

Preventing Violence Against Children in Sri Lanka

Policy Brief



A new discussion paper on violence against children in Sri Lanka shows that despite some critical data gaps, many children are clearly exposed to various forms of violence. Sri Lanka is working hard to protect children through a number of initiatives. Building on these foundations, the paper makes recommendations to accelerate efforts to end violence against children in line with Sri Lanka's role as a pathfinder country for the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

Issues

40%

Physical punishment is widespread and still legal in most settings. **40%** of parents surveyed in 2013 had physically abused their child in the previous month.

14%

Sexual and gender-based violence: one study found **14%** of both adolescent girls and adolescent boys reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse.

31%

25%

Emotional violence and mental health: **31%** of adolescent boys and **25%** of adolescent girls surveyed in 2009 experienced emotional abuse in the previous three months. About 14,175 children in institutions are at risk of emotional and physical abuse.

Child marriage

Child marriage continues to impact some girls, although rates appear to be in decline.

Online safety

Online safety: increased access to information and communication technologies has led to concerns that children will be exposed to harm. Laws need to be put in place to mitigate risks.

Data on violence against children

Data on violence against children: there is a lack of up-to-date and disaggregated data on the prevalence, trends and drivers of violence against children of all ages.

Preventing Violence Against Children

Implementation and enforcement of laws

Good legal coverage exists in Sri Lanka but implementation is a challenge.

Norms and values

Some public norms and values continue to expose children in Sri Lanka to various forms of violence.

Safe environments

More information is needed on 'hot-spots' for violence against children in communities

Parent and caregiver support

Vulnerable parents, including migrating mothers, need support to care for and protect children.

Income and economic strengthening

A range of schemes seek to improve family incomes but child impacts are not well understood.

Response and support services

Actors are delivering services and support to children, but the quality is inconsistent, fragmented and can re-victimise children.

Education and life skills

Excellent school uptake is protective but children need access to improved life skills.

Pathways

Priority actions to end violence against children in Sri Lanka

1

Conduct a study on the drivers of violence against girls and boys in Sri Lanka

2

Accelerate action to end sexual violence against girls and boys

3

Tackle physical and humiliating punishment in family, school and institutional settings

4

Build momentum with some quick wins:

- Finalise the Draft National Policy for Child Protection
- Convene Grassroots Learning Forums on preventing violence against children
- Explore pathways to work with the Private Sector
- Amend, finalise and enact the Children (Judicial Protection) Bill.



The Issues: Violence against Children in Sri Lanka

There is a lack of up-to-date and disaggregated data on the prevalence, trends and drivers of violence against children of all ages. Limited available evidence highlights violence against children as a clear and urgent public policy priority that requires further research and action.

Physical and humiliating punishment is considered to be widespread in schools, homes and institutions; is accepted by many parents, teachers, leaders, and children; and is still legal in most settings. 40.7% of parents surveyed in 2013 had physically abused their child in the previous month. An upcoming school-based child discipline study by the Government is expected to provide updated data and identify promising positive discipline practices.

While limited, existing data on **sexual and gender-based violence** is worrying: in one study, 14.4% and 13.8% of late adolescent girls and boys respectively reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse. There are indications that offenders are often known and trusted by the child. Statutory rape is an ongoing concern. The National Action Plan of Action to Address Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) is a valuable entry point for accelerating action on SGBV.

There is concern that the 14,500 children in institutions may face **emotional and physical abuse**, with many institutions lacking quality facilities and trained staff. Strengthening parent and caregiver support could help address some of the push and pull factors into institutional care.

Child marriage continues to impact some girls, although rates appear to be in decline. The NCPA is considering how to address legal gaps that expose Muslim girls to early marriage. Child marriage is largely driven by teenage sexuality and fear of unmarried girls being sexually active (with marriage intended to 'legitimise' sexual behaviour, even following statutory rape).

The Government, with NGOs and the private sector, are starting to educate children about **online safety**: increased access to information and communication technologies has led to concerns that children will be exposed to harm through these platforms. Laws need to 'catch up' to the increasing risks of violence children in this rapidly evolving context.

There is little data on **emotional wellbeing and mental health**, but a 2009 study found that 31.3% and 25.4% of late adolescent males and females respectively experienced emotional abuse in the previous three months. Despite good intentions, parents exert pressure on children to perform well in school, particularly on Grade 5 exams, damaging their psychological wellbeing. There are concerns that the 20% of children who are 'left behind' by parents migrating for employment are more likely to face emotional harm and risk of violence and neglect. The war has had complex multifaceted effects on family life, on parenting behaviours, and on the social and economic conditions that affect the family, especially in the Northern and the Eastern provinces. Many children are in deep psychological distress and require special care, support and protection.

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Implementation and enforcement of laws

Sri Lanka has good legal coverage to protect children from violence, although some legislative gaps remain. The draft Children's (Judicial Protection) Bill will be critical for improved child justice, but amendments are required before it is passed. The larger challenge is in implementing laws due to: strong focus on punishment, not prevention; lack of knowledge among law enforcement officers of some laws; a tendency to attribute blame for violence on the victim and reflect harmful norms and values; and slow and inaccessible justice processes. Stakeholders are concerned that there is a trend of imposing suspended sentences in child sex abuse cases. Training and systems to manage cases and monitor child victims throughout the justice system are needed.



Norms and values

The Government and other stakeholders have campaigned to strengthen norms and values that protect children and prevent violence; improved monitoring and evaluation will help maximise the effectiveness of these investments. Some gender norms and values can hinder children's safety. Some men report a sense of entitlement in enacting sexual violence, and 79% of men and 75% of women think that a woman's appearance and/or behaviour 'invites' rape. Authoritarian and patriarchal attitudes, often reinforced by the

media, can limit children's participation in decisions that affect them and can lead to violence. Rights-based child protection training and minimum standards will help to protect children from harmful media reporting, which often reinforces ethnic and gender stereotypes, promotes violence as a conflict-resolution tool, sensationalises sexual violence, and stigmatises victims. Faith based leaders are also influential in shaping norms and values.



Safe environments

There isn't much information on children's safety outside of home and school settings. Children can be vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation in and around tourist settings; campaigns have been launched to address children's risks in these contexts. While estate sector areas are recognized as being particularly deprived, there isn't data to understand the specific risks of violence faced by children in these settings. The Government has invested in improving children's access to services and support to help vulnerable communities in the North and the East to grapple with the legacy of the conflict, including war trauma, multiple displacements, and loss of family, kin, friends, homes, employment and other valued resources.



Parent and caregiver support

Programmes are needed to help vulnerable parents – such as young parents, those living with disability or mental health or drug and alcohol issues – to prevent child abuse and violence in home. The external migration of women for employment, a key economic strategy for Sri Lanka, has led to many children losing the protection of a female caregiver, which has in turn been linked to higher levels of domestic sexual abuse. Children in the 23% of female-headed households nationally are reportedly at increased risk of violence and exploitation. The health sector is a valuable potential partner for engaging parents and carers, and connecting them with knowledge, skills and support.



Income and economic strengthening

There are several programmes to improve families' household income, including through cash transfers, subsidies, and micro-credit schemes, the largest of which is the Samurdhi (Divi Neguma) Subsidy. However, important social support services are not financed or do not exist. There is no national strategy to guide an inclusive and child-sensitive social security system. The impacts of existing programmes on child wellbeing, human development, and child protection are not well understood.



Response and support services

Government and NGOs are both delivering critical services and support to child victims of violence. The quality of service provision can be inconsistent, fragmented, and subject to the commitment and personality of individual service providers. Response services often fail to meet children's needs, re-victimising them due to poor coordination, disjointed case management and the limited capacity of key providers. Case management protocols that clarify roles and responsibilities across agencies at all levels, coupled with minimum standards for service delivery, could help to improve the quality and coordination of services. The professionalising of the social service cadre, together with training on child rights and service standards is necessary, and should address any norms and values that negatively impact how professionals engage with children. Effective and efficient financing of the services remains a key challenge.



Education and life skills

The Government's commitment to extend compulsory education to 13 years of schooling will further build on its already impressive education results. Corporal punishment is prohibited in principle but remains commonplace. Bullying in schools is a concern. Schools have access to life skills curricula that can help to empower children, but many teachers are reportedly uncomfortable with some of the content related to sexuality. The NCPA is working with the Parliamentary Oversight Committee and the Ministry of Education to develop a new sexual and reproductive health curriculum. The country's 3,867 Children's Clubs are an entry point for building children's life skills, knowledge and participation. Other possible entry points include: state children's homes; after-school classes for participating children; and sports. A review of existing life skills approaches could help to improve programme impacts.

Multisectoral actions, coordination, monitoring and evaluation: An overarching child protection coordination mechanism could improve coordination and reduce duplication of mandates and powers. Enhanced partnership with NGOs and other actors – such as the media, private sector, faith-based leaders, and children and families – will amplify the Government’s efforts and offer new alliances. Bringing all stakeholders around a common vision of protecting children is an important first step. It is critical to engage children and youth as agents of change as well as beneficiaries. Improved monitoring and evaluation will help to identify what works best, under what circumstances, to prevent and respond to violence against children in all its forms.

Opportunities

- Harness INSPIRE¹ package to focus on effective and evidence-informed prevention strategies.
- Bring on board new stakeholders including the media, private sector and faith-based leaders.
- Build on existing plans and strategies to ensure alignment to national priorities.
- Generate lessons learnt from existing programmes and approaches.
- Mobilise financial and human resources to respond to a few key priority issues that impact on children’s protection from violence.
- NCPA and Police data is being digitized which will enable easier analysis.
- Strengthen linkages and the incorporation of child protection into other sectors such as health and education.

Challenges

- Inadequate accountability for child protection service providers, who are also disempowered and at times sidelined from managing child protection cases.
- Many existing plans and strategies are unfunded and are not fully implemented.
- Limited mainstreaming meaningful participation of children.
- Many children being at risk of violence, but key drivers and contexts not being well understood.
- Most of the priorities for action identified have been documented and tabled before: the Global Partnership will need to help identify and navigate the underlying reasons why many previous efforts have been unsuccessful before moving forward.

The Pathways: Opportunities for Sri Lanka to End Violence against Children

Stakeholders have emphasized the need to focus on a limited number of strategic milestones to effectively demonstrate impact as a pathfinder country. The following recommended pathways should be validated, refined and prioritized during the formulation of the Roadmap.

1

Conduct a study on the drivers of violence against girls and boys in Sri Lanka to generate disaggregated data on the prevalence, trends and contexts of violence.

2

Accelerate action to end sexual violence against girls and boys in line with local and global evidence, with ambitious and clearly defined targets for all partners to work towards.

3

Tackle physical and humiliating punishment in family, school and institutional settings with a multipronged approach, including: building the capacity of parents, teachers and caregivers to adopt positive discipline practices; prohibiting corporal punishment by law; and increasing support for them to manage stress and conflict without violence.

4

Build momentum with some quick wins: Ensure finalization of the Draft National Policy for Child Protection; convene Grassroots Learning Forums to generate learning from the collective experience of frontline workers, other stakeholders and children; explore pathways to work with the Private Sector; support the necessary amendments to the Children (Judicial Protection) Bill and advocate for its finalization and enactment.

¹ WHO, UNICEF, UNODC, the World Bank, the Pan-American Health Organization, Together for Girls, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have come together to develop a new INSPIRE package of seven proven strategies to prevent violence against children. Drawing from decades of global research and lessons learned, the new INSPIRE strategies comprise: the Implementation and enforcement of laws; Norms and values; Safe environments; Parent and caregiver support; Income and economic strengthening; Response and support services; and Education and life skills.