. We didn't know how to talk about sexual abuse of children, and felt that even if we did, no one else would want to hear about it.

Even now, the taboo of speaking about abuse is still very strong and we must overcome a fear that sharing our experience may disturb and alienate our friends. But in the past six years we have learned more about sexual abuse of children. While it continues to be a topic we wish we could avoid, we now know we can't. Silence about child sexual abuse grants impunity to the victimizer, and permits more abuse.

In our struggle to confront this issue responsibly within our organization, we heard many arguments suggesting we remain silent about our experience. I share these with you hoping we may help others address similar issues:



- *“If carried out in a loving relationship, sex with children can be nurturing.”* Regardless of the circumstances, sexual relations with adults are traumatic for children. Feelings of betrayal, powerlessness, stigmatization and inappropriate sexualization are all serious traumatic elements of any sexual relationship between an adult and a child. Early sexual activity can also cause physical health problems, such as unsafe pregnancy, and increases risk for HIV/AIDS, other sexually transmitted infections, and cervical cancer.
- *“If the children are enjoying it, it’s consensual. Children have sexual feelings too.”* The power differential between an adult and child involved in a sexual relationship makes these relationships inherently unequal and abusive. This difference in power causes much of the traumatic and unhealthy long-term psycho-social consequences of sex for children.
- *“In other parts of the world it is accepted.”* Wife beating, genital cutting, dowry deaths and other practices occur throughout the world. Like sexual abuse of children, it has taken years to move these harmful practices to a level of public acknowledgement and discussion.
- *“We have no right to interfere in personal, intimate relations.”* Sound familiar? This is the same argument we heard against discussing domestic violence as a women's health problem. As people working to create a world where health is a human right, we are obligated to address situations where health and well-being are threatened. This is especially the case concerning children, who may not have access to the language or channels necessary to address such problems themselves.
- *“We should keep quiet about it, we wouldn't want to destroy anyone's reputation” —or— “Talking about this will only harm ourselves.”* Sweeping sexual abuse under the carpet only allows abuse to continue and makes us complicit in the problem.

Although it's uncomfortable, we feel challenged to share our experience and take a public stance on this important health problem. By doing so, we hope we can raise public awareness about child sex abuse. As with so many other health problems, speaking about it is the first step to preventing sexual abuse.


Sarah Shannon