



Save the Children

REGIONAL CHILD PROTECTION SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS – PACIFIC

Summary report

Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

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The Situational Analysis was designed by the team from the Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne and Macquarie University, with significant input from the in-country researchers and the Save the Children staff noted above. Researchers in each country independently conducted primary data collection. Data were analysed by the Nossal Institute team, with input from the in-country researchers.

Dr Holly Doel-Mackaway from Macquarie University designed and guided the child-led research, analysed the data and authored the separate report. Iris Low played a significant role in overseeing the conduct of the child led research in both Fiji and Solomon Islands.

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The report would not have been possible without the time and perspectives shared by stakeholders, caregivers and children for this and past studies across each of the countries.

This research is dedicated to the memory of our dear colleague Emma David from Papua New Guinea, who died suddenly in December 2023.

Emma worked for Save the Children in PNG for over fifteen years in a variety of roles, including her most recent as Child Protection Technical Advisor for PNG. Emma was an integral member of our Pacific Regional Child Protection Technical group and was renowned for sharing her knowledge and wisdom, which inspired peers and colleagues across the movement. Emma was highly respected by Government officials and external colleagues across sectors and organisations.

Emma embodied all our organisational values, and her spirit and drive to promote children's rights and advocate for their protection knew no bounds. She was regularly described as 'a fearless advocate for children'.

It is fitting to honour her life's work by dedicating this first-ever Pacific Regional Child Protection Analysis to maintain the legacy of her work.

Supported by



INTRODUCTION

Save the Children's Regional Situational Analysis of child protection in the Pacific was carried out in 2023 in five countries: Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Fiji. The aim of the research was to better understand the nature and prevalence of violence against children in the region, how the drivers of violence and risk and protective factors have changed since before the COVID-19 outbreak, and in response, what changes are needed to child protection systems to keep children safe from harm.

Children are at the forefront of this research, with their personal experiences of violence in their home, school, community, and online a major contribution to the analysis, along with child protection stakeholders, caregivers and adolescents.

Equally, children must also be at the forefront of shaping the solutions required to better protect them from violence that has detrimental impact on their development and growth, and their sense of safety and protection in the world.

The objectives of the research were to understand:

- 1 The nature and extent of violence that children are at risk of or affected by in their home, school, community, and online;
- 2 The changes to these risks brought about by climate change, digitisation and COVID-19;
- 3 The extent to which formal child protection systems have been strengthened through funding, staffing and training to adapt to these changes;
- 4 The opportunity to strengthen child protection systems, with a focus on the community level, and how Save the Children may pursue these priorities in its programming and advocacy; and
- 5 The extent to which gender, age and disability and other factors serve as risk and protective factors and how this can be taken into account in the above.

Changes are explored over the past five years, focussing on children aged 6-16 years.

The research was conducted by the Nossal Institute for Global Health at the University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University, in-country research collaborators, and Save the Children. It was guided by a Reference Group comprised of Save the Children staff from Tonga, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand. Rigorous standards were adhered to for research design, ethics approval, data collection, analysis, validation and child safeguarding.

The full versions of the Situational Analysis Research and supporting child led research from Fiji and Solomon Islands can be found here:

- 1 Full report - Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis – Pacific
https://www.savethechildren.org.nz/assets/Files/Reports/FINAL-Child-Protection-Pacific-Situational-Study-Report_-_SC-Nossal-v3.pdf
- 2 Full report - Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis – Pacific – child led research
https://www.savethechildren.org.nz/assets/Files/Reports/FINAL-Child-Protection-Child-Led-Research-Report_-_SCNZ-Nossal.pdf

Papua New Guinea



Solomon Islands



Fiji



Vanuatu



Tonga



Across five Pacific countries:

- 50 child protection stakeholders were interviewed.
- 60 child protection stakeholders responded to online surveys.
- 150 caregivers participated in focus group discussions.
- 150 caregivers responded to online surveys.
- 150 children aged 8-16 participated in focus group discussions.
- 40 children responded to online surveys.
- 94 children participated in child-led research conducted by 10 adolescent facilitators in Fiji and Solomon Islands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are included in each country chapter, which articulate suggested actions to be taken by Save the Children in its own programming, Save the Children and government partners, and Save the Children and other actors in each context.

Across all five countries, the findings of the situational analysis point to a need to significantly increase efforts at all levels of the child protection system to realise commitments made by governments, Save the Children and other child protection actors to end violence against children. This will not be possible without government leadership, including by prioritising relevant legislative and policy reform, by securing a long-term increase in financing for the child protection system and by stewarding formal and community-based prevention and response services.

Given the evidence of the role of colonialism, poverty, migration and climate change in driving violence against children in the Pacific, global child protection partners – including donors – also have a key role in addressing violence against children, including by supporting locally-led initiatives that are aligned with government strategy, through long-term funding.

While specific country chapters highlight a range of recommendations for the specific country context, three key themes emerged across all five countries.

1

Importance of child participation within the child protection system

- Engage with children, including children with disabilities, diverse groups of children (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics), and children with lived experience of violence, within the process of strengthening the child protection system, and in its ongoing governance at the national, district and community level.
- Develop child rights based principles to guide child protection mechanisms at a community level. These would include: defining the context in which such mechanisms are appropriate; basic principles governing the use of such mechanisms, including when referral to formal services is necessary, and the involvement of women and children in decision-making regarding dispute resolution.

2

Strengthen primary prevention and community-based programming that addresses the links between violence against women and violence against children

- Use an evidence-based approach to meaningfully engage with children and caregivers to develop prevention programmes that address the gendered nature of violence against women and children, integrating online safety. Advocate to governments and donors for multi-year and core funding that adequately resource long-term programming.

3

Advocate with national level institutions in primary prevention and response

- Advocate for the prohibition on the use of violent discipline in all settings, and marriage before 18 years. Enable and support child-led campaigns and activities to address these issues.
- Advocate for appropriate resourcing (including budget allocation and adequate staff levels) to establish effective child protection response services, and provide ongoing opportunities for pre- and in-service training.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual framework

The research design was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children's approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children:



Drivers of violence against children: socio-cultural norms and practices; poverty and food insecurity; migration, including of labour to and from the Pacific; climate change; digitisation; and COVID-19.



Risk and protective factors: age; gender; sexuality; disability status; location (urban/rural); school status; living at home/away from parents; living in two-parent/single-parent family; living with their parents and extended family; parental use of alcohol and other drugs; and exposure to family violence.

This report presents data from a literature review, as well as primary research.

Literature review

The literature review encompassed a review of both academic and wider literature, including reports from United Nations and non-governmental organisations working in the Pacific. Reports were included if they were focused on the drivers, prevalence or consequences of violence against children in one of the five countries, described the child protection formal or community systems, or if they included monitoring or evaluation of programmes to prevent or respond to such violence. The review also included recent government legislation, policy, programme and budget documents not considered in recent literature.

Primary research

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection. These included online surveys, interviews with child protection stakeholders, focus group discussions with caregivers and children, and child led research.

The research design varied between countries based on complementary research projects taking place at the same time. Ethics approval was obtained from Save the Children's Ethics Committee in the United States and the Solomon Islands Health Research and Ethics Review Board. Data from the literature review and the different primary sources were triangulated to present country reports.

Child led research

The child led research component of this research is based on Doel-Mackaway's model for children's participation that utilises a child rights-based approach (Doel-Mackaway 2022). This model provides a template for the participation of children in research that is child-friendly, culturally appropriate and respects and upholds participants rights.

Ninety-four children and young people participated in the child led research: 49 females and 45 males across Fiji and Solomon Islands with ten adolescent facilitators. There were an equal number of participants in Fiji (47) and Solomon Islands (47) with almost the same gender breakdown across the two participant cohorts. The questions used for the child led research were based on the three overarching questions below used in the broader study, but were adapted for the child participants.

Situational analysis research questions

1

What is the nature and extent of violence that children are at risk of or affected by in their home, school, community, and online?

- 1.1 How are recent factors, including climate change, digitisation and COVID-19, changing the dynamics and behaviours that drive such violence occurring in the home, school, community and online?
- 1.2 How are the risks and protective factors associated with such violence, including but not limited to gender, disability and age changing?

2

What are the strengths and gaps in the current child protection formal and informal system to prevent and respond to key protection issues studied in this research?

- 2.1 Has funding and staffing changed to enable formal child protection services to respond to the last five years' changing context?
- 2.2 Are there past, existing or emerging, approaches, including kastom, traditional or religious approaches, to learn from?
- 2.3 What is needed to support the emergence of and to sustain such approaches?

3

What ideas do key stakeholders suggest for future child protection programming and advocacy work at the national, provincial and community levels?

- 3.1 Are there specific recommendations for protecting girls and children with disabilities?

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to the situational analysis:

- 1 The breadth of the research questions means that the depth in the data is limited in some key areas. Researchers and survey respondents noted that the interviews and surveys were too long, minimising in depth discussion and leading to drop off in survey responses;
- 2 The breadth of the study design is also reflected in small sample sizes across a broad range of respondents, although the stakeholders that participated likely represent a large proportion of the relatively small child protection workforce;
- 3 Stakeholder availability was limited in some contexts, as well as challenges with remote supervision of research;
- 4 The division in the research team between data collection and analysis may lead to errors in interpretation, which was mitigated in design through holding stakeholder validation workshops. The efficacy of the stakeholder validation workshops in mitigating this risk were in themselves constrained by limited participation; and
- 5 In respect to the child led research carried out in Fiji and Solomon Islands, limitations included inconsistencies with questions across both countries; the lack of any participants identifying as LGBTIQ+ or living with a disability, which limited the findings. Furthermore, the young participants were encouraged not to talk about personal experiences, so as to reduce risk to them, and instead talk about experiences of others, however this proved challenging for the children.



Children in Solomon Islands take part in child participation session.
Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

Methods and sample size	Fiji	Papua New Guinea	Solomon Islands	Tonga	Vanuatu
Online survey with child protection stakeholders	24	-	20	16	-
Online survey with caregivers	60	-	15	28	45
Online survey with adolescents (self-administered/facilitated)	19	-	-	20	-
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	16	10	11	10	5
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	4	2	4	10	3
Child led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 (mixed)	2	-	2	-	-
Child led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 (mixed)	4	-	4	-	-
Adult led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 (mixed)	-	2	-	1	-
Adult led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 (mixed)	-	3	-	2	-
Total number of participants	196	83	122	145	85



Children take part in a youth-led focus group discussion in Fiji. Photo credit: Save the Children Fiji.

Key findings

Nature and prevalence of violence against children

- Child protection risks have likely increased over the past five years due to COVID-19, increased migration, climate change, and digital connectivity.
- Over 80% of child protection stakeholders in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Fiji perceived that emotional, physical and sexual violence had increased or significantly increased in their country.
- Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu have the highest rates of violence against children across 40 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, with more than 80% of children experiencing violent discipline by their caregivers.
- Caregivers in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu were most concerned about online violence against children. The research found there are limited data on online violence with respect to children's safety in all five countries.
- Children identified serious concerns around online safety, including encountering inappropriate content, and cyberbullying leading to emotional harm and even suicide.
- The situational analysis confirmed that children's rights to live free from harm, abuse and neglect are threatened by persistent social norms that accept high levels of violence within homes, schools and communities.
- Socio-cultural and religious norms regarding gender and violence are the dominant driver of violence against children.

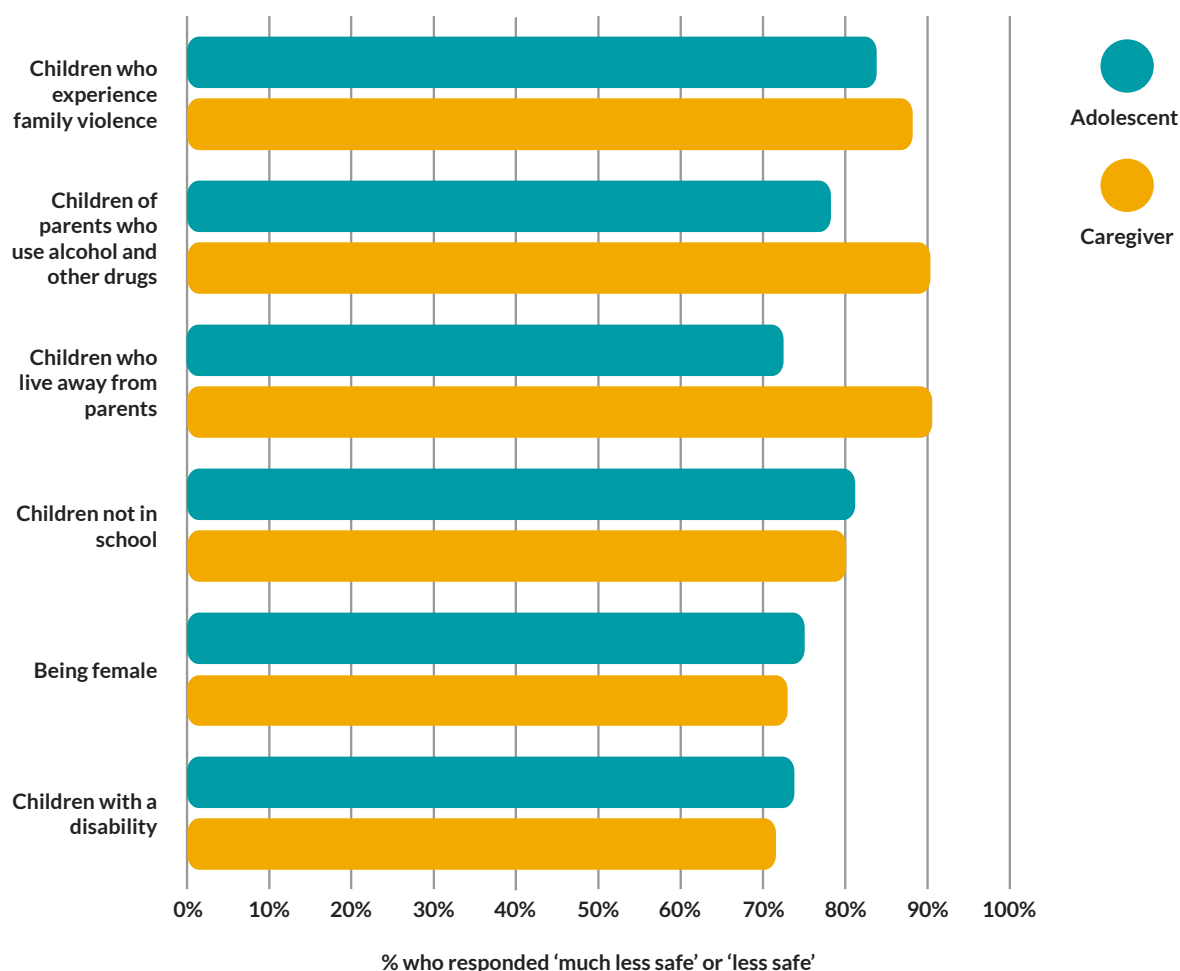
Risk and protective factors

- While violence in childhood was a generalised experience for both boys and girls across all five countries, a number of risk factors increase children's vulnerability to violence, these include family violence, gender, disability, living away from parents, not attending school, and parental use of drugs and alcohol. (Fig. 1)
- Higher education for both a child and their caregivers was the dominant protective factor for girls against child marriage. Other protective factors included wealth and positive parenting. The child led research also revealed strong connections for children between the home, school and community is what helps them feel safe.

Strengths and gaps in child protection systems

- All countries included in this analysis have made significant progress over the past 10-15 years in strengthening their child protection frameworks, however, there remains gaps in legislation and in implementation of laws, including corporal punishment and child marriage.
- Child participation is missing in the development of child protection systems across all five countries, and must be prioritised in order to strengthen those systems.
- Under-resourcing is a significant barrier to progress, leading to significant shortfalls in the number and quality of skilled workforce across child protection services.
- The research revealed that child protection agencies in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu received less than 0.06% of the total government budget in 2023.
- Weak data collection and management systems on most child protection issues is leaving detrimental gaps in understanding the prevalence and nature of violence against children.
- Informal community-based mechanisms and formal child protection services both have a role to play in the child protection system, yet greater investment is needed to establish linkages and coordination between them.

Figure 1: Adolescent (N=33) and caregiver (N=101) perspectives on factors that increase risk of violence for children





Supporting research from New Zealand

In 2023, Save the Children New Zealand carried out a separate but related piece of research on child protection for children under five in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The New Zealand research consists of a three-part literature review, which brings together evidence from overseas and in Aotearoa New Zealand, within mātauranga Māori and through surveys of children, as well as one-on-one interviews with thirty-five professionals that traverse the care and protection system.

While the research methodology differs to the Regional Situational Analysis, namely the age of the children in focus being under five years of age, the findings are relevant for the Pacific region, and can provide valuable insights into shared strengths and gaps to inform and improve child protection policy and programming.

Numerous gaps were found in Aotearoa New Zealand's current care and protection system that significantly impact children under five years. Gaps are evident at every level - system, institution and agency, service and programme, and within the workforce.

Findings show that despite higher investment in child protection services and greater data collection in Aotearoa New Zealand compared to the five Pacific countries studied in the regional analysis, the rates of family violence, sexual violence, neglect, and poverty that lead to increased vulnerability for children remain unacceptably high.

This shows it takes more than just understanding the problem, it is what is done with that knowledge and data that can bring lasting change for children who deserve to live a life free from violence.

Importantly, both situational analyses serve to illuminate pathways forward to securing the care, protection, and wellbeing of children in the Pacific.

CONCLUSION

The Regional Child Protection Situational Analysis shows overwhelmingly that violence is a common experience for the majority of children in the five Pacific countries studied, and that this violence has increased in the past five years since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings point to a need to significantly increase efforts at all levels of the child protection system to realise commitments made by governments, Save the Children and other child protection actors to end violence against children. This will not be possible without government leadership, including by prioritising relevant legislative and policy reform, by securing a long-term increase in financing for the child protection system, and by stewarding formal and community-based prevention and response services.

Moreover, given the evidence of the role of colonialism, poverty, migration and climate change in driving violence against children in the Pacific, global child protection partners, including donors, also have a key role to play by providing long-term funding for locally led initiatives that are aligned with government strategy.

To realise their rights to a life free from harm, abuse and neglect, children must play a pivotal role in shaping the solutions that bring about lasting change.

Fiji



Photo credit: Save the Children Fiji.

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children New Zealand commissioned the regional situational analysis of child protection systems across five Pacific countries in 2023, including Fiji. The aim of the research was to understand recent changes to structural drivers of violence against children and the risk and protective factors which underlie its prevalence and patterns, in turn to strengthen child protection systems, particularly at the community level.

The research was carried out by The Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University and in-country research collaborators.

The report presents the aims and objectives, methodology, child led research, key findings on violence against children in Fiji, and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Save the Children Fiji programming

- Increase internal funding allocated to child protection programming in Fiji.
- Build on Save the Children Fiji's long-standing work advocating for child protection to support the design and implementation of mechanisms for child participation in the governance of the child protection system.
- Continue to engage with children and caregivers at the community level through a comprehensive, evidence-based and long-term approach for primary prevention:
 - Programmes should include comprehensive sexuality education for both parents and children delivered in communities and/or schools.
 - Programmes should aim to address the gendered nature of violence against children, integrating, where appropriate, efforts for the primary prevention of violence against women and children (for example regarding pillar 1 and 2 of the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls).
 - Programmes should include, as a core component, online safety and digital literacy for children and caregivers, building on the I Am Digital campaign.
 - Rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning plans should be developed and shared with partners.

- Engage with police and schools on ways to strengthen reporting and referral processes to inform the revision of national policies across these sectors.
- Pilot and provide input into the development of secondary prevention programmes in communities in which primary prevention programmes are taking place, with a view to inform national level policy.
- Seek to engage with mechanisms governing the response to violence against women and girls, such as the National Action Plan Technical Working Group to help integrate efforts to further integration.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with national and subnational government institutions

- Engage children, including children with disabilities and lived experience of violence, within the process of strengthening the child protection system, and in its ongoing governance at the national, district and community level.
- Develop a comprehensive, evidence-based and long-term strategy for primary prevention that targets children and their caregivers. Enable multi-year investment in programming to build long-term outcomes.
- Consider revising and reinvigorating governance mechanisms of child protection, including with child participation. Launch any revisions through child protection and child participation leadership training to members.
- Pass the Child Care and Protection Bill and Child Justice Bill. Take the opportunity of the passing of the Bill to assess the level implementation of the Interagency Guidelines, in consultation with stakeholders and children, with a view to strengthening referral practices and developing inclusive reporting and referral pathways including for children with disabilities. Consider developing guidelines for the development of community-based reporting mechanisms.
- Develop a National Child Protection Policy, in line with the Child Care and Protection Bill, and building on the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls. Set budget increases to increase staff levels in the Department of Child Services Department, with an effective training budget for Department of Social Welfare officers working in child protection. Support the development of specialised online child safety expertise in the Department of Social Welfare or the Online Safety Commission.
- In accordance with any revisions to the Interagency Guidelines, review and support the design of in-service training for police relating to child protection and the implementation of the 'No Drop policy.'
- In accordance with any revisions to the Interagency Guidelines, review the 2015 Ministry of Education Policy on Child Protection in Schools, with training for school leaders, teachers and child protection focal points, and consider the appointment of external mentors for child protection focal points in schools.
- Review and increase the existing social protection payments to support children to stay in school, and to better care for children in residential care. Consider initiating secondary prevention programmes for children at risk, which could be piloted in informal settlements.
- Pass the Child Protection Safeguarding Policy to establish and mandate national standards for child safeguarding for all organisations working with children, and work towards the establishment of a sex offenders register.

Increase internal funding allocated to child protection programming in Fiji.



Engage with police and schools on ways of strengthening reporting and referral processes, to inform the revision of national policies in the two sectors.



Child participation is a missing component of governance at all levels of the system.

- Publish annual reports that are disaggregated, including by gender, disability status, location and the nature of the caregiving relationships analysing reporting data across the Department of Social Welfare, police, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, education and health sectors.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with other actors

- Advocate for increased government and external funding for strengthening the child protection system, including considering how funds designated to support the prevention of violence against women and girls can best be used to strengthen the child protection system.
- Strengthen coordination between child protection external partners, including UNICEF and Save the Children, based on recognition of respective strengths, through:
 - Sharing multi-year and annual work plans for support to the child protection system.
 - Coordination and co-commissioning of research and evaluation relating to child protection.
- Consider child protection responses to climate change, drawing on the evidence presented in this situational analysis and literature review.

Pass the Child Protection Safeguarding Policy to establish and mandate national standards for child safeguarding for all organisations working with children, and work towards the establishment of a sex offenders register.



Children in a rural school in Fiji wash their hands before lunch. Photo credit: Save the Children Fiji.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for the situational analysis was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children’s approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children.

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection in Fiji. These included online surveys, interviews with child protection stakeholders, focus group discussions with caregivers and children, and child led research.

Child led research

The child led research component of this research is based on Doel-Mackaway’s model for children’s participation that utilises a child rights based approach (Doel-Mackaway 2022). This model provides a template for the participation of children in research that is child-friendly, culturally appropriate and respects and upholds participants’ rights.

The child led research in Fiji was conducted with children and young people aged 8-16 years old in two communities in Suva (locations withheld for privacy). Site 1 is a close-knit community where there are many social programmes and community groups most of which centre around church gatherings where religious practices and rituals are observed daily. Site 2 is an informal settlement located in a densely populated area. The settlement predominantly comprises of poorly constructed and often incomplete housing structures. The community residing in Site 2 face significant socioeconomic challenges.

Adolescents aged 16 and 17 facilitated the focus group discussions with the young research participants.

Methods	Sample size
Online survey with child protection stakeholders	24
Online survey with caregivers	60
Online survey with adolescents (self-administered/facilitated)	19
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	16
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	4
Child led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 (mixed)	2
Child led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 (mixed)	4
Total number of participants (gender)	196 (F-128 M-63 Other-5)

KEY FINDINGS

Nature and extent of violence against children

In Fiji, the situational analysis found many children experience violence in their home, school and community, with growing concern regarding children’s experiences of violence online. Other forms of violence included sexual violence in the home, community and online, as well as bullying both in schools and online.

Children, both girls and boys, are subjected to high rates of violent discipline at home, leading to children feeling unsafe. Findings were consistent with data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey carried out in 2021, in which caregivers reported 81% of children aged 1-14 years had experienced violent discipline in the last month (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Prevalence rates were slightly higher for boys, children aged 3-9 years, children from poorer backgrounds and children in rural areas. Furthermore, physical or sexual violence against girls aged 15-19 years by their partners remains higher than the global averages (UNICEF, 2023b; WHO, 2021).

Most child protection stakeholders who participated in the online survey perceive that violence is increasing (Figure 2).

Adolescents and caregivers reported children were least safe online compared to other settings.

Figure 2: Proportion of stakeholders that perceive an increase in:





Children in Fiji take part in a child participation session. Photo credit: Save the Children Fiji.

Prevalence of violence

Violent discipline

Children reported that the use of violent discipline in the home is widespread and leads to children feeling unsafe and impacts their relationships with caregivers and other adults.

Through the child led research, almost all the child participants aged 12 to 16, across both research sites, emphasised the prevalence and detrimental impact of violent discipline in the home on children's lives.

Children explained many ways caregivers engage in corporal punishment, including through the use of implements such as a hosepipe, sasa broom, stick, knife, spoon, father's belt (8-11 years, mixed) or mother's rolling pin (Boy, 12-16 years).

Two females said, and all other participants agreed, that children feel unsafe when parents threaten to or "smack" children (Girl, 8-11 years).

Neglect

Neglect and its correlation to other forms of violence against children is a cause of concern amongst children, caregivers and stakeholders in the research. Children said they felt unsafe when left alone at home without their parents and when their parents went to work. Children whose caregivers used alcohol and other drugs and children with a disability are particularly vulnerable to neglect.

Neglect was the most common form of child abuse (30%) reported to Department of Social Welfare between 2016-19, with slightly more cases amongst boys (52%) compared to girls (48%) (Plange et al., 2023). However, since that reporting period, stakeholders perceive neglect to have increased.

The kitchen was a place that could make children feel very unsafe 'because [there is] a lot of sharp stuff there for smacking, the fire, the pan, the belt'.

Young children said when parents, particularly fathers, are intoxicated they feel unsafe and very worried.

Stakeholders describe the drivers of neglect as having worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sexual violence

Stakeholders and caregivers expressed concern regarding sexual violence (including harassment) in the home and community, with 100% of stakeholder participants perceiving there to be an increase or significant increase in sexual violence in the past five years. Girls are most vulnerable to child sexual violence (92% of cases reported to police - Fiji Police Force, 2021). However, stakeholders stressed that boys are also vulnerable to sexual abuse, and children with a disability are particularly vulnerable.

Data shows that most perpetrators are adult men known to the victim, although up to 20% of persons charged with sexual offences between 2019 and 2022 were under 18 years of age.

Child marriage

On child marriage, the overarching finding is that while it shows some decline, it continues to take place despite the minimum age for marriage being 18 years of age. Stakeholders described cases of child marriage as a common response to teenage pregnancy in Indo-Fijian communities.

Child labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children

Regarding child labour and Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC), a 2023 study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported qualitative evidence showing there has been an increase in child labour and CSEC since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some stakeholders raised CSEC as a concern. Qualitative data suggests that CSEC takes place in foreign owned yachts, fishing vessels, hotels and motels and may be facilitated by families, taxi drivers, pimps or through direct contact between children and perpetrators online (Davy & Tppou, 2022; Fatiaki, 2019; UNODC, 2023b). Past research has found children engaged in CSEC are commonly between the ages of 13-17 years, although can be as young as 10 years of age, with the iTaukei community being reported as particularly vulnerable, citing poverty, homelessness and migration, including living with extended families as factors associated with CSEC (Davy & Tppou, 2022; Save the Children Fiji, 2019).

A small number of stakeholders raised concern over child labour in Fiji, although it was not raised in the child led research. One female caregiver noted in a focus group that if children have to help their family financially, they are forced to work.

Violence in school

Children raised violent discipline by teachers as a significant concern, reporting a range of physical discipline used by teachers including being hit by, or having the following items thrown at them: *“dusters, sasa brooms, throwing chalk and dustpans”* (Boy, 12-16 years).

Non-compliance with school rules leading to visits to the principal’s office and potential disciplinary actions like ‘growling, screaming, or smacking’ contributes to children’s sense of unease at school (8-11 years, mixed). Older female participants described some teachers as bullies (Girl, 12-16 years) who wield authority and power in ways that make students feel unsafe and uncomfortable.

Stakeholders and caregivers, as well as children who participated in the

66 Referral lately of a 14 year old on way to school, decided to take shortcut and there were men drinking and they raped him. We are telling parents to look after their boys and girls, not just girl.99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Although corporal punishment is not permitted within schools, teachers continue to use psychological and physical violence as an approach to classroom management.

child led research, said bullying in school by older children towards younger boys and girls is a concern, as is travelling to and from school.

There is limited reporting of school related violence by schools to the Department of Social Welfare and no formal child protection information system within the education sector.

Violence online

All participant groups in the situational analysis voiced their concern for children's safety online and the lack of protection for them in place. In particular, adolescents and caregivers were most concerned about children's safety online compared to forms of violence in other settings (figure 3). Specific concerns raised include cyberbullying, sharing of images and photographs of children, grooming and viewing inappropriate material.

Adolescents who took part in the online survey reported incidences of their friends being sent violent or sexual content, being contacted by a stranger, having someone misuse their personal information/photos online in a mean way, receiving online threats or abuse, and having people say things damaging to their reputation.

"It's like going into the ocean, the deeper you go, the higher the risk. Our children are so deep into social media but lack the basic understanding [of] the right reasons for being online." (Child protection stakeholder, male)

66 There are plenty of bad things online, including bad photos, pornography and 'bad links' that make the online environment unsafe for children. 99

- Boy, 12-16 years.

66 Communicating with strangers is very scary. 99

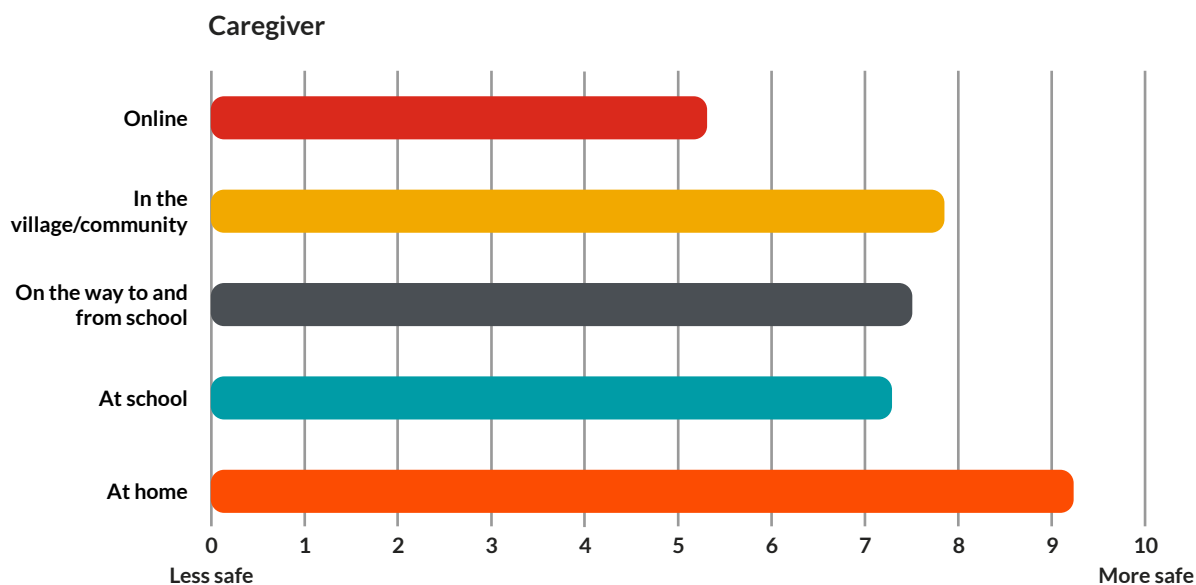
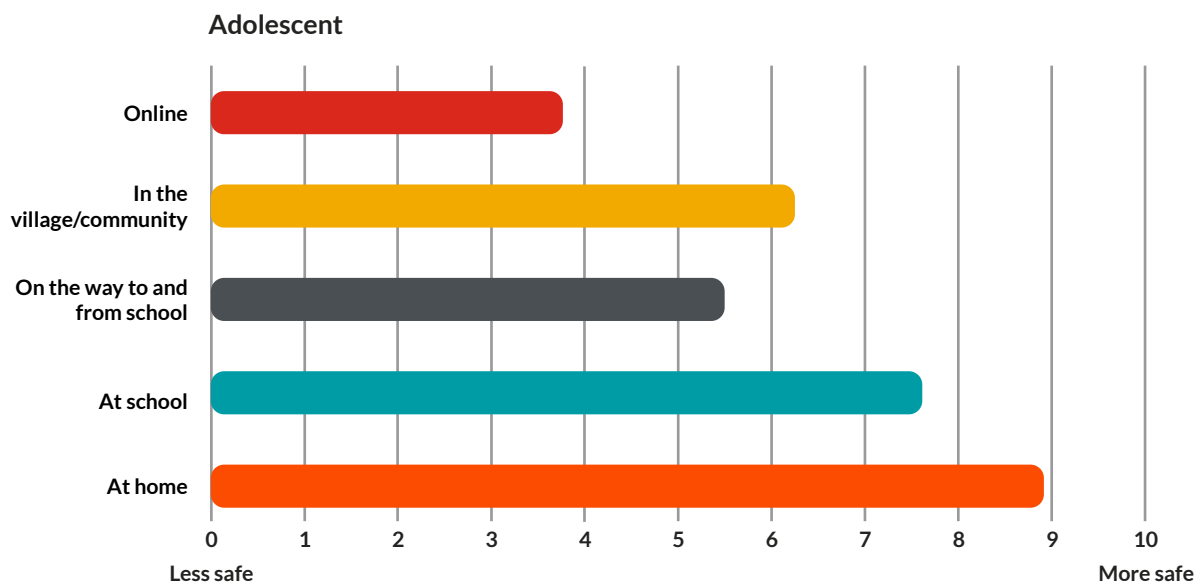
- Boy, 12-16 years.

Stakeholders also raised concerns of social media and its potential for grooming of girls:

66 When we speak to our [clients] we see how they go in contact with people on Facebook or Instagram and they become friends and start dating or seeing each other and end up getting pregnant. Sometimes when they are talking to someone on Facebook, the gap is 10 - 12 years, but their picture is so young, and they think it's a young person. In the conversation the person knows how to groom the child - give you recharge, send expensive things, food or money for data. And so looking at the child's development we can see the love and affection the child will get drawn to, compared to that from the family, and they end up getting so close to the person and sense of belonging increases because of this online connection. They meet once or twice and the child becomes pregnant then the person is gone - account deleted. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Figure 3: Caregiver (N=60) and adolescent (N=19) perceived level of children’s safety in different settings in Fiji on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being least safe





Youth-led focus group discussions in Fiji. Photo credit: Save the Children Fiji.

Drivers of violence

The primary drivers of violence include socio-cultural and religious gender norms and socio-economic inequalities and their gendered implications, which lead to an ongoing cycle of violence. Migration, in part driven by climate change and poverty, as well as digitisation, are also contributing to violence including in new settings – informal settlements and online, which require continued innovation in programming responses.

Existing drivers

Colonialism: Human rights and in particular, children’s rights to be free from violence, are perceived by some as external and imposed, and inconsistent with traditional values, such as respect and forgiveness. Although respect and forgiveness may be enabling of human rights, “respect” has a particular meaning related to authority and “forgiveness” to traditional restorative practices rather than resort to the legal system, and in tension with child and victim centred justice processes.

With the pace of change in Fiji in recent years through the influence of migration, urbanisation and digitisation, resisting the notion of rights has become synonymous with protecting traditional/indigenous values.

Norms and practices relating to gender and violence: Violence against children can be seen as part of the intersection of gender norms relating to men’s and women’s behaviour and roles, and to the normalisation of men’s violence against women and children in the household. Norms relating to violence against children are strong with the most recent Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey finding that there is a greater acceptance of violence against children, compared to violence against women - 24% of women and 21% of men think that a husband is justified in hitting his wife for one of five reasons, while 60% of men and 54% of women think that a child needs to be physically punished (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Poverty and violence: While lower than Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, poverty, particularly in the lower middle income bracket, has increased in Fiji since 2010 (Sachs, 2023).

Stakeholders and caregivers considered poverty to be a strong driver of violence against children, with 13 out of 14 adolescents (93%) who responded to the online survey agreeing that poverty makes children much less safe or less safe.

66 Rights take away our culture. Culture taught us to forgive one another, respect one another, but rights took control of the culture. 99

- Male, caregivers.

[Women] acknowledged [they] participate in the perpetuation of violence in families by beating their children: ‘You pass on what has been done to you—women to girls also’.

The influence of poverty on different forms of violence against children was evident in the data:

- 1 Poverty is a household stressor, particularly in the context of unemployment and food insecurity and if caring for a child with disabilities.
- 2 Caregivers take on more than one job leaving children unsupervised and at risk of neglect and other forms of violence. This is a particular risk in single parent families (IOM, 2019).
- 3 Poverty leads to an increase of unsafe work for children, with children selling drugs, commercial sexual exploitation and/or begging to support themselves and/or their families (Davy & Tupou, 2022; Fatiaki, 2019; Save the Children Fiji, 2019).
- 4 Other common implications of poverty reported by stakeholders included an increasing number of children living on the streets, despite efforts to reduce them and girls having to stop education to look after siblings.

Emerging drivers

Climate change:

The primary data collection for the situational analysis (which was limited on this topic) and the literature review suggest two primary linkages between violence against children and climate change:

- 1 its impact of the loss of the home, and the implications for parental and/or caregiver supervision, and
- 2 the financial impact of disasters, leading to increased levels of poverty.

COVID-19:

Stakeholders (77%) thought that COVID-19 increased or significantly increased violence against children. Findings show COVID-19 exacerbated children's exposure to violence in three ways:

- 1 children had greater exposure to violence within the home during lockdowns;
- 2 COVID-19 affected those who were already vulnerable and experiencing economic hardship, exacerbating the poverty pathways noted above; and
- 3 school closures increased children's use of digital devices and therefore the associated risks as a driver of violence.

Migration: Migration was described as a driver of violence against children in a number of ways. Migration itself is driven by poverty, seeking of basic needs, economic and educational opportunities, or due to climate change. Stakeholders described risks where children migrate by themselves or with one family member or with another parent, or both parents migrate without the child, as well as risks associated with family migration to urban centres.

Digitisation:

Stakeholders and caregivers described children from as young as primary school possessing unrestricted access to the internet in Fiji, with stakeholders noting that there has been no national regulation to limit availability of harmful or illegal content easily accessible on the internet. Additionally, children have increased risks of exposure to commercial sexual exploitation, grooming, and online bullying.

Consistent with the documentation of sexual assault in emergency contexts elsewhere, stakeholders referred to anecdotal evidence of cases of sexual assault reported in evacuation centres.

Risk and protective factors

Risk factors

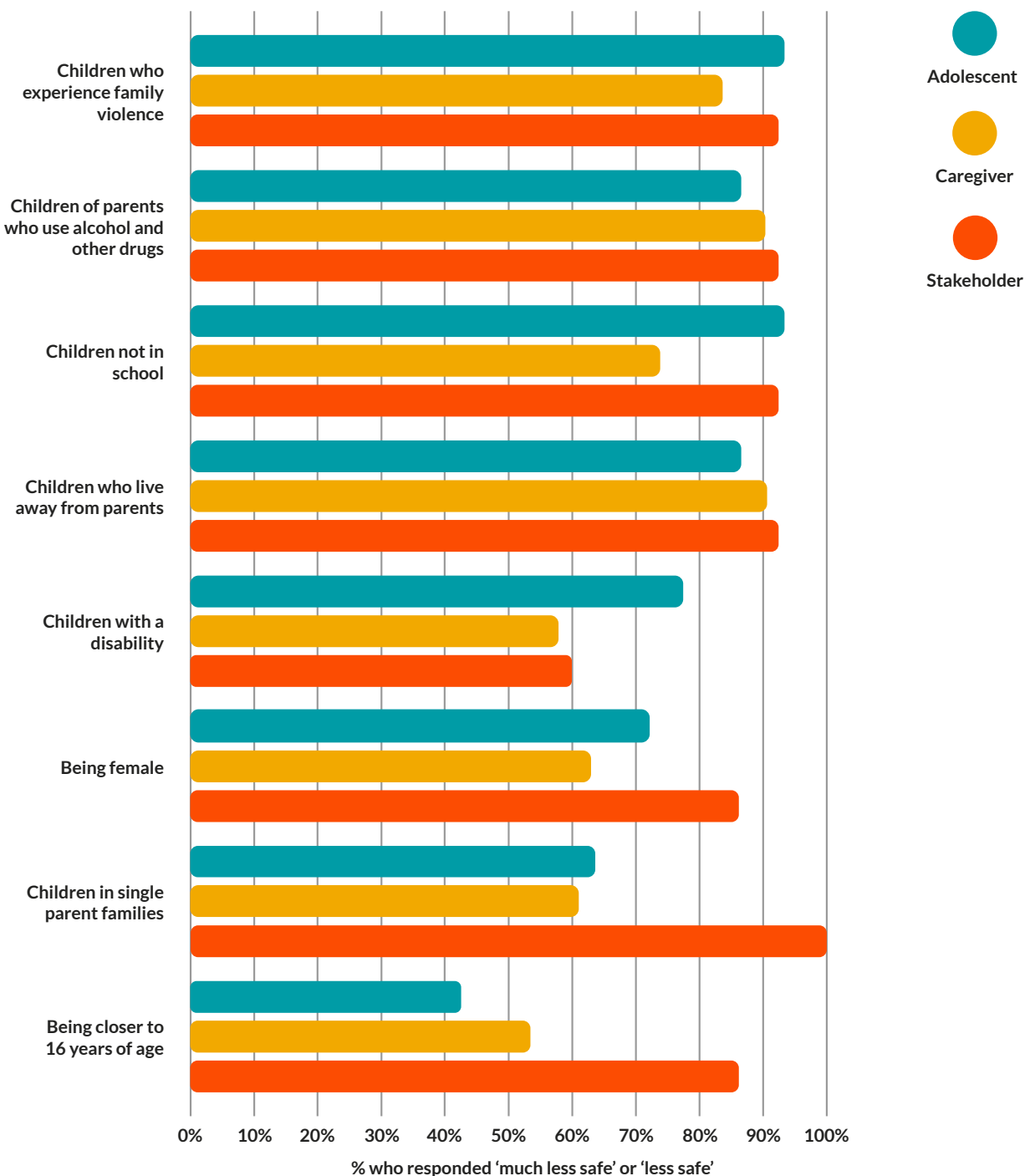
While the experience of violence was widespread and generalised, the situational analysis identified risk factors as children living away from one or both parents, experiencing family violence or breakdown, or with caregivers who use alcohol and other drugs, and children who are not in school or living in poverty. Children with a disability and who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI+) were also considered

at risk, with stakeholders suggesting a need for greater knowledge and strategies to ensure the child protection system effectively caters for these children. See figure 4.

Protective factors

In terms of protective factors, the higher a girl's education, the lower their risk of child marriage. Higher parental education (tertiary or higher) may also reduce children's risk of violence in the home and community. Other factors include wealth and positive parenting.

Figure 4: Adolescent (N=14), caregiver (N=41) and child protection stakeholder (N=15) perspectives on risk factors of violence in Fiji





Kids Club members in Suva, Fiji. Photo credit: Save the Children New Zealand.

Child protection system in Fiji – strengths and gaps

Governance, legislation and policy

Fiji has made considerable progress with respect to legislation and governance in the past 10-15 years, including the enactment of the Child Welfare Act 2010, with mandatory reporting obligations for professionals, together with the establishment of Inter-Agency Guidelines on Child Abuse and Neglect. These changes have streamlined reporting to the Department of Social Welfare and provided a holistic picture of what child protection looks like. Findings suggest further support is needed for implementation and compliance of these policies in the police and education sectors, including training, resources and simplification of reporting practices.

Findings noted legislative gaps for physical violence against children, particularly around corporal punishment in the home, as well as non-contact sexual violence against children, which includes online grooming and sexual harassment.

Stakeholders reported the need to pass the Child Care and Protection Bill 2023 to redefine the grounds under which care and protection orders can currently be made under the Juveniles Act 1974. They have also called for the passing of the Child Justice Bill 2022.

The Government is seeking to strengthen the role of the Department of Social Welfare as the steward of the child protection system, in particular the response to cases of violence, through the establishment of a specialised Department of Children within the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection (the Ministry).

In addition, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has encouraged communities to shift from a reliance on community resolution of cases involving violence against children to use of formal systems. With the Department of Social Welfare already experiencing stretched resources to meet current guidelines, there is a need for additional human and financial resources for the new Department.

66 There is a need for child rights training at the highest levels of government. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

66 We need dedicated officers and then maybe we can have justice for children in Fiji. 99

- Child protection stakeholder.

Policy gap: With the age of consent at 16, but Family Planning services only available from 18, girls are being put at risk of unintended pregnancies.

Furthermore, opportunity exists to consider the role of Department of Social Welfare officers with respect to primary prevention at the community level. There is scope for the Ministry to play a greater role in establishing a national strategy for such efforts, alongside the implementation of the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028. Rather than direct implementation, this would see the Ministry take on coordination and monitoring, evaluation and learning of civil society organisations' and faith-based organisations' community based work.

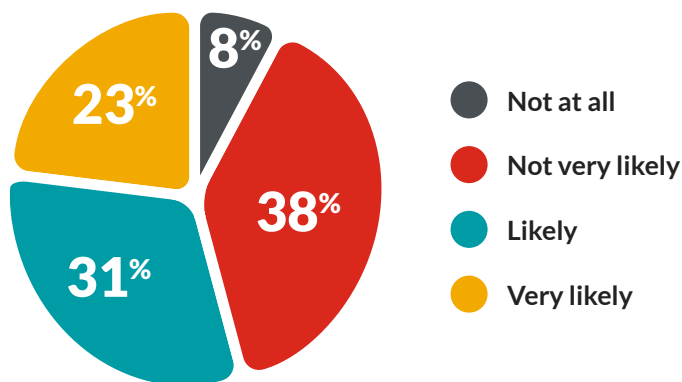
Reporting

The *Child Welfare Act 2010* mandates reporting to the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection for welfare officers, police, health workers, teachers, and legal officers who suspect that a child is being harmed or is likely to be harmed. However, despite policies, guidelines and trainings for reporting, there is very little evidence on how mandatory reporting is playing out, nor publicly available information on the reports provided.

With respect to children's reporting of violence, there is some evidence that children have increased confidence in sharing experiences of violence, although barriers remain for adolescents who completed the online survey, 54% reported that children were likely or very likely to report violence against them, as shown in Figure 5. This was similar to the child led research in which 57% of children said that they would disclose an experience of violence.

Although limited, latest data shows increasing reports of child abuse and neglect. This may reflect an increased trust in and availability of reporting pathways, and/or an increase in prevalence.

Figure 5: Adolescent respondents (N=13) perception on whether children were likely to seek help if they experience violence



Others note that there are still challenges associated with reporting violence and children are often ignored, not taken seriously or not reporting, especially if abuse is happening inside the home, in which case children would be fearful of the abuser.

Police and justice

Fiji Police has in place policy commitments to refer cases to the Ministry where children may be at risk of violence, and to respond to all complaints of gender-based violence through 'No Drop'. Notwithstanding these commitments, there are reported gaps in implementing the policies. Similarly, analysis has found gaps in the treatment of child victims, highlighting the need for training on child protection services across the police force.

At a time of growing demand and increasing caseloads of reports, the Government's salary budget for the Department of Social Welfare has slightly declined each year since 2021.

66 In most cases, [children] won't tell, they will hide it – it's taboo to discuss things like sex so that is why children keep it to themselves. 99

- Male caregiver.

66 Culturally as a society, children do not have a voice, not given a voice... Still a whole lot of silence around these things. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Lengthy investigating and court processes leave children and families frustrated and unsafe, while perpetrators remain at large and continue to harass and abuse victims.



Furthermore, while Fiji has made significant progress in strengthening the justice system for children, resource constraints pose the greatest barrier to justice for child victims of violence.

Education

The Ministry of Education has made significant progress in strengthening the legislative framework relating to child protection, including introducing child protection officers into each school. However, study participants suggested the policy was not fit for purpose and that the role of the child protection officers was too demanding, furthermore, school leaders were still not adequately reporting cases of abuse.

Information systems

There are administrative information systems within Child Helpline, Department of Social Welfare, police and the Public Prosecutor's office that continue to, or have in the past, publish information regarding cases, reports, or prosecutions relating to violence against children. A key strength of these systems is the use of a common definition of child – under 18 years of age – enabling analysis for monitoring, evaluation and learning across the data sets. Ensuring annual publications assessing trends across the information systems will facilitate dialogue on long term and recent trends and appropriate system responses.

Community approaches to child protection

Stakeholder participants are deeply aware of the importance and complexity of engaging with communities in relation to both the prevention of and response to violence against children, drawing on socio-cultural strengths and grappling with the need for socio-cultural change.

In Fiji, the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs has discouraged traditional leaders from using the cultural reconciliation practice (*bulubulu*) for cases involving violence against children, instead promoting use of the formal justice system. The traditional practice denies women and young victims any role in the process and requires them to accept the outcome, in turn shaping children's understanding of violence and its normalisation within communities.

Cultural approaches to inform programming

The following key themes for community approaches emerged from the research:

- Address challenging cultural practices within communities in different ways and with different stakeholders;
- Stakeholders are effectively working with champions within religious institutions to counter the claims that violence against women and children is consistent with socio-cultural and religious values;
- Reflect traditional or indigenous approaches and frameworks, adapting approaches to context and long-term relationships;
- The importance of understanding the linkages between violence against women and violence against children, and the efforts to prevent and respond; and
- The process of engaging with communities in turn creates space for conversations among families and encourages them to spend more time together, including by reinstating family meetings.

66 Everyone should have the mindset that they need to include children as part of funding for women and they are not two separate issues – they impact each other. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

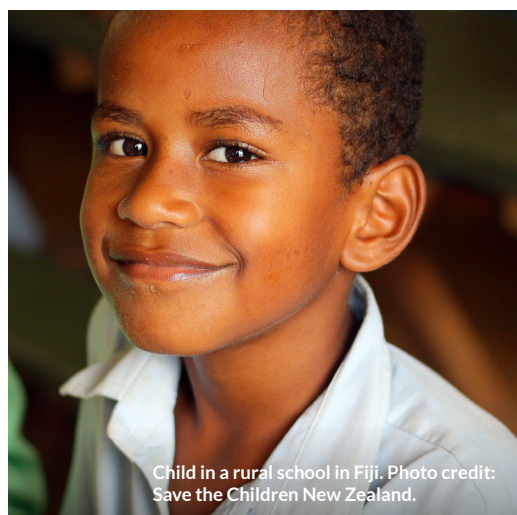
Save the Children Fiji is working with children and community members who seek to play a role in leading change in their communities. The programme design draws on a number of resources, including Child Safeguarding, Parenting without Violence and Children are a Precious Gift from God, and combines an integrated approach to positive parenting, children's participation and child safeguarding. A recent mid-term review of the five-year programme shows very modest but positive changes in children's knowledge and caregiver behaviour (Save the Children, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The research analysis reveals the multifaceted nature and pervasive extent of violence that Fijian children face across various contexts – in the home, at school, in the community and increasingly online. Furthermore, that this violence has increased in the past five years.

The strengths in the current child protection system are evident in some children seeking help from or reporting violence to parents, police, teachers, and social welfare. These entities are recognised for their potential to offer legal assistance, support, counselling, prayer and advice. However, notable gaps in the formal and informal child protection systems include children's hesitancy to seek help from certain individuals, such as strangers, some friends or teachers, siblings, or unsupportive step-parents, and a hesitancy to report sexual violence due to fear and cultural taboos. This underscores the importance of fostering a trusting and supportive environment within formal and informal systems to encourage children to disclose their problems, and the need to tackle or address cultural taboos that enable the silences related to sexual violence.

Children's voices are at the forefront of this analysis and they must continue to be to shape the solutions required to honour their rights and better protect them from violence that has detrimental impact on their development and sense of safety in the world.



Child in a rural school in Fiji. Photo credit: Save the Children New Zealand.

Papua New Guinea



Photo credit: Save the Children Papua New Guinea.

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children New Zealand commissioned the regional situational analysis of child protection systems across five Pacific countries in 2023, including Papua New Guinea. The aim of the research was to understand recent changes to structural drivers of violence against children and the risk and protective factors which underlie its prevalence and patterns, in turn to strengthen child protection systems, particularly at the community level.

The research was carried out by The Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University and in-country research collaborators.

The report presents the aims and objectives, methodology, findings on the status of violence against children in Papua New Guinea, and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Save the Children Papua New Guinea programming

- Prioritise child protection programming in Papua New Guinea, seeking to allocate a significant share of its resources towards child protection staff and programmes over a multi-year period.
- Given the nature and scale of challenges associated with violence against children in Papua New Guinea, ensure programming responses reflect the socio-cultural context and are embedded within a whole of sector national approach, with commitment amongst partners to mutual accountability and learning.
- Respondents within child focus group discussions indicated that children and young people should be involved in the development and application of Save the Children policies within the communities Save the Children is conducting work.

66 You (Save the Children) can save us by doing some awareness in our school and sometimes in our community to help us know that parents should not abuse their child or do whatever they want. 99
- Girl, 12-16 years.

- Engage in long-term child led programming to help children increase their knowledge of and skills to respond to violence in their homes, communities, schools, and online. Children requested that these programmes be conducted both in schools and communities, and include distribution of paper based information on violence against children. Such programmes should seek to learn from and collaborate with comprehensive sexual education programmes and community-based programmes aiming to prevent and respond to gender-based violence from an early intervention perspective.
- Engage in long-term community-based programming with caregivers to build their knowledge of and responses to violence in their homes, communities, schools, and online, as well as their skills with respect to positive parenting practices. Such programmes should seek to learn from, and collaborate with, community-based programmes aiming to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.
- Design primary prevention programmes that consider best practices for training and mentoring Child Protection volunteers, seeking to build a community approach to secondary prevention and strengthening tertiary response. Community members specifically requested that Save the Children appoint a representative to liaise with and to understand the needs of the community.
- Consider system readiness for initiating secondary prevention programmes (such as cash transfers), related to disability, poverty, and drugs and alcohol.

Strengthen enforcement of all child protection laws



Engage with all children within the process of strengthening the child protection system



Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with national and subnational government institutions

- Proactively engage with children, including children with disabilities and lived experience of violence, within the process of strengthening the child protection system, and in its ongoing governance at the national, district and community level, drawing on the Pikinini Bung mechanism in the Lukautim Pikinini Act.
- Respondents noted that strengthening the implementation and resourcing of the full suite of child protection laws within Papua New Guinea was required as a matter of urgency. This necessitates greater investment in both the number (availability) and skill development of professionals working in child protection across office of child and family services and non-government organisation response services, police, justice, education and health.
 - Through appropriate policy measures, set budget increases to establish and appropriate staff at national, provincial and district levels.
 - Review pre-service and in-service training curricula across key professions. In particular, child protection stakeholders noted that there is currently no in-service training related to child protection for police, nurses and teachers.
- Consider the development of specialised reporting and response services for children with disabilities.
- Support the policy proposal for a no-drop policy (meaning that police are obliged to investigate cases) in relation to gender-based violence and advocate for the proposal's extension to abuse and crimes against children.
- Give consideration to the development of the Child Protection Volunteer Model. A feasibility study should be conducted as to selection of volunteers, including Village Health Volunteers have sufficient time, commitment and skills to take on the role.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with other actors

- Increase funding for strengthening the child protection system, including by considering how funds designated to support the prevention of violence against women and girls, can best be used to strengthen the child protection system.
- Strengthen coordination between child protection external partners, based on recognition of respective strengths, through:
 - Sharing multi-year and annual work plans for support to the child protection system
 - Coordination and co-commissioning of research and evaluation relating to child protection.

66 I don't think there are enough voices that can speak out for children...the major contribution is the lack of acknowledgement of the rights of a child and that right include the right to be protected. We seem to feel that they are protected by their family but not in their [own] right...I don't think we speak sufficiently in the forums that we have the opportunity to, and even at the political level.

There has to be increased avenues where children can voice their feelings, and this (is) something we taking out big time...for too long, we feel we ourselves, other adults have spoken for children. But it's time we find avenues to bring the child(ren's) voices out...so that we can hear directly from them...to be able to speak of the things they are afraid (of and) feel is happen(ed) to them that is not right. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.



Children in Papua New Guinea learn about their rights during a World Children's Day celebration. Photo credit: Save the Children Papua New Guinea.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for the situational analysis was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children's approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children.

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection. For Papua New Guinea, these included interviews with child protection stakeholders and focus group discussions with caregivers and children.

Methods	Sample size
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	10
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	2
Adult led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 (mixed)	2
Adult led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 (mixed)	3
Total number of participants (gender)	83 - (F 49 M 34)

KEY FINDINGS

Nature and extent of violence against children

The situational analysis found that the extent of physical and emotional violence against children within their home, community and school environments in Papua New Guinea was both accepted and a near generalised experience. A large number of respondents noted the prevalence of sexual abuse against children, as well as commercial sexual exploitation, and stressed that such abuse often occurred within households, often perpetrated by the family members of victims.

Violent discipline is embedded as a way to punish or seek retribution against other family or community members, including children. Children themselves were aware of the gendered nature of the violence that they experience, including child sexual abuse and child marriage. Long term trend data relating to child marriage show that rates of child marriage at 15 and 18 years are unchanged over 25 years from 1993 to 2018 (Demographic and Health Survey).

There is no prevalence data for violence against children in Papua New Guinea for the last five years, although respondents who participated in the focus group discussions and interviews perceived that violence against children in Papua New Guinea was increasing.

Prevalence of violence

Violent discipline

Violence against children in the home was raised consistently by participants as accepted and widely practiced, particularly in rural settings. Although there is no national prevalence data on the use of violent discipline amongst caregivers, a recent phone survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found that 82.2% of caregivers thought “a child sometimes needs to be physically punished” (World Bank, 2021).

Some child participants said living with their parents is something that makes them feel safe and that their parents treat them with love and respect. Others raised violent discipline in the home as something that concerns them, as well as family violence.

66 I see back in the village is still very violent and brutal to some extent, parents using stick and stones to belt the children. In rural Papua New Guinea, child discipline still involves physical discipline. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male.

What makes children feel unsafe and worried?



- Children, 8-11 years, mixed.

Findings showed that if children face violence in the home or other settings and report the initial incident of violence, they may be subject to further violence perpetrated by their parents – this culture of violence is difficult for children to overcome on their own and in isolation.

66 If I go and tell my parents, my parents will hit me and hit the other girl. 99

- Child, 8-11 years, mixed.

Neglect

A number of stakeholders raised neglect as a growing concern: it is associated with economic pressures, women's increased working hours and family breakdown and makes children vulnerable to other forms of violence.

66 These days, because of financial crisis, mothers are spending more time at the table market or trying to find something to do and put food on the table, they don't have enough time at home. With this scenario, it also places the children (at risk), the children being abused at home, there's a lot of breakdown in marriages, broken homes, domestic violence, someone leaves the daughter behind..[for example] Mum's got a new partner, so the new partner abuses the girl or child at home. So, there are a few drivers to sexual abuse. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence against girls, including girls with disabilities, in the home and community was a concern for all participants in the research, with stakeholders of the view that sexual abuse was increasing.

Existing data from Papua New Guinea shows the majority of sexual assault victims under 16 years of age were girls, with 87.8% of the perpetrators known to the victims (Lokuge et al., 2016). Stakeholders and caregivers participating in this study identified fathers and stepfathers as common perpetrators, and explained this poses challenges for the child protection services to access victims of abuse: **"the family member is staying in the house living with them, in the same household, he or she can always be perpetrators"**, (Stakeholder, female).

According to the most recent Demographic and Health Survey which was conducted in 2016-18, 15% of women aged 15-19 years had experienced sexual violence (Papua New Guinea National Statistical Office, 2019). Data from the Health Information System show a decline in sexual violence cases perpetrated against children 0-16 years from 2019 to 2021, although this may represent a decline in utilisation of health services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There are some instances where abuse has been going on in the village, but just because that kind of topic is a... harsh thing in the village, people don't report it...I wish they had more courage to come out and report those to the authorities." (female caregiver).

Child marriage

Civil marriage is gendered in Papua New Guinea, with the legal age for girls 16 years and boys 18 years, or 14 years and 16 years respectively with a court order. Customary marriage is legal at any age. Longer term trend data shows no change in the prevalence of child marriage at 15 years or 18 years for girls in Papua New Guinea since 1993 (UNICEF 2022).

66 Sexual abuse is very common in girls with disabilities. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Child labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children and trafficking

Minimal data exists relating to child workers, child labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children or trafficking. However, respondents perceived that there was an increasing prevalence of the commercial sexual exploitation of children as a result of economic pressures, greater levels of isolation and less monitoring of young children, specifically young girls. Adding that this abuse is facilitated online or through peer groups or family members.

“I feel worried because, when I see lives on the streets of Port Moresby, very young little girls are taken by their own relatives ... for trade, like commercial trade. Something that they give it to other people [for] money or goods that they want.” (Male caregiver)

Other forms of violence in the community

Children in the focus group discussions described feeling unsafe in their communities making them reluctant to play and connect with other children outside of their home:

“People carrying around bush knives, axes and sling shots and swearing around the streets, sometimes they make children unsafe, so they always stay in the house. They never want to come outside and open up to some other children and feel safe and play around.” (Boy, 12-16 years)

Violence in school

Corporal punishment remains legal in schools in Papua New Guinea, and like in the home, respondents noted that teachers' use of violent discipline is accepted. While violence against children in schools in Papua New Guinea remains under-researched, existing data reported safety concerns regarding the school environment.

Where children do report instances of violence, respondents stated caregivers often reacted in a violent manner by attending the child's school and threatening violence towards the teacher.

Violence online

While prevalence data is also very limited on the online environment in Papua New Guinea, children said they are scared of cyber bullying and the sharing and manipulation of digital images: *“Individuals online can get your pictures and do anything or can ask you unnecessary things if you are online.”* (11-16 years, mixed).

Caregivers voiced their concern on who children might be connecting with online, and perceived online contact to be facilitating commercial sexual exploitation of children and sex trafficking. This is consistent with anecdotal reports from non-government organisations and law enforcement agencies in Papua New Guinea that indicate a connection between the increase in online child sexual exploitation, some of which may be child sex trafficking, and increased internet usage during the COVID pandemic (U.S Department of State, 2023).

66 Sometimes the teachers may speak violently to [children]...use objects to beat them, that's not right. Sometimes they make the students feel unsafe in the school. **99**

- Boy, 11-16 years.



Drivers of violence

Socio-cultural and religious norms regarding gender and violence are the strongest drivers of violence against children in Papua New Guinea. While there is some evidence to suggest that practices associated with child marriage are changing, which warrants further exploration, other drivers of violence – poverty, migration, climate change and digitisation - are stagnating or deepening.

Existing drivers

Colonialism and cycles of violence: Recent global research has found that countries which were colonised are 50 times more likely to have a higher prevalence of intimate-partner violence (Brown et al., 2023). The authors hypothesize that three pathways lead to this higher prevalence of violence: imposing “*patriarchal beliefs that devalue women;*” creating “*structural inequities*”, including political and economic relations; and leading to “*intergenerational trauma*” (Brown et al., 2023).

These pathways are equally relevant to violence against children. In Papua New Guinea, respondents raised cycles of violence as an ongoing concern, with existing data connecting childhood trauma and violence against children, manifested in men who go on to perpetrate intimate-partner violence, and women who accept and justify violence against children (Feinstein et al., 2022; Fulu et al., 2017; Jewkes et al., 2013; Jewkes et al., 2017). Evidence shows strong association between male children who experience both physical and sexual abuse and the perpetration of intimate-partner violence as adults (Fulu et al., 2017).

Norms and practices relating to gender and violence: The literature review found strong evidence that violence against children in Papua New Guinea is driven by socio-cultural and religious gendered norms and behavioural standards for boys and girls and men and women. It is accepted that men are responsible for enforcing these standards and use violence to do so (Feinstein et al., 2022).

The experiences of the respondents, consistent with existing literature, show that violence against children is prevalent in all spheres of a child’s existence and is a scenario which is to be resolved as a ‘family matter’ (Save the Children, 2015).

Such norms within communities limited the capacity of children to make reports against their abuser and/or to seek out a bare minimum level of support from within their family network and/or from formal service providers:

Socio-cultural and religious gendered norms are the dominant drivers of violence against children.

'Let's say if a daughter in the family is sharing something, if the papa or the stepfather has done something to the girl and the girl is saying that to the mother, the first thing is...you are telling lies, don't say this.' (Stakeholder, female)

Poverty and violence: Recent economic conditions in Papua New Guinea, already the poorest country considered in this analysis, have created considerable economic pressures on households and families within communities across the country, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, 52% of the population lived below the poverty line; and child stunting under 5 years of age increased from 37% to 52% between 2000 and 2022 (Sachs, 2023).

Participants described a number of pathways by which poverty can lead to violence against children:

- The absence of parents/caregivers (particularly mothers) who need to leave the household in order to undertake more work or other duties is regarded as a 'big security problem' for young people (11-16 years). Respondents said this left unsupervised children vulnerable, particularly girls, to incest and abuse inside their home.
- Overcrowding within households as large numbers of extended family members are forced to reside together, increasing the vulnerability of children to abuse:

'Parents are struggling to cope with high cost of living and there may be three or four families living together in one small apartment or house and kids are open to child abuse. With difficult times economically, comes difficult times for children.' (Stakeholder, male)

- Unemployment is a significant cause of household stress and breakdown of the family unit.
- Parents/caregivers seeking other sources of income increases vulnerability to child marriage, child labour, commercial sexual exploitation, and trafficking as: *'parents are doing this because they want money; they want bride price'* (Stakeholder, female).
- Struggling to cover the costs of schooling may be an additional driver of child marriage.

66 Families who are really struggling to make ends meet may end up selling their daughters or their children for prostitution...at a very young age to people with money... They [parents] are basically selling their children, selling their young girls, abuse girls...some of them are so hopeless that they may have no other means of earning an income. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Emerging drivers

Migration and climate change: Migration and its impact on family units, where children can often be separated from their parents/caregivers, increases children's risk of violence, according to respondents in the situational analysis.

Causes of migration:

- **Conflict:** Children migrate to flee tribal violence, particularly in rural areas such as Wewak and Sandaun; children who experience forms of violence can also be removed/relocated to other carers/extended family;
- **Economic hardship due to climate change:** loss of food, income sources for family needs, including cost of schooling is leading to a rural urban drift;
- **Weather-related incidents:** women and children are at particular risk from displacement caused by natural disasters.

Beyond the linkages between climate change and migration, there was limited respondent data to provide insight as to how climate change has affected and is affecting the prevalence and extent of violence against children.

COVID-19: Respondent data is in line with a longitudinal study in Papua New Guinea that showed household finances were impacted during COVID-19, with an increase in those that could not afford food in rural areas, exacerbating poverty and household stressors, which we know to be a driver of violence (World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, greater levels of isolation and less monitoring of young children, specifically young girls, increased the risk of violence against children (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Digitisation: Respondents discussed the extent of digitisation and technology uptake in Papua New Guinea, which has seen internet usage increase by 200% amongst adults (World Bank, 2023a), with particular concerns relating to children's usage of technology and how this may affect socio-cultural norms. They shared their concerns regarding children's exposure to pornography and cyberbullying online, as well as the use of social media to facilitate commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Risk and protective factors

As with other Pacific Island countries considered in this analysis, violence against children is widespread. At the same time, the analysis highlighted a number of intersecting risk and protective factors that can affect a child's vulnerability to violence, these include gender, disability, living away from parents, the use of drugs and alcohol and poverty.

There was a recognition amongst respondents from the welfare sector that there is a clear linkage between climate change and the overall wellbeing of children.

66 Girls might be more worried about being raped, and then boys might be more worried about being bullied or things like that. So, being a male or female has its own worries. **99**
(Boy, 12-16 years).

The greatest protective factor against violence for children is access to education, both for children and their caregivers.

Risk Factors

Respondents, supported by existing data, reported children at greatest risk in Papua New Guinea were:

- Female children – more vulnerable to child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Children with a disability - more vulnerable to abuse (physical and psychological), neglect and sexual violence (especially female children).
- Older children - greater risk of child sexual exploitation and peer violence.
- Poorer children – increased risk of violence in the home, child marriage, trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour.
- Children living away from parents - more vulnerable to forced labour and sexual exploitation.
- Gay (particularly male), bisexual and transgender children - more vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and violence.
- Children whose parents use alcohol and drugs – more exposure to family violence.
- Rural children - may be at greater risk of child marriage.

Protective factors

In terms of protective factors, the higher a girl's education, the lower their risk of child marriage. Higher parental education (tertiary or higher) may also reduce children's risk of violence in the home and community. Other factors include wealth and positive parenting.

Child protection system in Papua New Guinea – strengths and gaps

Governance

The establishment of the Office of Child and Family Services, within the Department of Community Development and Religion, through the *Lukautim Pikinini Act 2015*, was seen as a significant step forward for the child protection system in Papua New Guinea (Anderson et al., 2022). The Office of Child and Family Services is responsible for implementing the Act and establishing an effective child protection system at all levels of government, including the community level.

Other relevant governance structures include the National Family Services Council, intended to be established in each province, with the first in Enga province in 2021. In addition, the Department of Community and Religion is also responsible for the governance of a number of other child protection mechanisms.

Notwithstanding the progress in establishing the governance frameworks, respondents held particular criticisms at a provincial level, repeatedly citing the lack of a coordinated approach amongst response services and agencies, to the extent stating that those working in one agency may not be aware of the functions of other agencies.

This is consistent with the perspectives shared by the Government and existing research, which has found operational shortcomings in the responses to violence against children and violence against women (Government of Papua New Guinea; UNICEF EAPRO, 2020).

Sexual abuse against girls with disabilities is incredibly common.

(Survey respondents)

66 The governance structures are missing.. at the province [they] are also missing, so there is pretty much no strength of that in place at the moment. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Legislation and policy

Significant progress has been made in strengthening the legislative framework for child protection, with the enactment of the *Lukautim Pikinini* Act, the establishment of the Office of Child and Family Services and the deepening of its reach in provinces. Yet the literature review, and other recent work (Anderson et al., 2022) has comprehensively mapped the legislative and policy framework relating to the child protection system in Papua New Guinea, suggesting significant gaps remain.

Key areas for concern included:

- Differences in definitions of violence and offences in the *Lukautim Pikinini* Act and the criminal code, for example the Act defines violence against children as including emotional and physical violence for the purposes of care and protection orders, yet the criminal code does not reference emotional violence as a defence.
- The lack of legislation on corporal punishment, which remains legal in Papua New Guinea.
- Inconsistency in legislation relating to child marriage and age of consent, and low levels of enforcement, which respondents account for the high prevalence of child marriage rates within communities.
- Uncertainty with respect to differences in the minimum age of child labour between the *Lukautim Pikinini* Act and the Employment Act 1978.

Reflective of the findings reported above, while efforts have been made to strengthen referral pathways there remains significant work to do at the provincial level.

Reporting pathways

Papua New Guinea has established various formal reporting mechanisms for child protection issues. Under the *Lukautim Pikinini* Act any person who thinks a child is in need of care and protection is obliged to report their concerns to the Office of Child and Family Services and specified professionals, including police, health workers, teachers, welfare officers, clergy and in some cases even community members. However, the scope and implementation of these obligations can vary and may be inconsistently applied due to lack of supportive frameworks (UNICEF, 2017a).

Respondents noted that parents will often make reports in relation to sexual exploitation directly to the protection services, if available within their local community, but would not likely do so for cases of physical violence, for example, against children in communities.

Children in the focus group discussions said they may or may not report instances of violence. They may tell their friends, parents, neighbours, or other relatives. Reasons for not reporting include fear of a lack of confidentiality and further violence.

Overall, respondents acknowledged a lack of engagement by the community and professionals, including teachers, with the formal reporting mechanisms and referral pathways, citing a preference for communal practices instead and the time it takes to pursue formal pathways, during which *“people tend to forgive each other”* (Male, caregiver), discussed further below under Community.

66 [W]e are feeling scared to [report] because our mother and father will belt us. 99

- Girl, 8-11 years.

Child protection response services

The primary response mechanism for responding to cases of violence against children lies with the Office of Child and Family Services and its Child Protection Officers, who are also represented in each province.

Respondents, however, reported the formal response services are underfunded and understaffed with inadequately trained and qualified officers. Most recent data showed there were 188 Child Protection Officers nationally (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2023), which sees a ratio of officers to children of 1:20,000, an overwhelming workload for one officer given the nature and prevalence of violence against children in Papua New Guinea. In addition to being overworked there is also a lack of appropriate resources including child safe spaces.

The evaluation of Save the Children's "Safe Communities, Safe Children" programme, which sought to strengthen links between community leaders and the formal service providers, reported that community leaders found Child Protection Officers inaccessible, limited reporting by community leaders, and that they often failed to take action even when successfully contacted about child protection cases (Save the Children, 2021).

Overall, respondents indicated that there were chronic issues with regards to child protection services in the face of a high prevalence of cases and an insufficient amount of funding.

Police

The Papua New Guinea police force has established 26 Family and Sexual Violence Units across the country to respond to domestic violence (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2023) and receive referrals from hospitals regarding cases of child abuse.¹ However, like other child protection services in the country, the Units are constrained in fulfilling their function due to inadequate resources to extend its reach to remote police stations, and inadequate staff training.

Stakeholders noted that there are deterrents to reporting to police and that police are not an immediate port of call for those fleeing or seeking to make a report of child abuse.

In May 2023, the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality in Papua New Guinea proposed that the government adopt a "no drop policy" in relation to gender based violence, similar to Fiji, obliging police to investigate and charge such cases (The National, 2023). It is unclear if this policy proposal extends to crimes against children.

Justice

Respondents expressed a clear desire for the adoption of child-focused measures within both the judiciary and legal proceedings in Papua New Guinea more generally. While the family court is mandated to hear and determine child protection matters, only two out of 22 provinces in Papua New Guinea have a functioning Family Court, leading to reliance on the magistrates in most provinces for both care and protection and criminal hearings (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2023).

Respondents reported that the judiciary, in particular magistrates, are currently ill equipped to respond to cases of violence against children and that there needs to be much deeper training and socialisation of the *Lukautim Pikinini Act*.

¹ Police Sexual Offence Squads have also been established to investigate sexual offences, although these only exist in two provinces.

While total government expenditure is projected to increase between 2024 and 2026 by 9%, the amount allocated to the Office of Child and Family Services is due to decline by 19% over the same period.

66 **If you go to the police station, having someone who can deal and handle children's cases. We don't have that no, we only have the FSVU [Family and Sexual Violence Units], but we don't have a place or a section for children. 99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.



Children in Papua New Guinea learn how to stay safe online through the I Am Digital project. Photo credit: Save the Children Papua New Guinea.

Education

While corporal punishment remains legal, Papua New Guinea has made considerable progress in establishing child protection strategies and protocols in education, including guidance and training to teachers on non-violent classroom behaviour management strategies (UNICEF EAPRO, 2020). Despite this, respondents indicated that verbal and physical violence against children remains prevalent within educational environments in Papua New Guinea, and significant gaps remain in the enforcement and implementation of child protection strategies.

Information systems

With respect to strengthening information systems, given both the decentralised nature of government child protection services, the mix of both government and non-government service providers, and different age definitions of children across the care and protection and criminal legal frameworks, harmonization of standards for data collection is vital.

Stakeholders noted there was the lack of data on violence against children and this contributes to a poor allocation of time, energy and resources of staff. They recommended that information systems for case management, as well as broader analysis regarding trends in violence against children and system capacity, be embedded within the sector moving forward.

Community approaches to child protection

Community mechanisms play the primary role in the resolution of cases of violence against children that come to the attention of adults in the community. Data amongst both stakeholders and caregivers reflected ongoing use of these mechanisms, as well as ongoing consideration as to whether cases should continue to be resolved using such mechanisms “inside” the family, village and religion or “outside” through formal justice systems.

66 Sometimes the teachers may speak violently to them...use objects to beat them, that's not right. Sometimes they make the students feel unsafe in the school. 99

- Boy, 11-16 years.

66 They don't go to the police, they don't go to the welfare, they go back to the custom, customary arrangement. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Respondents described a tension in the community with some adults wanting to utilise “outside” formal systems for cases of violence against children, but that they did not have agency to make the decision, in part due to fear of perpetrators being imprisoned or seeking retribution:

“Some of the rape cases... the child was neglected. The parents took [action] against the perpetrator, so it was always done in the church, when the church leaders were sent out to visit these parents. The victim, the child – we don’t concentrate on the victim, we only concentrate on finishing up there [the communal peace and cultural obligations].” (Male, caregiver)

Cultural approaches to inform programming

Evident in the stakeholder and caregiver responses was an interest and commitment to take a strengths-based approach in drawing on socio-cultural values to prevent and respond to violence against children. Stakeholders described the importance of family and community relationships, as well as the diversity of communities across Papua New Guinea, as key strengths on which programmes could be based.

Study participants stressed the importance of long-term involvement and relationship-building in community interventions and child protection programming. They added the need for programming to recognise the diversity of Papua New Guinea communities and to adapt to local needs, as well as the importance of contextualisation to local needs, including needs and interests in protecting traditions and cultural values.



Children in Papua New Guinea learn how to stay safe online through the I Am Digital project. Photo credit: Save the Children Papua New Guinea.

CONCLUSION

The overarching finding of this situational analysis is that violence against children in Papua New Guinea demands greater attention and resourcing from government and global partners. As in other Pacific Island countries considered in this analysis, emotional, physical and sexual violence is a common experience for children in all domains of their lives – home, school, community and online. Violent discipline is embedded as a way to punish or seek retribution against other family or community members, including children.

Socio-cultural and religious norms regarding gender and violence are the strongest driver of violence against children. Other drivers of violence – poverty, migration, climate change and digitisation are stagnating or deepening. At the same time, the analysis highlighted a number of intersecting risk factors, including gender, disability, living away from parents, the use of drugs and alcohol and poverty.

While significant progress has been made in strengthening the legislative framework for child protection, the positive impacts of that progress are mostly yet to be seen at the community level.

Children's voices are at the forefront of this analysis and they must continue to shape the solutions required to honour their rights and better protect them from violence that has many detrimental effects on their development and sense of safety in the world.

Solomon Islands



Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children New Zealand commissioned the regional situational analysis of child protection systems across five Pacific countries in 2023, including Solomon Islands. The aim of the research was to understand recent changes to structural drivers of violence against children and the risk and protective factors which underlie its prevalence and patterns, in turn to strengthen child protection systems.

The research was carried out by The Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University and in-country research collaborators.

The report presents the aims and objectives, methodology, child led research, key findings on violence against children in Solomon Islands, and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Save the Children Solomon Islands Programming

- With respect to community level programming, children recommended a greater focus on community education about customs and religious beliefs to promote respect and collaboration.
- Build on previous engagement with children in the communities in Malaita where the child led research took place where children called for bans on corporal punishment. Enable and support child-led campaigns for law reform to ban corporal punishment in homes and schools.
- In collaboration with other partners, engage in child led programming in schools and communities for primary preventing, including children's rights and knowledge and skills for preventing and responding to violence against children. Such programmes should include, as core components, comprehensive sexuality education and online safety for children, learning from and expanding on existing programmes.
- In collaboration with other partners, expand on primary prevention programmes with caregivers, on preventing and responding to violence, and alternative parenting approaches. Such programmes should include, as core components, comprehensive sexuality education for adults and online safety for children, building on and expanding existing programmes.

Enable and support child led campaigns for law reform to ban corporal punishment in homes and schools.



- Ensure all community-based prevention programmes for both children and caregivers address the gendered nature of violence against children, linking and potentially integrating, where appropriate, efforts for the primary prevention of violence against women and children.
- Support communities to take action regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs. Build monitoring and evaluation efforts regarding these efforts.
- As part of community level programming, pay attention to providing safe housing, play and recreation areas and facilities for children, and support activities that strengthen familial and community bonds and participation in recreational activities, like storytelling and sports (swimming, fishing, soccer, and volleyball) as suggested by children.

Prioritise the passing of legislation to increase the age for marriage from 15 to 18.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with national and subnational government institutions

- Engage with children, including children with disabilities, gender and sexual diverse children and children with lived experience of violence, within the process of strengthening the child protection system, and its ongoing governance at the national, provincial and community level.
- As part of the implementation of the Child and Family Welfare Act, develop a nationwide, comprehensive, evidence-based and long-term strategy for primary prevention, with multi-year investment, based on evidence of what is working well in Solomon Islands.
- Develop guidelines for communities on community safety, including community collaboration, enforcing bylaws, and police playing a more active role. Child protection stakeholders should consider whether to include advice on reconciliation and compensation practices in instances of violence against children, and if so, what advice, with respect to participation of women and children, and principles for consideration.
- Advocate / prioritise the passing of legislation relating to increasing the age for marriage from 15 to 18.
- Advocate for appropriate resourcing (including budget allocation and adequate staff levels) to establish effective child protection response services, and provide ongoing opportunities for pre- and in-service training.
- Strengthen child protection information systems to support case management. Publish annual reports on violence against children and reporting/ referral and case outcome trends that are disaggregated, including by gender, disability status, location and the nature of the caregiving relationships.
- Train teachers on child protection policies and non-violent classroom management strategies, as well as comprehensive sexuality education curricula. Teacher training should include identifying and responding to violence against children through appropriate referral pathways.

66 When drafting the Child Protection Policy it would be great if we involve and engage children in it through consultations, provide feedback mechanisms, and support them in delivering programs that are suitable and appropriate for them. 99

(Online survey stakeholder)



A child in Solomon Islands takes part in child participation session. Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

- Support efforts to strengthen health worker engagement with communities and build knowledge and skills around identifying and responding to violence against children through appropriate referral pathways.
- Consider the initiation of secondary prevention programmes, with consideration to:
 - Additional educational support to children living away from their parents;
 - Establishing fee waiver programs for upper secondary school to prevent violence against children, including child labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and child marriage; and
- Support families and communities regarding the use of alcohol and other drugs (as well as relevant public health campaigns).

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with other actors

- Continue to build strong coordination between partners, committing to mutual accountability and learning and strengthening efforts to collaborate on a deeper level with respect to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of child protection programmes to ensure national level reach and impact. Centre the technical capacity within service organisations as part of these programmes.
- Increase funding for strengthening the child protection system, including by considering how funds designated to support violence against women and girls can best be used to strengthen the child protection system. In addition, building on the evidence presented in this report, consider support to child protection as part of responses to climate change financing.



Child group session in Solomon Islands. Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for the situational analysis was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children's approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children.

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection in Solomon Islands. These included online surveys, interviews with child protection stakeholders, focus group discussions with caregivers and children, and child led research.

Child led research

The child led research component of this research is based on Doel-Mackaway's model for children's participation that utilises a child rights-based approach (Doel-Mackaway 2022). This model provides a template for the participation of children in research that is child-friendly, culturally appropriate and respects and upholds participants' rights.

The child led research in Solomon Islands was conducted with 47 children and young people, aged 8-16 years old, at two schools in Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita Province. Auki is one of the largest provincial towns in Solomon Islands. The names of these sites have been withheld to protect participants' privacy. Adolescents aged 16 and 17 facilitated the focus group discussions with the young research participants.

Methods	Sample size
Online survey with child protection stakeholders	20
Online survey with caregivers	15
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	11
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	4
Child led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 (mixed)	2
Child led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 (mixed)	4
Total number of participants (gender)	122 (F 57 M 65)

KEY FINDINGS

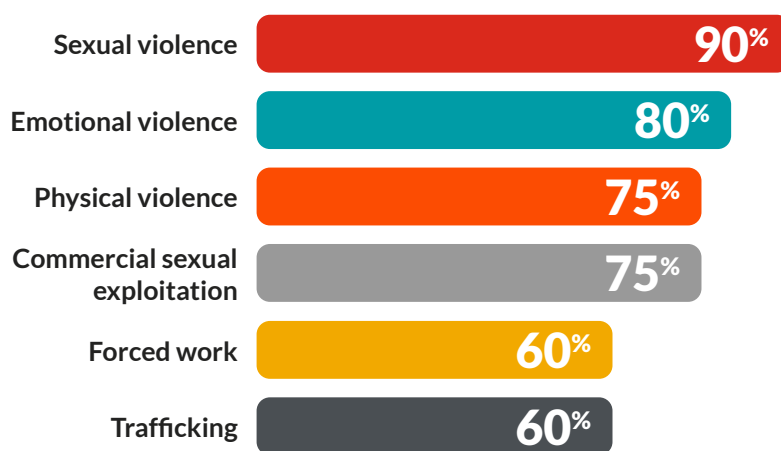
Nature and extent of violence against children

The situational analysis found that, like other countries considered in this analysis, children’s experience of violence in Solomon Islands pervades all aspects of their lives, including in the home, school, community and online, and is getting worse (Figure 6). This includes emotional, physical and sexual violence, with gendered risks for girls and boys, in particular continued concern regarding child marriage and the commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Solomon Islands.

The most recent data shows Solomon Islands has the highest rates of violent discipline² and child labour, and the second highest for bullying, compared to 40 low- and middle-income countries across the Asia Pacific region (Kennedy et al., 2020). However, since then and exacerbated by COVID-19, the perception is that violence against children has become even worse (Figure 6).

Approximately 74% of reported cases of violence against children were girls (SAFENET³). Data shows an increase in reported violence against children from 2020 (232) to 2021 (421), with no further trend data available. Cases involving child victims reported in 2021 included physical (30%), sexual (34%), psychological (37%) and economic abuse (44%).

Figure 6: Stakeholder perception of increased violence 2019-2023



² Tonga’s Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey was conducted after this analysis and was reported as higher than Solomon Islands.

³ SAFENET is the referral network of government and non-government service providers in Honiara.

Prevalence of violence

Violent discipline

Children described home as a place they sometimes feel scared and unsafe. Existing data shows a high rate of violence in the home, with 86% of children aged 2-14 years experiencing violent discipline in the past month (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office et al., 2017).

Participants across the focus group discussions spoke of the prevalence of child abuse and violence in the home, including “harsh talking”, “threats”, “swearing”, and when “parents sometimes treat their children badly”. Older female participants said children are “hurt” and “bullied” in the home.

Stakeholders and caregivers described violent discipline as legally and socially accepted within the home (and other settings). There are slightly higher rates of violent discipline against boys, children aged 5-9 years, children living in rural areas, children whose mothers have lower educational attainment and the four poorest quintiles (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office et al. 2017). However, the differences are small and suggest that programming responses need to be generalised in reach.

Neglect

There are no prevalence or reporting data relating to neglect, and limited existing data describing its nature and extent. However, children expressed concern regarding parental neglect and reported that being left alone in the home made them feel unsafe, “because of drunk men coming to the home” (12-16 years, male), people stealing from people’s homes in the community, and when “houses are run down or incomplete” (8-11 years, mixed).

Stakeholders also expressed some concern regarding declining parental supervision of children, with parents needing to work extended hours to earn an adequate income. Economic pressures were also reported as playing a role in the decline of the *Wantok* system – a traditional safety net that sees families from the same location or language group (one talk) share housing, food and money with those in need.

Sexual violence

Children, stakeholders and caregivers expressed concern regarding sexual violence in the home and community, with 90% of stakeholder participants perceiving there to be a significant increase or increase in sexual violence against children in the past five years. Girls are most vulnerable to child sexual violence perpetrated by male relatives, neighbours, other community members and peers.

Children, particularly girls, discussed the issue of how to stop sexual violence of children “by strangers, big men, family members and adults”, (Male, caregiver). Older girls also indicated knowledge and concern about sexual assault occurring in their community by saying there are unsafe areas “that we know rape happened there” (Girl, children 12-16 years).

Caregivers, both male and female, also discussed the implications for a child victim of sexual violence, including negative treatment from peers and neglect.

Consistent with reporting data referred to by national stakeholders, reports of sexual violence are increasing. Although this increase may be due to greater awareness of what constitutes violence and reporting pathways, rather than increased prevalence. Others noted there are a lot of cases of sexual violence that remain unreported.

66 I feel unsafe when my parents smack me with a stick. 99

- Girl, 12-16 years.

66 Physical violence...is a major worry for children in homes due to parents' harsh treatment. 99

- Male, caregiver.

66 Sexual abuse is on the rise now, especially rape. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Child marriage

Child marriage remains legal in Solomon Islands from 15 years of age with parental or judicial consent. Recent data shows that one in five women aged 20-24 years were married by 18 years. Although not raised by child participants as a concern, female caregivers reported girls as young as 13 getting married. Participants discussed the vulnerability of female children to early marriage with the bride price an attractive means of income for the family, in turn diminishing opportunities for young girls to pursue education.

Child labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children and trafficking

Children make a significant contribution to household labour in Solomon Islands, raising concern among participants with respect to its implications for children's education. Household survey data show that three out of five children (61.6%) aged 5-11-year-olds, and one in ten 12-14-year-olds (11.1%) are engaged in child labour (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office et al., 2017).⁴

Existing data shows that child labour is more common amongst girls compared to boys (contrary to other Pacific Island countries), in rural areas compared to urban areas, and declines as maternal educational attainment and household wealth increase (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office et al., 2017).

While data on commercial sexual exploitation of children is limited, stakeholders and prior research in Solomon Islands have documented reports of commercial sexual exploitation in the agriculture, fishing, hospitality and tourism industries in Honiara, as well as around extractive industries, particularly logging, with foreign workers (ILO, 2017; IOM, 2019; Tichener, 2018). In a survey undertaken near logging camps in Isabel and Makira published in 2019, 26% of adults had heard of children under 15 years of age having sex in exchange for goods or money in survey sites (IOM, 2019).

Other forms of violence in the community

Significantly, all children who participated in the child led research said they feel unsafe in their communities. This includes when they see *"people drinking on the street"* and when they witness *"street fighting"* (Boys, 8-11 years).

The interplay between substance abuse and serious community conflict and concerns about strangers are key factors that contribute to children's feelings of a lack of safety in their communities and on the streets.

Alcohol fuelled violence in the community, says participants, has a profoundly negative impact on children because this makes children *"fear strangers who may harm them"* and it also leads children to *"think that people can kill them"* (Girls, 12-16 years).

The above is consistent with a 2020 study, which found only 7% of 236 girls surveyed always feel safe in Honiara, with the top five perceived safety risks being: drunk and intoxicated people, theft, verbal harassment, touching and rape (Plan International Australia & Plan International Solomon Islands, 2020).

66 Their bride price could help finance school fees for the younger ones or to start up money generating income to support families. **99**

- Female caregiver

66 Children feel unsafe when walking alone on the street and meeting strangers on the street and about sexual abuse. **99**

- Girl, 12-16 years.

⁴ For children aged 5-11 years child labour is defined as at least 1 hour of economic work or 21 hours of unpaid household services per week; and for children aged 12-14 years child labour is defined as 14 hours of economic work or 21 hours of unpaid household services per week (UNICEF, 2023a).

Violence in school

Children raised a number of concerns in their school environment: bullying and fighting, harassment travelling to and from school, and violent discipline by teachers. In addition to emotional and physical violence, one caregiver also noted that sexual violence takes place in schools.

Stakeholders also expressed concern regarding bullying and its gendered nature, consistent with prior research in Solomon Islands that suggest that there is a gendered dimension to bullying, with males bullying girls, and older students bullying younger students, including both in and outside the classroom (Plan International Australia, 2019). Stakeholders also observed a link between bullying at school and cyber bullying – *“the reason for bullying is mainly related to social issues and social media (cyber bullying)”* (stakeholder, male).

Caregivers are most concerned about the safety of children on their way to and from school and children noted that walking with other children, as advised by parents, helps them feel safer.

Violence online

All participant groups in the situation analysis voiced their concern for children’s safety online and the lack of regulation and protection in place. In particular, caregivers were most concerned about children’s safety online compared to forms of violence in other settings (see figure 7), and expressed a desire for more information on how to keep their children safe. Specific concerns raised include cyberbullying, sharing of images and photographs of children, grooming and viewing inappropriate material.

Children were aware of the risks of online grooming, as well as encountering inappropriate material online, and said they worry about interactions online leading to cyber-bullying. One stakeholder referred to a case where a child committed suicide as a result of cyber-bullying, *“this is one thing that is really new... especially as a very young nation”*, (stakeholder, female).

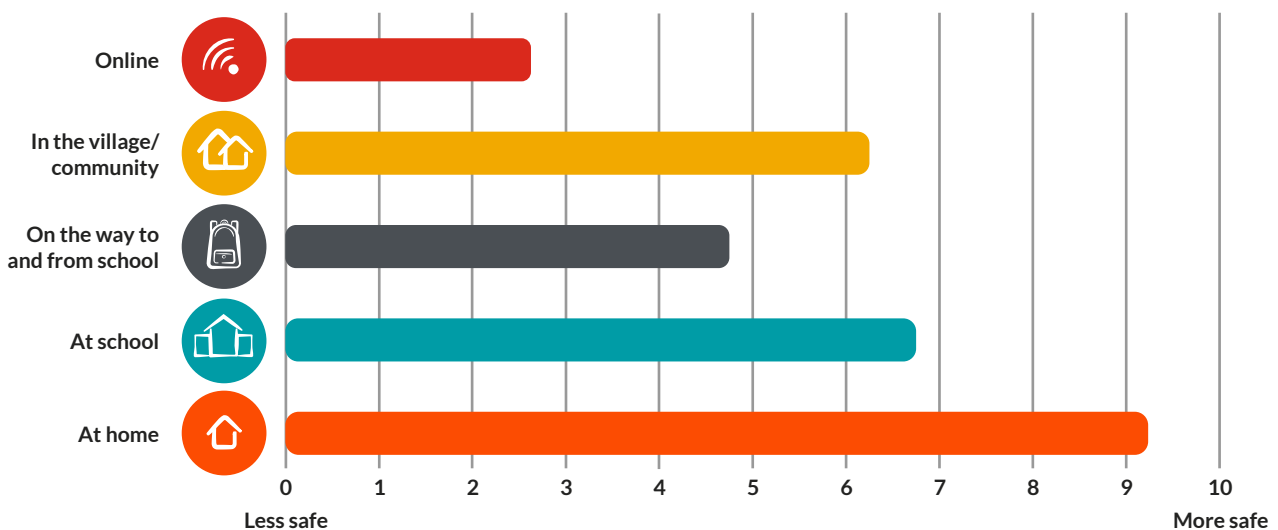
66 The use of [the] internet increased the contributing factor to child abuse e.g.usage by adults to lure children and display any forms of pornographic pictures. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female

66 Not all [online] friends are good friends. 99

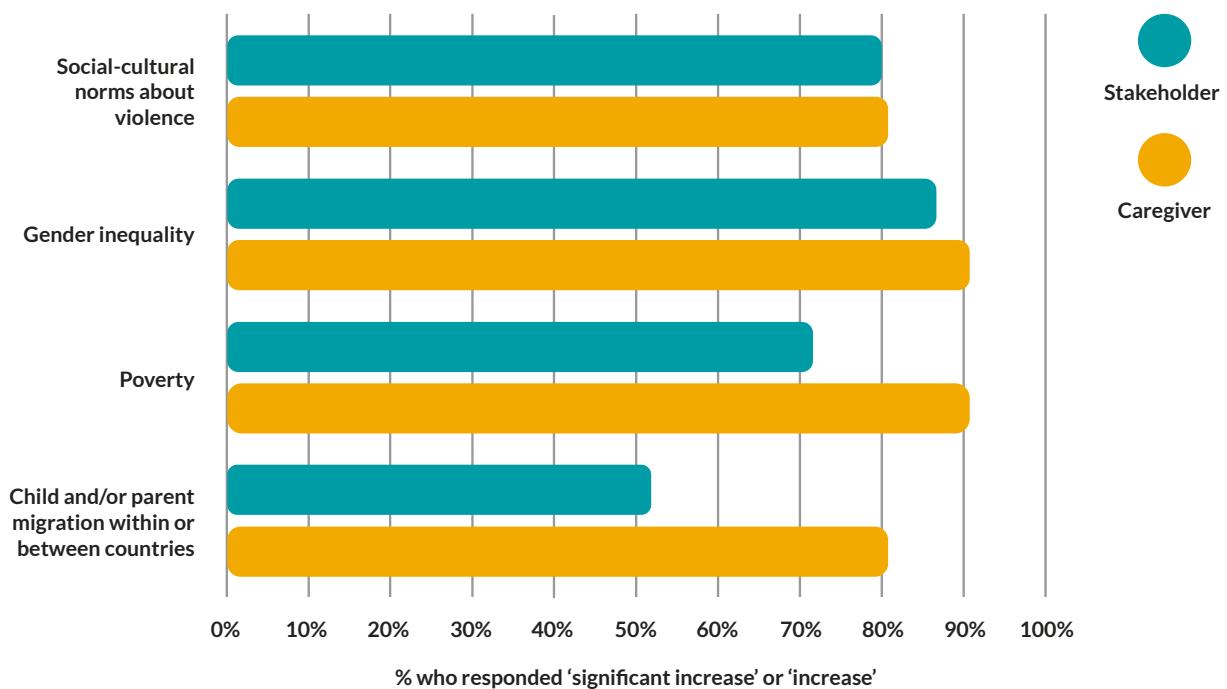
- Boy, 12-16 years.

Figure 7: Caregiver perceptions on children’s safety in different settings in Solomon Islands (N=13)



Drivers of violence

Figure 8: Stakeholders (N=15) and caregivers (N=11) perspectives on drivers of violence in Solomon Islands



Stakeholder perspectives that violence against children is increasing is consistent with data on the underlying drivers of violence, including gendered norms and practices, poverty and its gendered implications, climate change and digitisation. In particular, poverty has exacerbated since 2019, in the context of both COVID-19 and structural changes to the Solomon Islands economy.

Existing drivers

Colonialism and cycles of violence: There is a near generalised experience of violence or trauma in childhood in Solomon Islands. As noted in the literature review, recent global research has pointed to connections between colonisation and a high prevalence of intimate-partner violence (Brown et al., 2023). Stakeholders described a context in which violence is normalised and beliefs and practices are passed from one generation to the next, and the lack of knowledge or experience of non-violent approaches to parenting.

Norms and practices relating to gender and violence: Violence against children can be seen as part of the intersection of gender norms relating to men's and women's behaviour and roles, and to the normalisation of men's violence against women and children in the household. Children in this context have little status in the family or community.

Gender plays a significant role in violence against children in Solomon Islands, evident in variations in the prevalence of different forms of violence against boys and girls, and widely recognised in the literature and the perspectives of different respondents. Caregivers described these norms as stemming from marriage and, in Malaita, the patrilineal system where *“women are seen as less important to man. This cultural norm plays a very important role in the upbringing of children”* (Male caregiver). Violence against women and children is considered an acceptable way for men to release anger and frustration, and men's violence against women and children was therefore viewed as socially accepted and expected (Homan et al., 2019).

66 Children who live in homes with family violence grow up seeing what their parents do and think violence is normal and part of life... 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

66 There is a culture of silence which discourages children reporting. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.)

Socio-cultural norms around sex and sexuality underpin the high rates of child marriage, which is often the solution for families responding to the shame of a pregnant teenage daughter and potential loss of bride price.

66 Some girls at the age of 13 and up have experienced being forced to marry someone they are in a relationship with, or someone who is rumoured to have been dating the girl, or someone who makes them pregnant, or someone who their family chose. With or without her consent, they were forced to marry, and that thought has mostly girls worried to be seen or heard with someone. Boys may also experience the same as girls for the same reasons. **99**

- Focus group, caregivers, female

Poverty and violence: Solomon Islands has the second highest poverty rate in the Pacific. Long term trends show an increase in poverty since 2019 following economic contraction as a result of COVID-19, together with a reduction in logging.

Multiple pathways linking poverty and violence against children were identified in the literature and in the participant responses in Solomon Islands. First, poverty, including food insecurity, was described as a household stressor, and exacerbating violent discipline and neglect in the home. Related to this, poverty was described as leading more parents to work more with less supervision for children, in turn increasing vulnerability to violence in the home and community.

Second, poverty may lead households to make challenging decisions regarding their child's education or marriage, with gendered implications for girls.

Emerging drivers

Migration: Data suggest that poverty and climate change are drivers of migration in Solomon Islands, with children and/or their families migrating to informal settlements in Honiara the most common trend. Migration carries risks for children who travel without their parents to live with their extended relatives or friends. Other children living with extended family may be vulnerable to sexual violence, particularly from male relatives.

Climate change: Climate change may drive violence against children through a number of pathways highlighted in the data:

- Increased household stress and poverty as climate change impacts food security, both for fishing communities and communities who rely on gardens for food and livelihoods;
- The forced relocation of gardens and water sources means that children have to walk longer distances alone to collect water and work in the gardens;
- Children are forced to spend more time working in the gardens, potentially increasing child labour and the potential for dropping out of school.

66 In the community, some parents could not afford to send their children to school [and] they force them to work to earn money and do all the household chores. **99**

- Male caregiver.

66 We've had cases of rape happening against girls because they had to travel distances to collect water. They experience drought so this is common practice that we send our girls out to fetch water, [making] them more vulnerable to violence. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, male.

COVID-19: COVID-19 both exacerbated poverty and disrupted home and school life, with 100% of stakeholders reporting a significant increase in the prevalence of child marriage, child sexual abuse or other forms of violence since the pandemic.

Digitisation:

Increasing digitisation is both a setting for violence and a driver of conflict between parents and children, with increasing concern among stakeholders and caregivers for the safety of children online. Stakeholders and caregivers expressed concern there is currently no restriction or regulations about what content children are accessing, including pornography, or violent/age-inappropriate material.

Risk and Protective factors

In the Solomon Islands context, poverty is a generalised experience. However, stakeholders and caregivers also identified several risk and protective factors associated with violence against children.

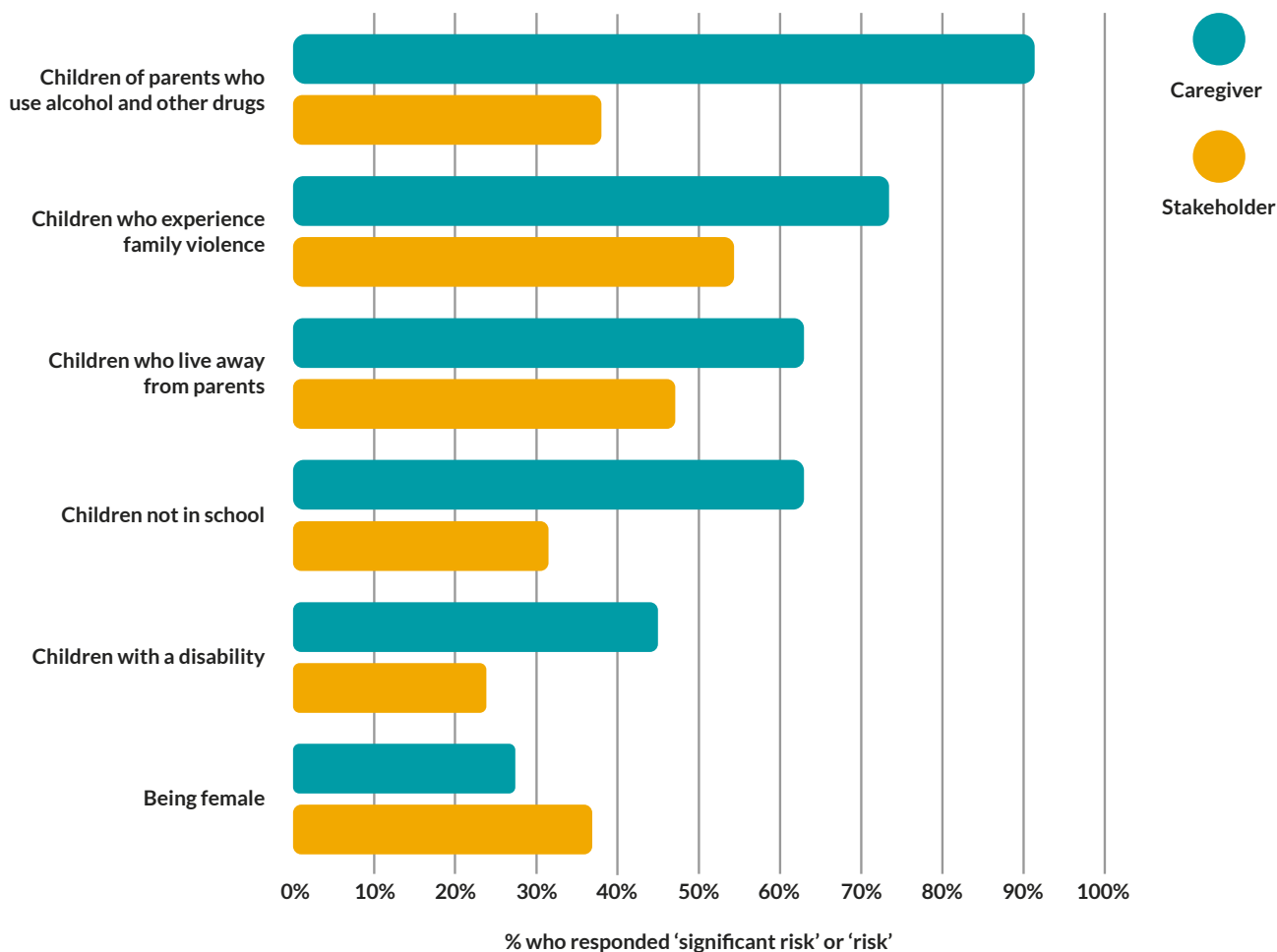
Risk factors

Factors that left children more vulnerable to violence included, living away from parents or in a single parent family, being out of school, experiencing family violence, disability, having caregivers who use drugs and alcohol and children who identify as LGBTQI+. See figure 9.

Protective factors

In terms of protective factors, the higher a girl’s education, the lower their risk of child marriage. Higher parental education (tertiary or higher) may also reduce children’s risk of violence in the home and community. In addition, the child led research revealed positive parenting, and strong connections between the home, school and community is what helps children feel safe.

Figure 9: Stakeholder (N=13) and caregiver (N=11) perspectives on risk factors



Child protection system in Solomon Islands – strengths and gaps

The analysis of the child protection system showed significant progress in establishing the legislative and policy framework related to child protection, with further work necessary with respect to corporal punishment, child marriage, child labour and cyberbullying. Child protection response services have expanded reach to the provincial level, and collaboration between partners in Honiara has strengthened through SAFENET, however, human and financial resources limit the availability and accessibility of these services in rural areas, and their accessibility to children in Honiara.

Governance

Stakeholders highlighted a number of challenges with respect to current governance and stewardship of the child protection sector, including resourcing and coordination.

Firstly, while the National Advisory Committee for Children is operational with secretariat support, stakeholders noted that there was a need for greater political leadership to increase participation and the resources available within the child protection system.

Secondly, the governance of the system and ultimate responsibility for stewardship of the system is split between two ministries, which to some extent is exacerbated by divides in the international community. Furthermore, responsibility for stewardship of both prevention and response efforts under the *Child and Family Welfare Act 2017* rests with the Social Welfare Division, in the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, yet the Social Welfare Division only receives 0.2% of the Ministry's budget.

Legislation and policy

There has been significant progress made on strengthening the legislative environment for children in Solomon Islands over the past 10 years. This includes enacting the *Child and Family Welfare Act 2017* which governs the child protection system. The Act acknowledges the primary role of parents, families and communities in ensuring the well-being of children, and setting out responsibilities of the Social Welfare Department in ensuring the care and protection of children.

The *Family Protection Act 2014*, *Penal Code (Amendment) (Sexual Offences) Act 2016* and the *Adoption Act 2017* have also been adopted in the past 10 years. In addition to the above, Solomon Islands has also recently ratified the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2022)* and the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2023)*.

Notwithstanding the progress made, there remain a number of key legislative gaps with respect to child protection:

- While physical violence is recognised as a ground for care and protection orders, corporal punishment in the home, school and other care settings that does not cause injury or is “reasonable” by a parent or teacher is legally permitted;
- Customary marriage is permissible at 15 years of age, and children who are married before 18 years are not protected under the *Child and Family Welfare Act*;

Most importantly, there is no systematic mechanism for the participation of children within the governance of the system.

- Cyber bullying and online sexual violence, including grooming, are not explicitly covered in the legislative framework; and
- Child labour has a minimum age for work set at the age of 12 years.

Reporting pathways

There are no mandatory reporting obligations under the *Child and Family Welfare Act*. Reporting violence against a child to the Social Welfare Department or police is voluntary, however, police are required to pass reports to the Department. Health workers have mandatory reporting obligations under the *Family Protection Act 2014*, and education providers who suspect that a teacher has committed an offence must report the matter to police under the *Education Act 2023*.

With respect to children reporting violence, stakeholders and caregivers were mixed in their responses. Some stakeholders and caregivers thought that some would be too afraid to report.

However, during the child led research all children said that they would tell someone if they experienced violence – “*we share our problems to get help*” (Girl, 12-16 years). This is an important finding that indicates children’s willingness to share concerns with people around them, that children live in a context where their concerns are taken seriously, and they have trusted members of the community they may talk with if they have a problem. This may also reflect a positive development following Save the Children’s work with children in these communities on child rights and violence against children.

Stakeholders and caregivers also described parents as the key barrier to reporting abuse to authorities, citing taboo, shame and concern that the child wouldn’t be believed as reasons for this, particularly if the perpetrator was a male family member. The above is consistent with existing data from a survey of adults in Isabel and Makira which found that 97% of respondents agreed that it was wrong for children to have transactional sex but over one quarter of respondents said that they would do nothing about it (IOM, 2019).

Child protection response services

Service providers across the child protection system said that there have been significant improvements in strengthening coordination and referral pathways, with the establishment of SAFENET in Honiara.

There are relatively better services available in Honiara for women and children who experience violence, however far fewer outside of the capital.

Respondents cited widespread and significant challenges with responses to violence against children, including financial constraints, impacting both staffing and operational budgets, and the need for greater training and specialisation for those in the child protection workforce.

Stakeholders recognised the significant contribution of Save the Children and UNICEF to the strengthening of the child protection system, including providing both financing and technical assistance. Stakeholders identified three main challenges with respect to external assistance received: this includes the timeframes for expenditure of project funds; the funding of pilots rather than strategic, collaborative long-term programmes; and the use of external technical assistance where capacity exists, which has been noted in prior evaluations (Homan et al., 2019).

66 When disclosing some children cry, smaller ones refuse to respond further when asked, especially when the perpetrator is a member of the family. If a case is outside of [the] family, a child is [more] willing to disclose. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

66 Sexual violence is seen as a taboo and should not be exposed. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

The Social Welfare Department receives less than 0.03% of the overall Solomon Islands Government recurrent budget, which is equivalent to AUD 50 cents for every child under the age of 19.

Police

There was very limited data on the discussion of the role of the police in Solomon Islands amongst both caregivers and stakeholders. The Royal Solomon Islands Police Force has established Family Violence Units (FVU) in all provinces and the Sexual Assault Unit, only in Honiara (UNICEF, 2017b). The Units receive reports of child victims of family violence from health workers (mandatory under the Family Protection Act 2014) and refers to and from other services via SAFENET for family and gender based violence. New recruits also receive training on child protection issues. However, like other aspects of the child protection system, police also lack human and financial resources to play a more proactive role in community policing and youth crime prevention.

Importantly, data from SAFENET shows that only 29% of adult or child victims receiving services from SAFENET in Honiara across 2020 and 2021 reported to police, suggesting significant socio-cultural barriers in reporting, even in Honiara with greater ease of access to specialised police services. This is consistent with prior research that child victims have not always been treated by police in a manner consistent with trauma informed policing (UNICEF, 2017b).

These barriers are also reflected in the child led research data. In both focus group discussions several female participants said children would not go to the police if they had a problem because they may be *“worried that they may come to parents to discuss about the issue”* or that children may be too *“scared or ashamed to go and report to the police”*, (Girl, 12-16 years).


Justice

There is an emerging level of specialisation in the justice system both relating to child victims and children in conflict with the law, including the establishment of a Children’s Court, however this is largely limited to Honiara. And like other areas of the child protection system, there are limited human and financial resources to implement these good practices. In addition, outside of Honiara, training for judges and magistrates in child protection remains ad hoc (UNICEF, 2017b).

Education

With respect to violence in schools perpetrated by teachers, there has been progress made with the enactment of the *Education Act 2023* and associated Administrative Instruction under the Act, requiring that *“protecting the safety and welfare of students must be the paramount consideration for exercising powers”*. However, lessons from other Pacific countries included in this analysis suggest that even when the legal and regulatory framework is well established, additional teaching resources are needed within schools to implement and comply with such regulations, including reporting pathways.

It is concerning that corporal punishment, violence or bullying are not mentioned in the current National Education Action Plan 2022-26.



Information systems

Stakeholders noted that there are ongoing efforts to design and implement a fit for purpose information system that supports child centred responsive services. Stakeholders agreed that the digitisation of administrative information systems is a high priority. The design of the system should be a collaborative effort across all partners. Furthermore, it will be important to ensure harmonisation of definitions of forms of violence, and of socio-economic characteristics (such as age, disability, education status etc) across all partners. In addition, data across different partners should be regularly analysed and disseminated.

Community approaches to child protection

Community based processes for responding to violence against children typically involve male relatives of the victim and perpetrator, sometimes with the support of community leaders, reconciling through dialogue and often involving the payment of compensation (money or goods) from the perpetrator's relatives to the victims. The use of these processes for resolving cases of violence against children continues to be widespread given the resource, geographical and logistical constraints of formal services.

Stakeholders and caregivers described the rationale for such practices as keeping the peace within families. These practices, however, appear to deny women and young victims any role in the process and requires them to accept the outcome, in turn shaping children's understanding of violence and its normalisation within communities.

Cultural approaches for informing programming

Working with communities and understanding traditional customs and values is key to both the effectiveness of primary prevention efforts, as well as responses to violence against children, given the limitations of the availability of formal response services in Solomon Islands.

Stakeholders recognised the tension in socio-cultural norms and practices as both a driver and basis for prevention strategies. Furthermore, they discussed the importance of engaging with church institutions. Existing data highlighted the effectiveness of training and engaging community members as resources in their communities for changing norms, and improving linkages with the formal child protection services (Homan et al., 2019).

66 Our socio-cultural norms and practices can [both] expose or provide the best foundation for preventing child abuse. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male.



Children in Solomon Islands having fun during child participation session. Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

CONCLUSION

The research analysis reveals the multifaceted nature and pervasive extent of violence that children in Solomon Islands face across various contexts –in the home, at school, in the community and increasingly online. This includes emotional, physical and sexual violence, with gendered risks for girls and boys, in particular continued concern regarding child marriage and the commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Solomon Islands.

The perception by stakeholders that violence against children is increasing is consistent with data on the underlying drivers of violence, including gendered norms and practices, poverty and its gendered implications, climate change and digitisation. In particular, poverty has been exacerbated since 2019, in the context of both COVID-19 and structural changes to the Solomon Islands economy.

In this context, poverty is a generalised experience. However, stakeholders and caregivers also identified several risk and protective factors associated with such violence, including living away from parents or in a single parent family, being out of school, experiencing family violence, disability, having caregivers who use drugs and alcohol and children who identify as LGBTQI+. Protective factors include education, for both child and caregivers, positive parenting, and strong connections between home, school and community.

The situational analysis has documented both significant progress in strengthening the child protection system, and challenges with respect to resourcing and workforce capacity, with further legislation and policy needed with respect to corporal punishment, child marriage, child labour and cyberbullying.

Children's voices are at the forefront of this analysis and they must continue to be to shape the solutions required to honour their rights and better protect them from violence that has detrimental impact on their development and sense of safety in the world.

Tonga



INTRODUCTION

Save the Children New Zealand commissioned the regional situational analysis of child protection systems across five Pacific countries in 2023, including Tonga. The aim of the research was to understand recent changes to structural drivers of violence against children and the risk and protective factors which underlie its prevalence and patterns, in turn to strengthen child protection systems, particularly at the community level.

The research was carried out by The Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University and in-country research collaborators.

The report presents the aims and objectives, methodology, findings on the status of violence against children in Tonga, and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Save the Children Tonga Programming

- Establish flexible, long-term partnerships with existing actors in child protection and gender-based violence, both in government and civil society.
- Engage with children in schools and at a community level to teach them about their rights. Enable and support strengthening peer relationships, through activities such as child clubs. Invest in child led programming and activities, to ensure children's concerns and perspectives are heard.
- Engage with caregivers on positive parenting approaches and strengthening relationships with their children, as well as effectively responding to violence. Respondents described "talanoa"/"talatalanoa" in communities and schools to discuss child protection issues as the best means for discussing such issues and should be framed in this way. Holding sessions may provide a basis to inform programme design in a deeper manner.
- Support initiatives to build greater online safety and digital literacy. These may provide a basis for initiating community-based programmes on culturally taboo issues such as sex, sexuality and child sexual abuse. For parents, this should link to the positive parenting knowledge and skills around how caregivers can effectively negotiate screen time.

- Enable and support awareness-raising and education programmes and campaigns (including via TV and radio) about:
 - Available services for children,
 - Strategies for children to protect themselves and support their friends (which SC could assist to develop and train teachers how to deliver),
 - Child protection strategies for parents and communities,
 - The importance and impact of reporting child abuse to the authorities (for both children and adults),
 - Online harms and how to address them (for both children and parents).

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with national and subnational government institutions

- Strengthen child protection policy and legislation, including implementation and enforcement, through the passing of the Child Protection Policy and the development of a legislative framework for the care and protection of children. The development of the legislation should take place through the deep participation of children and caregivers.
- Together with other child organisations and relevant government agencies, develop and communicate guidelines for formal reporting processes and explaining how confidentiality is maintained, broadly across the community. This should link to consistency in reporting of cases and data-collection/data-management.
- Help establish a youth office in each community, staffed by qualified child protection officers who are also people who live in the community.
- Work with the Ministry of Education and Training to support cultural (institutional) change within the education sector to create a **“positive and supporting environment where [school] staff feel safe, valued and empowered to report incidents”** (Survey, Caregiver, Female).
- Engage in dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Training on integrating violence against children, online safety and digital literacy and reporting violence, into school curricula. Work to remove social taboos and shame surrounding child sex abuse to enable open discussion.
- Consider the introduction of community policing in communities, to support a feeling of safety, particularly in relation to stranger violence (requested by children and caregivers in focus group discussions).
- Development of a Tongan definition of the word “gender”, a better definition of Leitis/LGBTQI group (the key informant asked for Save the Children support in progressing this).

Engage with children in schools and at a community level to teach them about their rights .



Strengthen child protection through the passing of the Child Protection Policy.



METHODOLOGY

The research design for the situational analysis was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children's approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children.

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection in Tonga. These included online surveys, interviews with child protection stakeholders, and focus group discussions with caregivers and children.

Methods	Sample size
Online survey with child protection stakeholders	16
Online survey with caregivers	28
Online survey with adolescents (self-administered/facilitated)	20
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	10
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	10
Adult led focus group discussion with children aged 8-11 years (mixed)	1
Adult led focus group discussion with adolescents aged 12-16 years (mixed)	2
Total number of participants (gender)	145 (F 105 M 40)

KEY FINDINGS

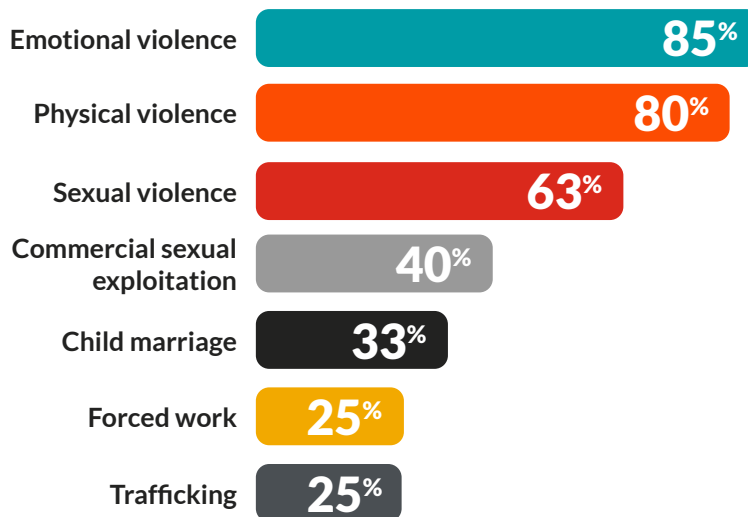
Nature and extent of violence against children

The situational analysis found that, like other countries researched, children's experience of violence in their home and school is commonplace in Tonga.

While there is a lack of official prevalence data, child protection stakeholders perceived an increase in both reporting and incidence of violence against children in Tonga over the last five years (Fig. 10), particularly an increase in the prevalence of emotional, physical and sexual violence. While respondents were less certain about trends in child labour, commercial sexual exploitation and child trafficking, overall their responses also indicated a likelihood of increased prevalence.

Adolescents said they feel safest at home, but least safe online.

Figure 10: Stakeholder perception of increased violence 2019-2023



Prevalence of violence

Violent discipline

While study findings did not suggest any material change in the prevalence of violent discipline by caregivers in recent years, all participant groups referenced corporal punishment as commonplace, despite caregivers also recognising that it was something that made their children worry or feel unsafe.

The 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey made the following findings on the experiences of children aged 1 – 14 years:

- An overall 87% had experienced some form of violent discipline or psychological aggression by caregivers in the past month, which is higher than the global average of 74% estimated by UNICEF (UNICEF, 2023);
 - 73% had experienced a form of emotional aggression;
 - 79% had experienced physical discipline; and
 - 23% had experienced severe physical discipline (Tonga Statistics Department, 2020).

Neglect

A number of child protection stakeholders and caregivers named child neglect as a concern in Tonga, echoing the results of a 2021 study where 70% of participants reported that child neglect was an issue, and many further believed that it was a growing one (Langridge et al., 2021). Participants in the situational analysis often linked child neglect to parents' work, and specifically to migrant work, where children were said to be left with one parent or extended family who then neglected their care:

66 Most forms of abuse I have come across is the abuse of neglecting of children in Tonga. The children we visit suffer from neglect by parents and caregivers. Children are left unattended and uncared for during the day. Especially during natural disasters the children are most vulnerable... It is evident that there are more signs of children being neglected. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Sexual violence

The majority (63%) of child protection stakeholders surveyed reported some degree of increase in child sexual abuse rates over the past five years. A majority of both adolescent and caregiver respondents considered sexual violence to be a worry for children, and various participants were able to discuss a small number of known cases from both community and school settings.

While there is a lack of official prevalence data, the Government of Tonga has in the past noted the difficulty of establishing the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse and incest in Tonga, due to the sensitivity of the issue, consequent underreporting to the police, and limited resources for research into the causes of sexual exploitation and abuse in Tonga (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2018).

One in ten girls in Tonga married before 18 years of age.

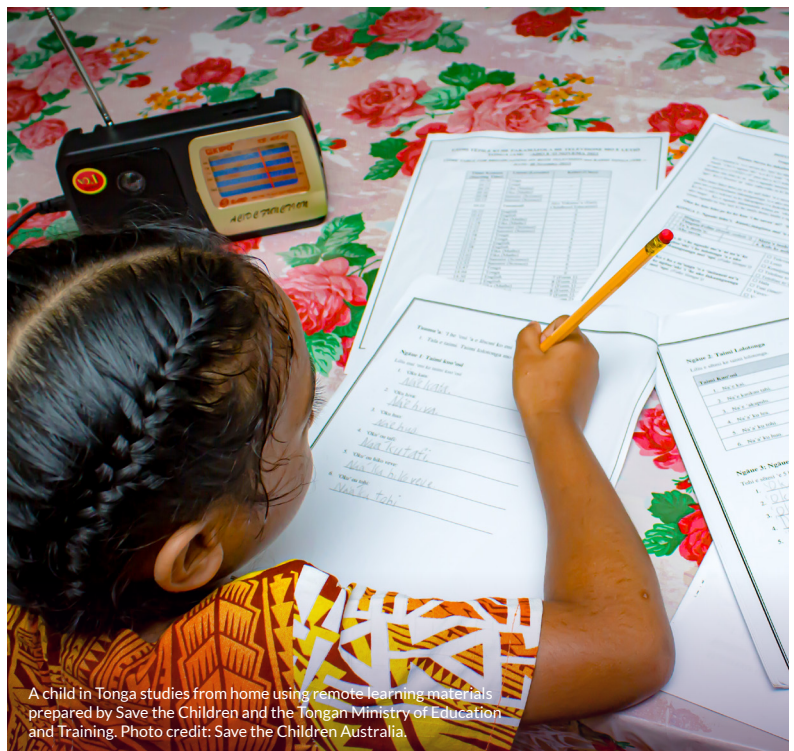
- UNICEF, 2022.

Child marriage

While participants did not raise child marriage as a concern, according to the existing literature, child marriage poses a higher risk for girls in Tonga compared to boys (Tonga Statistics Department, 2020). While the minimum age of marriage is 18 years of age, it is permissible from 15 years of age with parental consent.

Child labour, commercial sexual exploitation of children, and trafficking

Existing data showed that the majority of children who were engaged in some form of economic activity did so without meeting the definition of "child labour". The US Department of Labor noted the lack of a coordinating mechanism for child labour, labour inspectorate and the absence of a legal authority to conduct labour inspections



A child in Tonga studies from home using remote learning materials prepared by Save the Children and the Tongan Ministry of Education and Training. Photo credit: Save the Children Australia.

in Tonga, leading to an overall lack of visibility for child labour issues (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). This implies a substantial possibility of underreporting.

Regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children and trafficking, a small number of child protection stakeholders reported an increase in both forms of violence, however, most survey respondents reported being unfamiliar with the area. Notably, though, no stakeholders thought that prevalence of either had decreased to any degree. Beyond this, a small number of participants were able to share anecdotal evidence, which serves to confirm the presence of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking in Tonga, if not prevalence:

66 I am aware of parents they agreed for their daughter to have an affair with a married man because the married man bribed them with goods, money, and other stuff. I think parents should not accept or do anything about it. **99**

- Female caregiver.

A lack of data collection and investigation into any potential trafficking cases suggests that official figures may not be representative of actual prevalence (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021; UNODC, 2023).

Violence in school

School-related violence was a common concern for all groups of children who participated in the study. Children reported violence against them by teachers and student peers. Caregivers linked violence at school to children refusing to go to school, truancy or children dropping out of school completely.

Despite limited data on violence perpetrated by teachers, overall responses from participants suggest that, despite widespread knowledge of its illegality, use of violent discipline by teachers (including both physical punishment and verbal abuse) is still common, and also largely accepted (Coram International, 2021; End Violence & End Corporal Punishment, 2022). Notably, violent discipline is commonly and openly reported by children to their parents, particularly when children seek adult action on acts of discipline that they feel is not justified.

Study participants as a whole reported bullying – by peers as well as prefects, and in physical, verbal and digital forms – as being common, with most vulnerable groups including:

- Younger students: who are bullied by older students who take their money, clothes, books, food and other belongings;
- LGBTQI+ children: who become targets due to the social vulnerability created by their sexuality – or apparent/purported sexuality, in that some children are bullied after simply being accused of being “fakaleiti” or gay; and
- Children who are experiencing family breakdown: again due to their increased social vulnerability, although some participants described these children also being involved as perpetrators of bullying.

A small number of adult participants also discussed the risk of stranger violence in connection to school settings posed by adult strangers at school entrances.

Violence online

Adult participants from all study groups identified online violence against children as a serious risk. Participants described known cases of abuse perpetrated by both strangers (who used the internet to locate potential targets) and people known to victims (such as cyberbullying by peers). Child protection stakeholders also thought that the internet increased the capacity of predators to perpetrate child sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual abuse, including through greater ease of access to victims.

The top three most common online experiences of concern discussed by adolescent participants were:

- Being contacted by a stranger or someone the child did not know;
- People saying things about the child to damage their reputation; and
- Being deliberately excluded from events/social groups

Drivers of violence

Socio-cultural and religious norms regarding gender and violence were the dominant driver of violence against children in Tonga. Other drivers included poverty and socio-economic factors, often associated with children living away from one or both parents due to separation or parent migration, as well as migration, climate change and digitisation.

Existing drivers

Norms and practices relating to gender and violence:

In alignment with the literature, stakeholder responses to the study survey showed strong consensus on the role of socio-cultural norms in driving violence against children, and both adolescent and caregiver respondents agreed that acceptance of violence in the community had a negative impact on children's safety.

Participants discussed four predominant socio-cultural norms that affect the safety of children:

1 Norms surrounding use of violent discipline in the home

Across the Pacific, violence against children can be seen as part of the intersection of gender norms relating to men's and women's behaviour and roles, and to the normalisation of men's violence against women and children in the household. In line with the literature, the current study overwhelmingly found that there is a continuing acceptance of the use of violent discipline by caregivers. However, that community acceptance did not mean that all instances of violent discipline passed unquestioned or unchallenged.

Moreover, two respondents explicitly criticised the practice, one citing the child's right to live free from abuse, and another describing the adverse effects on parent-child relationships:

In Tonga, data reflects generalised acceptance and use of violence against children by both men and women.

66 We Tongans believe that physical violence is the best way to punish our kids but no, we can be a good example on [how] we deal with our kids because if we hit them they would be afraid and would not feel safe to talk to us. **99**

- Female caregiver

2 Norms surrounding use of violent discipline in school

Both children and caregivers tended to accept or support teachers' use of violent discipline (both physical and verbal) within certain parameters, such as where the child was "at fault" or "would learn from" the experience. Caregiver responses to their children being disciplined focused on teaching children to change their behaviour to avoid being hit or smacked in future, rather than changing the teacher's behaviour.

But while there was evidence of the normalisation of violent discipline by teachers among children's attitudes, this did not always equate to acceptance.

3 Norms surrounding gender roles, gendered behaviour and violence

One theme that emerged from the data was the association between masculinity and violence, with a number of participants making explicit ties between cultural drivers and the greater tendency of boys to be involved in physical fights with peers. One teacher at a male boarding school added that these norms also prevent boys from reporting on violence that they have experienced.

66 I believe adults should react in a way [where] we would be protected. **99**

- Child, 12-16 years.

66 The school culture is very strong on the children, also the culture at home is evident in the attitudes and values of the child. If a child decides to report any violence they are depicted as cowards and someone who is not strong enough to receive physical punishment like other children and considered a weakling amongst strong boys. They usually fear the backlash from students and communities when they tend to report events of violence. **99**

- Female caregiver

4 Norms that discourage reporting or discussion of violence

In addition to masculinity, a number of different norms (also often relating to gender) were identified as discouraging children to report or discuss experiences of violence, and thereby increasing their vulnerability.

One caregiver (female) noted that *"it is a culture thing that most parent and children conversation is a one-way conversation"*. However, there was evidence that adherence to these norms was changing – for example, the same caregiver added, *"but now we can open up for a two-way conversation and even if we don't like it there's room for compromise"*.

66 Cultural norms have contributed to the sexual harassment of girls in community life. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder

A related norm was the sentiment that certain problems relating to the family were “private” and should not be disclosed to others. One mother described the consequence of her acceptance of violence towards her and the impact of this on her son:

Poverty and gender: Existing data shows children in the lowest socio-economic group experience higher rates of violent discipline: 90% experienced any type of violent discipline within the preceding month, compared to 78% in the highest socio-economic group, as well as 86% compared to 70% in terms of use of physical punishment specifically (Tonga Statistics Department, 2023).

Poverty in Tonga is associated with violence against children.

66 He would come home with a bruised eye and I would ask him what happened and he would say it's alright, nothing's wrong, but when you got to the school and talk to the teachers, they know and the kids know as well but then you know, they should've called and talked to me. So I think the reason why my son is like that is because it is what he experienced at home when he was young. I think he got it from me, because when I got abused, I couldn't tell anyone, even my parents and my family. I would take everything in and be quiet and move on like nothing happened. I think he picked that up and he thinks that that is how you're supposed to handle things as well. **99**

- Female caregiver.

Participants associated poverty with child neglect and increased risk of violence both at home and at school. Caregivers also noted the intersection between poverty and family breakdown or separation, identifying children living with extended family while their parents had migrated for work, as well as children in households with widows as particularly at-risk for material deprivation.

Notably, existing literature highlighted a contributor to the gendering of poverty is the inability of Tongan women to legally own land (UN Women, 2022). This inequality in rights increases Tongan women's economic vulnerability compared to that of men, as well as their economic dependency on the men in their lives, and therefore their (and their children's) vulnerability to violence (UN Women, 2022).

Emerging drivers

Migration: Globally, migration has been described as a driver of violence against children (Maternowska et al., 2020). In Tonga, this notion was supported by child protection stakeholders, who described the trend of families migrating from the outer small islands to the main Island of Tongatapu, or from Tonga to Australia and New Zealand under temporary work schemes, as having negative impacts for their children.

Climate change: Most child protection stakeholders and caregivers surveyed for the study believed that living in evacuation centres or camps in the aftermath of natural disasters such as cyclones or floods, tended to increase the prevalence of child sexual abuse and other forms of violence against children. Focus group participants also associated the aftermath of climate disasters with a general deterioration in children's living conditions and risk of poverty, exacerbating pathways identified above.

66 Migration of children or parents within or between countries has an increasing effect on the prevalence of child sexual abuse and other forms of violence against children. 99

- Child protection stakeholders.

COVID-19: Participants in the research analysis reported contrasting impacts for children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Child protection stakeholders said there were cases of child sexual abuse reported during that period, commonly involving male perpetrators from among the victim-survivor's close family and friends who were living together as a result of the lockdowns.

However a large number of caregivers thought that the pandemic made an overall positive contribution to children's safety, precisely due to increased time to spend with family, which they associated with better parenting and more family discussions. They also noted the protective impact of increased law enforcement presence during lockdown periods, which protected children against violence from strangers. However, notably, the survey did not specify which types of violence against children should be considered, and this may warrant further exploration.

Digitisation: While improved internet accessibility in Tonga has resulted in some positive protective effects for children (mobile phones for contacting family and the use of social media for increasing community awareness of violence against children), all research participants spoke extensively about the child protection risks associated with children's increasing use of the internet and social media.

The biggest concern raised by child protection stakeholders, caregivers and children was exposure to "inappropriate content". This was described as including sexualised/pornographic, violent or otherwise undesirable material (such as gambling or horror), with some respondents being worried that exposure might encourage children to mimic negative behaviours – in particular, violent or sexual ones.

Other concerns, particularly by adult participants, included risks of online bullying and online predation of children (such as scams, theft and misuse of data, blackmail) by strangers, as well as the overuse and/or addiction to digital activity both for children and caregivers and the negative impacts that may arise. Both adolescents and caregivers expressed an interest in comprehensive education on digital use and safety.

Restrictions on children's movements during COVID-19 gave perpetrators known to the child more access and opportunity to commit abuses against them.

66 I felt so much safer because I knew that there is barely anyone roaming around since we had lockdown and a lot of town officers to keep watch. 99
- Female adolescent



Child from a government primary school on Tongatapu, Tonga.

Risk and protective factors

There is a scarcity of existing data on risk and protective factors associated with violence against children in Tonga. However, study participants provided valuable insights into the particular factors that increase risk or protection of violence against children.

Risk factors

Age: Study participants identified variation in risk with respect to different types of violence according to age:

- Children aged 5-15 years were generally at risk of home or community violence;
- Children aged 6-11 years were at particular risk of violence due to children being “*still [too] young to understand what is occurring around them, but [old enough to] react to it nonetheless*” (Child protection stakeholder).
- Being a younger child within a school community increases bullying from older students.
- Children who are LGBTQI+ (or at risk of being labelled so by their communities) were reported to be most vulnerable between ages 8 and 11.
- Age can act as a protective factor for older school children, while at the same time can also expose them to increased peer violence; concerns for older children accessing inappropriate content online.

Gender: Consistent with existing data, research participants agreed that being female posed a risk or significant risk to the safety of children, with respect to both child sexual abuse and some other forms of violence against children. Children and adults both said boys were more at risk of peer violence.

Gender and sexuality diversity: Child protection stakeholders reported an increased or significantly increased risk of violence for children who identified as gender or sexually diverse, particularly in the home:

66 I would always yell at [my son] sometimes asking if he is a “fakaleiti”⁵ and I would smack him sometimes and you know that’s just me not wanting him to be fakaleiti because he’s my only hope. 99

- Female caregiver.

Disability: Across the Pacific and in Tonga specifically, the literature identifies children with disabilities as more vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse, neglect and sexual violence, with the general limitations on their social participation considered a contributor to their vulnerability. Although there was limited discussion, all survey respondent groups agreed that disability increased the risk of children being abused, with child protection stakeholders noting a similarly increased risk of child sexual abuse.

⁵ A Tongan individual assigned male at birth who has a feminine gender expression.

Child protection system in Tonga – strengths and gaps

Although Tonga has the highest income per capita out of the countries considered in this analysis, its child protection system is in its initial phases, with the first Child Protection policy pending approval by Cabinet. Next steps include the establishment of a child protection legislative framework that is contextually appropriate for Tonga, with associated institutional development to support service response. Other legislative priorities include prohibiting the use of violent discipline, protecting boys from sexual violence, and eliminating exceptions for child marriage.

Governance

There are a number of government bodies and ministries responsible for the governance of the child protection system in Tonga, however, major gaps remain in inter-agency co-ordination, which one key informant in the study identified as the most pressing issue in strengthening Tonga's child protection system. Furthermore, there remains a lack of overarching strategy and management for child protection specifically, and the sector as a whole. This includes:

- No national co-ordinating body responsible for strategic planning and inter-agency coordination for child protection;
- No co-ordinating body, other mechanism, policy or programme to address child labour; and
- No inter-agency body or referral mechanism that is specific to child protection (UNICEF, 2017b).

Legislation and policy

The major gaps with respect to the legislative framework⁶ include the lack of:

- Provision of care and protection orders for children (which are currently only available under the Family Protection Act), including in relation to corporal punishment;
- Criminalisation of corporal punishment in the home and community;
- Criminalisation of sexual violence amongst boys (and men) and online grooming; and
- Establishment of 18 years as the minimum age for marriage without exception.

A major gap in child protection governance in Tonga is the lack of a national child protection policy (UNICEF, 2017b). This has been addressed through the development of the Tonga National Child Protection Policy and Strategic Plan, which is pending approval by Cabinet.

Experience from other Pacific countries shows the development of institutional capacity, including financial and human resources, is a long process.

⁶ For the full overview of Tongan legislation relating to child protection, refer to the Full Situational Analysis Report, Table 20 & 21, page 153-154.

Reporting pathways

The Family Protection Act 2013 places an obligation on all health professionals to file a report with the police on behalf of any child victim where the professional has been notified or become aware that the child has experienced or is at risk of future domestic violence (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2016). In some women and children's service organisations, procedures have been introduced relating to confidentiality and protection of victim identity, which are aimed at making it easier for children to lodge complaints against perpetrators (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2018).

However, all forms of reporting still require children to access a particular service and service providers, and thus a gap remains in child-friendly mechanisms for children to report violence directly, and from there to be directed to available forms of support.

Child protection stakeholders surveyed provided a very low estimation of the likelihood that adults would report violence against children, collectively estimating that more than half of child sexual abuses (63%) and cases involving other forms of violence against children (53%) go unreported.

Child protection stakeholders identified common barriers that prevent or make children reluctant to report abuse, these include:

- Cultural sensitivity and shame of child sex abuse
- Fear of abusers being identified.

Beyond specific barriers, responses from the children and adolescents involved in the study suggested that children's willingness to report experiences of violence to the people around them broadly decreased with age, and was dependent on the type of violence.

66 There are instances where the mothers would not let the child report the abuse, especially sexual abuse, because it will bring shame to the family or a stigma that they do not want. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

66 It depends, if it feels too personal I wouldn't tell anyone but maybe I would tell anyone if I feel like I need help but for now I feel like I wouldn't tell anyone and it would depend if it is serious enough to report. 99

- Boy, 12-16 years.

Child protection response services

Despite the community need, there is no clear authority for any government agency to proactively intervene and protect a child who is at risk of, or has experienced harm (UNICEF, 2017b). There is also no government agency/unit with the mandate or capacity to coordinate or deliver child and family welfare services.

Research participants, consistent with existing data, identified a number of main gaps in child protection response services in Tonga, including⁷:

- A lack of technical expertise and training across the sectors, specifically in relation to gender-based violence, and violence against children, as well as child protection in general;
- A Pacific wide lack of focus on child protection in both health sector policies and health service delivery (Sheehan, 2021; UNICEF, 2017c);
- Limitations in general service provision and funding for services to the outer islands, noting that the majority of providers are located in Tongatapu; and
- General limited funding across the sector, with children's affairs receiving a relatively small proportion of the national budget as compared to other areas. According to the literature, this would likely have been further reduced by COVID-19 (Coram International, 2021).

Police

There is no dedicated children's unit within Tonga's police force, with cases involving children being distributed across other specialist units and the general police force. Study participants, consistent with existing literature, described barriers for children reporting to police, including a widespread lack of training in gender-based violence and child protection, and an overall lack of formal processes and procedures for handling cases involving children (UNICEF, 2017b; Polynesia Regional Office, 2021; Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2016, 2018).

On the other hand, participants did express confidence in the ability of the police to address at least some non-sexual risks to children. For instance, school-related violence (largely corporal punishment by teachers) and drug-related violence. Many caregivers and children also called for increased patrolling from police and officers in towns.

Justice

In regards to addressing sexual abuse cases involving children, child protection stakeholders had a positive opinion overall of the justice system with 78% rating the system effective. Access to justice services was rated similarly well, at 64%. However, sentiments relating to justice services for other forms of violence against children were much lower, at 55% for availability and 36% for quality. Offences involving children in conflict with the law and child victims are still largely resolved informally through community mechanisms (UNICEF, 2017b).

Strengths and gaps were identified across the three main justice bodies: Magistrates Court (and Supreme Court on appeal), Police Safety Orders, and Community Legal Aid Centre/Tonga Family Protection Legal Aid Centre⁸.

66 Some children are afraid when the police are involved so they closed off when they experience violence. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

⁷ For the full overview of Tongan health and welfare services for child protection, refer to the Full Situational Analysis Report, Table 23, page 160-161.

⁸ For the full overview of the justice sector actors in Tonga, refer to the Full Situational Analysis Report, Table 24, page 162-163.

Education

There were both strengths and gaps in Tonga’s child protection framework in its education system, identified by research participants and in the literature study.

Key features include:⁹

Framework features	Strengths	Gaps
“Zero-tolerance” Bullying Policy and “Zero-tolerance” Corporal Punishment Policy	Evidence of implementation resulting in decreases in both bullying and use of corporal punishment in schools, although both practices persist to a high degree.	Gaps in sector-wide child protection reporting; integration of child protection issues into school curricula; data collection; and training on alternative strategies for disciplining students, or identifying child abuse (Stakeholders; UNICEF, 2017b).
School Child Protection Initiatives	Initiatives to protect children from stranger violence, as well as violence on the way to and from school; some examples of child safety initiatives being adapted for different school settings, boarding vs. non-boarding schools.	Unclear whether there are best-practice materials available to schools, or any sector-wide minimum standards relating to child safety.
Individual School Procedures for Reporting	Both children and caregivers reported knowing of some reporting procedures in place in schools, as well as pathways reporting or speaking with teachers, escalating issues to principals and then where the school fails to act satisfactorily, escalating to the police and the Ministry of Education and Training. Appointment of child protection “counsellors” or officers from among school staff; examples of some child protection programming for students to help them identify abuse.	An absence of sector-wide protocols; poor implementation of policies; anecdotal descriptions of schools and teachers failing to take action on bullying.

⁹ Full the overview of child protection features of the education sector in Tonga, refer to the Full Situational Analysis Report, Table 25, page 164-165.

Information systems

Some of the study participants and many sources across the existing literature identified outstanding gaps in data-collection on violence against children, child protection needs and related issues, including:

- a complete lack of data collection in areas such as child trafficking;
- a lack of systematic data sharing between different agencies and child protection actors; and
- a lack of analysis of the data that is collected for use in informing child protection activities, including enforcement of crimes, advocacy and programming (Coram International, 2021; Polynesia Regional Office, 2021; Szamier & Attenborough, 2017; UNICEF, 2017b; UNODC, 2023a).

Community approaches to child protection

Like the other Pacific countries in this situational analysis, the community, including caregivers and church leaders, plays a primary role in Tonga's overall child protection system. It is the main mechanism by which children report abuse, and the medium for social reintegration for child victims (Government of the Kingdom of Tonga, 2016). Furthermore, the majority of out-of-home care for children is informal kinship care.

However, existing data highlights how social change is weakening the role the community plays in protecting children: one, migration has disconnected families and weakened traditional safety net structures, particularly of extended family who traditionally take in children who have experienced violence if needed. Two, dependency on community support structures that are subject to community and cultural norms, attitudes and traditions, can act as barriers for children – for example, for LGBTQI+ children and other groups who already face social exclusion (Coram International, 2021).

Cultural approaches for informing programming

While there is limited data on Tonga-specific community child protection programming, existing data from other Pacific Island countries showed that projects are "...highly variable and inconsistent in terms of funding, staffing, commitment and ideas about desirable outcomes" (Sheehan, 2021).

Research participants identified some potentially beneficial approaches and areas of focus for future community-level programming:

1

Long-term involvement and relationship-building

"[Child protection programmes] should be ongoing on the relevant issue and keeping up with times and let them do it every year because we can't just sit and wait until something happens in order to act" (Female caregiver).

2

Contextualisation and adaptability of programming

Multiple sources stressed the diversity of Pacific communities, and the importance of contextualisation to local needs, including cultural needs and interests in protecting traditions and values.

3

Adopting or incorporating indigenous approaches and frameworks

Going beyond community involvement, some respondents advocated for the adoption of Pacific indigenous approaches in child protection programming, which would enable the incorporation of cultural relevancy and sensitivity, anti-racism, anti-oppression and decolonisation into the core of intervention design and implementation.

“Talanoa”/“talatalanoa” – The Tongan approach

The use of group discussions or “talanoa”/“talatalanoa” in Tonga, was frequently suggested by both adult and child study participants as a way to collectively develop child protection solutions within communities and was “*how Tongans best learn*” (Stakeholder, female).

Suggestions included holding village meetings to discuss shared responsibilities for child safety and child safety in schools, as well as ongoing discussions between parents and children about identifying and responding to violence, and to strengthen parenting practices in general.

CONCLUSION

In Tonga, the situational analysis found violence against children is a common childhood experience, with caregivers and stakeholders particularly concerned about emotional and physical violence against children in the home and at school and the rise of sexual violence.

Socio-cultural and religious norms regarding gender and violence were the dominant driver of violence against children in Tonga. Other drivers included poverty and socio-economic factors, often associated with children living away from one or both parents due to separation or parent migration, as well as climate change and digitisation. Risk factors identified by stakeholders, caregivers and children include gender and sexuality diversity, disability, experiencing family violence, living away from one or both parents, caregiver drug and alcohol use, and education and poverty.

Although Tonga has the highest income per capita out of countries considered in this analysis, the child protection system is in its initial phases. The experience of other countries in this study suggests that the development of such institutional capacity (including interagency guidelines guiding practice, as well as financial and human resources) is a long process.

Children’s voices are at the forefront of this analysis and they must continue to be to shape the solutions required to honour their rights and better protect them from violence that has detrimental impact on their development and sense of safety in the world.

Vanuatu



Photo credit: Save the Children Vanuatu.

INTRODUCTION

Save the Children New Zealand commissioned the regional situational analysis of child protection systems across five Pacific countries in 2023, including Vanuatu. The aim of the research was to understand recent changes to structural drivers of violence against children and the risk and protective factors which underlie its prevalence and patterns, in turn to strengthen child protection systems, particularly at the community level.

The research was carried out by The Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, together with Macquarie University and in-country research collaborators.

The report presents the aims and objectives, methodology, findings on the status of violence against children in Vanuatu, and recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Save the Children Vanuatu Programming

- Strengthen long-term child-led programming to help children build their knowledge of and responses to violence in their homes, communities, schools, and online. Such programmes should seek to learn from, and collaborate with, community-based programmes aiming to prevent and respond to gender-based violence from an early intervention perspective.
- Strengthen long-term community-based programming with caregivers to build their knowledge of and responses to violence in their homes, communities, schools, and online, as well as their skills with respect to positive parenting practices. Such programmes should seek to learn from, and collaborate with, community-based programmes aiming to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.
- Consider ways in which intersectionality can be reflected in generalised prevention programming, including linking to secondary prevention programmes, such as providing additional support to families with children with disabilities and grandparents who are primary carers.
- Better connect children with their communities. This may include engaging children in traditional or other community activities to help provide a deeper sense of “belonging”. This could be reflected in and potentially harnessed in programming, particularly to encourage community buy-in.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with national and subnational government institutions

- Support the Government of Vanuatu in the final stages of passing the Child Protection Bill, and in collaboration with other child protection actors, support the development of a national implementation or action plan to support the Government to fulfil its responsibilities in relation to prevention and response, including establishing a governance mechanism for the sector.
- Support the development of teacher capacity to respond without violence, and to respond appropriately to peer-to-peer violence. In addition, consideration should be given to strengthening the safety of the whole of school environment, including children's transit to and from school.
- Work with UNICEF and other child protection partners to identify additional training opportunities to identify and respond to violence against children within the health workforce.
- Support stronger law enforcement in rural Vanuatu through activities such as police training or community based programming.
- Help to embed and mainstream child protection policies into all government sector activities.

Recommendations for Save the Children partnership with other actors

- Work closely with UNICEF to build greater understanding of each organisation's role in assisting the Government in embedding child protection legislation..
- Deepen partnerships with other child centred organisations to ensure programming moves beyond small scale initiatives and adopts a strategic national approach to primary prevention. Such efforts will require engagement of all partners, as well as programming that addresses complex issues such as community-based resolution of violence against children.

Strengthen programming with caregivers to build their knowledge and responses to violence against children.



Support stronger law enforcement in rural Vanuatu through police training and community programming.



METHODOLOGY

The research design for the situational analysis was based on the socio-ecological model, which underpins Save the Children’s approach to strengthening child protection systems. The model enables consideration of both structural drivers and risk and protective factors which underlie the prevalence and patterns of violence against children.

The literature review informed the development of methods for primary data collection in Vanuatu. These methods included online surveys, interviews with child protection stakeholders, and focus group discussions with caregivers.

Methods	Sample size
Online survey with caregivers	45
Interviews with child protection stakeholders	5
Focus group discussions with parents/caregivers of children 6-16 years (number of groups)	3
Total number of participants (gender)	85 (F 50 M 33 Other 2)

KEY FINDINGS

Nature and extent of violence against children

Consistent with recent research in Vanuatu, this situational analysis has found that violence is present in all domains of children's lives - home, school, community and online (Naughton-Watt et al., 2023). Violent discipline in the home and school remains a key concern, as well as sexual violence, particularly for girls. There are growing concerns about children's safety online and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Child protection stakeholders in this analysis reported incidences of violence against children have increased over the past five years. Positively, there was a sense among research participants that child marriage under 18 years has declined for girls as access to education has improved, but given the limited sample size, this finding should be treated with caution until data from the upcoming Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey is available.

Prevalence of violence

Violent discipline

In the home, both girls and boys are subject to emotional and physical violence as a form of discipline from their male and female caregivers, and in some contexts, older siblings. The 2013 Demographic and Health Survey found that 83% of boys and 84% of girls between the ages of 2 and 14 were experiencing some form of violent discipline (Vanuatu National Statistics Office & Pacific Community, 2014).

Although the existing data is more than 10 years old, findings from the situational analysis indicate that the situation remains largely unchanged, with stakeholders identifying physical discipline in the home as a common and continuing child protection concern. One key informant described violence against children as including: *"shaking or throwing, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or choking, pushing or kicking, inappropriate restraint or false imprisonment, misusing medication, fabricating or including an illness or ill health,"* (Child protection stakeholder, female).

Children aged 5-9 years in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to severe physical punishment.

Neglect

There were a number of different situations that placed children in Vanuatu at risk of neglect, according to research participants. Families facing economic hardship leads to unsupervised children as parents or caregivers work more, as well as being unable to pay for school fees and adequate clothing for children.

Participants also identified children with disabilities, adopted children, those with single parents, and those with drug-using parents as particularly at risk of neglect. In these instances, the reasons for neglect were broader, with links to socio-cultural norms. For example, one stakeholder described how some parents treat, or neglect, children with a disability: *"Locking [the child] inside, not giving them food or bathing them and not caring if they are out in the street begging,"* (Child protection stakeholder, female).

Street / community violence

Multiple participants feared for children's safety when they are out in the community without their caregivers for protection, this included going to and from school, being at community events, or when out in the community in general with peers.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence, particularly for girls, was the most frequently-raised child protection concern for caregivers and child protection stakeholders. While there is a lack of recent sexual violence prevalence data for both boys and girls, prior studies have found that 30% of women have experienced sexual abuse before 15 years of age (Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2016).

Perpetrators of sexual violence could be known or unknown to the victims. Known perpetrators, according to the findings, included fathers, stepfathers and uncles, as well as neighbours. Cases of sexual violence committed by strangers were connected with children being unsupervised in community spaces, or without their parents potentially as a result of migration.

Child marriage

Child protection stakeholders described child marriage in Vanuatu as a decreasing, but persisting practice, increasingly restricted to certain remote villages or islands. This is consistent with data from the caregiver survey, which found that 44% of caregivers thought that children worried about being forced to marry. Girls were more likely to experience child marriage, with grooms reported to be much older than their young brides.

Notably, there was indication of a cultural change in attitude with unanimous disapproval towards child marriage among stakeholders, as well as some caregivers. However, acceptance of the practice still remains, evidenced by the majority of caregivers saying that they would not report instances of child marriage to the formal authorities, preferring instead to speak to village or church leaders. This presents a child protection risk where these leaders are themselves involved in or otherwise supportive of the practice.

Child labour

Child labour was briefly identified as a child protection concern by participants, but not discussed in much detail. The majority of caregiver survey respondents (64%) thought that children worried about being forced to work to some extent. In line with existing data, one key informant identified poverty as a driver for children selling their labour very cheaply. This also suggests that prevalence may have grown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and successive natural disasters.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children and trafficking

While there is limited information on the prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation of children or trafficking in Vanuatu, both are identified as a risk faced by both girls and boys in the Pacific, with a potentially greater risk for girls – noting that a recent survey of child protection stakeholders across the Pacific reported 68% of trafficking victims were girls (ECPAT International, 2019b).

Child protection stakeholders discussed the exploitation of girls and its association with poverty. One stakeholder noted that many girls from

66 Early age marriage happens because the parents want to exchange [the girl] ..for the family's land or financial security, so the girl becomes the victim. It is like trading of goods. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

broken homes or those who were experiencing COVID-driven poverty were selling their bodies *“very cheap[ly] for money”* (Child protection stakeholder, female). With another respondent adding this was in turn contributing to an overall increase in sexual violence.

Violence in school

The nature of violence against children in the school setting, according to research participants, could be grouped in to three main themes: one, violence associated with going to and from school; two, teacher violence; and three, peer to peer violence, in that order of concern.

The school journey: The threat of violence, particularly sexual, against a child as they journey to and from school was one of the major concerns among caregiver participants, second only to online as the least safe setting for children:

“Walking home exposes [children] to abuses such as they can be picked up by strangers. There [is] history of children, especially girls, jumping off running vehicles because of attempted rape or sexual molestation on these public vehicles.” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

Prevalence data on violence experienced by children in this setting is limited. Participants linked this danger to the lack of parental supervision, and noted children travelling with peers provided some protection.

Teacher violence: Despite a ban on the use of physical punishment by teachers since 2001, existing data shows it still continues in Vanuatu, with teacher attitudes reflecting normalisation of this form of violence (Save the Children’s Seif Skul/Safe Schools programme). Child protection stakeholders supported the literature findings, noting that the use of violent discipline (both in terms of physical violence and abusive language) in schools continues, with little concern of formal consequences. Notably, no caregivers discussed violent discipline by teachers as a concern at all, which one key informant attributed to widespread social acceptance:

“In a lot of cases, and in rural communities in Panama, teachers are almost like equal to nurses and doctors in terms of the respect that you would give them. And so you don’t question that authority. It’s a given and teachers know what’s good for your child, so you respect that.” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

Peer to peer violence: Existing data from 2016 shows a relatively high prevalence of school bullying, with a slightly higher prevalence among boys than girls. Prevalence also appeared to decrease slightly with age (53% for students aged 13-15 compared to 48% those aged 16-17) (WHO, 2011-2017).

Data from research participants was limited, apart from reporting risks attached to specific groups, such as children with disabilities and LGBTQI+ children (WHO, 2011-2017).

Violence online

Caregivers reported widespread and increasing access to digital devices and the internet among children. Being a relatively new area of focus, there are limited data related to violence experienced by children online, despite this, caregivers said they were more concerned about children’s safety online, compared to any other setting. Most of the concerns voiced by adult participants centred on risks relating to accessing inappropriate content, as opposed to risks involving contact with people online, with no discussion on more extreme forms of online violence, perhaps reflecting the emerging nature of child protection awareness in this space.

Despite being banned for over two decades, corporal punishment continues in schools.



Drivers of violence

Gendered social and cultural norms remains the dominant driver of violence against children in Vanuatu, with poverty, migration, climate change and digitisation also significant drivers.

Existing drivers

Norms and practices relating to gender and violence:

Across all five Pacific countries in this situational analysis, violence against children can be seen as part of the intersection of gender norms relating to men's and women's behaviour and roles, and to the normalisation of men's violence against women and children in the household. Evidence presented in the literature review suggests that women's violence against children is part of this gendered violence (Feinstein et al., 2022; Homan et al., 2019; Naughton-Watt et al., 2023; Pacific Community, 2009).

Child protection stakeholders overwhelmingly pointed to the normalisation of violence in the community as a persisting driver of violence against children in Vanuatu. This was in relation to children witnessing violence at home (particularly violence against women), acceptance of the use of violent discipline against children in the home, as well as children's relative status and the impacts of that on reporting.

Poverty relating to gender and violence: Limited data emerged from the situational analysis on the pathways between poverty and violence against children in Vanuatu. However, existing research shows parental use of physical violence was higher among poorer communities (74%), compared with higher socio-economic groups (66%) (Vanuatu National Statistics Office & Pacific Community, 2014).

In line with the literature, the majority of survey respondents thought that poverty made children less safe with the qualitative data suggesting four pathways:

- 1 Connection between poverty and a failure to meet children's basic needs (neglect).
- 2 Poverty creates household stress, impacting family relationships and leading to household conflict.
- 3 Poverty and limited resources were associated with increased child marriage, with girls being forced to marry for their family's "*land security purposes*", (Child protection stakeholder, female).
- 4 Poverty is associated with a lack of educational opportunities for both children and parents, which may put children at risk of child marriage and/or child labour.

Emerging drivers

Migration and displacement: Globally, migration has been described as a driver of violence against children (Maternowska et al., 2020). Migration for economic or climate-related reasons can result in abrupt changes in children's living arrangements, which caregivers and stakeholders both associated with increased risk of violence against children, particularly neglect. Survey participants strongly associated both child and parent migration, as well as moving away from community, as creating risks for children. Stakeholders gave the example of children facing increased violence after being brought under the care of extended family when parents have migrated from rural areas, or to Australia and New Zealand:

66 Community or family itself can be another driver. When a child is raised in a violent community or home when he grows up, he'll be violent too, because he thinks that it is a tradition in the family or community. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male.

66 Now we have so many people go for [seasonal work] in Australia and New Zealand, which creates so many broken homes and children become victims. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male.



Community members take part in a consultation on climate change in North Epi, Vanuatu. Photo credit: Save the Children Vanuatu.

“Village kids face different violence at home. Many parents who are at the [Recognised Seasonal Employment] scheme and leaving their children under the care of aunts, uncles, grandmothers etc., there is a lot of abuses happening to these children everyday.” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

Caregivers also strongly associated migration of parents for work with loss of oversight over children, and consequently a general decrease in child safety.

Climate change: Research participants reported climate change was responsible for increasing violence against children in Vanuatu. First, as a result of being forced to live in temporary displacement settings; second, climate change’s longer term impacts on household poverty and food insecurity; and third, by exacerbating weaknesses in Vanuatu’s services system.

Caregivers strongly agreed that temporary displacement, either to evacuation centres or further relocation to other communities, posed greater risks to children’s safety:

“As a kid you lost your house, you are homeless, you must relocate, you relocate to another island but you don’t know their custom and culture. You make mistakes this can lead you to many abuses.” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

Weather related incidents increase economic hardship and household stressors, both recognised as drivers of violence against children. Economic analysis following Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015 suggested that 4,000 people had slipped below the poverty line after the disaster (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). Given women’s more limited access to financial and other capital, the impact was likely disproportionately high for women.

Caregivers agreed that food security and water scarcity both posed a degree of risk to child safety. They noted that effects of climate change on crop yield, disruptions from cyclones, and COVID-19, have already been disrupting children’s food security at home and at school. Furthermore, the frequency of natural disasters is placing significant pressure on Vanuatu’s ability to deliver services such as education and emergency resources.

COVID-19: Findings on the impacts of COVID-19 on violence against children were limited. When it was discussed, research participants described some economic impact and that school closures were disruptive to children’s education, however, not to the same degree as cyclones.

66 Displacement: Their children were vulnerable to violence and their protection was at stake. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing systems gaps in Vanuatu - the constant need to spend resources on rebuilding is also impeding work on further systems strengthening.

Digitisation: Children of all ages have access to the internet and digital devices in Vanuatu, with greater access in urban centres. The research findings mirrored data from other Pacific countries, which showed both children and their caregivers were very concerned about exposure to inappropriate content (primarily via social media) (Third et. al., 2020). Participants expressed concern about sexualised, violent, and otherwise inappropriate content influencing children's behaviours, with some specifically linking internet exposure to crime, including sexual abuse, and changing cultural morals. Participants were also concerned about the potential for children to become addicted to internet use, and its impact on parent-child engagement in the home.

No participants discussed the risk of more extreme forms of online violence, such as grooming, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. One explanation for this could be limited awareness. In the face of these risks, there is a lack of comprehensive education in online risk-management strategies for both children and parents.

Risk and protective factors

In the Vanuatu context, violence against children is a generalised experience, however, stakeholders and caregivers identified in this situational analysis several risk factors associated with such violence. These included children with a disability, children's disclosure of violence, parental drug and alcohol use, gender and sexual diversity, location (urban vs. rural) and living arrangements.

Like other Pacific countries in this research analysis, education of both children and their caregivers was the dominant protective factor against violence against children.

Risk factors

Disability: Disability was strongly identified by all groups of participants as a risk factor for children, with one child protection stakeholder working in the disability space attributing this vulnerability to their limited autonomy and increased dependence on others. Furthermore, the stakeholder noted the connection between neglect and poverty in cases involving children with disabilities, adding that caring for a child with a disability for families who are facing increasing hardship becomes an additional stressor.

Participants also raised concern about the lack of specialised service providers for children with disability, as well as lack of access to education.

Disclosure of violence: Participants in the research described the disclosure of violence by children to adults as itself exposing child victims to further experiences of violence. This included physical violence, with caregivers reporting that some parents or relatives would respond to reports of violence by beating the child victims involved. Many participants also said children would face emotional violence and social exclusion if their experiences of violence become known.

Drug and alcohol use: In line with existing data, caregivers very strongly identified drug and alcohol use by parents as a risk factor for children, reporting substance abuse made children 'much less safe'.

66 Hardship is one of the main drivers [of violence] when we are dealing with children with disability. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

66 A young father who was under the influence of marijuana burned his innocent son who was 4 years old...the father angrily hit him and threw him to the sea shore and brutally removed all his teeth and burned him. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female.

Gender and sexual diversity: As is the case for other Pacific countries in this situational analysis, embedded cultural and religious norms are a driver of violence for children in Vanuatu who identify as LGBTQI+. The impacts of this social exclusion further increase the risk of violence against them, with one participant noting this risk increased with age as this status becomes more obvious:

“People will criticize them because of their gender in so many ways that can sometimes cost them their life. From what I know, most of them find it very hard to get jobs in town, parents send them out from the house, families denied them in public and people will see them as nothing or useless. But now they have formed an organization called VPRIDE which secure their rights as humans too in the society.” (Stakeholder, female)

Location (urban vs. rural): Both caregivers and stakeholders reported that living in rural areas presented a greater risk to children’s safety. Reasons for this included higher rates of poverty, lack of economic opportunity (and therefore labour migration and the risks stemming from separation from parents), more limited access to education, and reduced access to child protection services. In addition to this, the stronger adherence to tradition and custom in rural areas was associated with a higher risk of child marriage for girls, as well as a higher risk of violent discipline by teachers going unreported.

Separation from parents/living with extended family: In line with existing data, findings from this study associated violence with children who had been separated from their families, and as a consequence, were living with alternative caregivers/extended families. As mentioned above, a driver for this is migration for work. Existing data found one in six children in Santo living away from both parents due to parental migration to Australia and New Zealand as part of labour migration schemes (Brandl et al., 2023).


More specifically, separation from parents was associated with substandard care or neglect by alternative caregivers, children engaging in antisocial behaviours due to lack of adequate supervision and guidance, as well as the risk of sexual and other forms of violence by alternative caregivers.

Similarly, according to research participants, children living in single parent households were likely to face increased risk. In particular, teenage pregnancy, poverty and neglect – both in terms of material deprivation and lack of parental supervision or control over children.

Age: Existing data suggests that caregiver use of violent discipline is slightly greater amongst younger children (aged 2-9 years), compared with children aged 10-14 years, however, there was a strong consensus from caregivers that being closer to 16 years of age created increased risk to children – this may be in part because caregivers placed more weight on violence outside of the home.

Experiences of family violence: In line with existing data and as mentioned above, norms relating to gendered behaviour and family violence are drivers of violence against children.

Cultural and religious norms are a driver of violence for children in Vanuatu who identify as LGBTQI+.



All caregivers in this study emphatically identified family violence as a risk factor for violence against children. One stakeholder noted, however, that the link between violence against women and violence against children has received relatively little attention in terms of programming and service integration and that further work is needed.

Gender: Study participants were consistent with existing research in also identifying that a child's gender can increase their risks of violence against them. Girls are more at risk of child marriage, sexual violence, and commercial sexual exploitation, while boys are at higher risk of physical violence from peers and serious injury (Naughton-Watt et al., 2023; WHO, 2011-2017).

Protective factors

Education: All participants generally saw being in education as a protective factor for children. Child protection stakeholders further associated being out of school with increased vulnerability to child marriage, as well as unemployment or limited employment opportunities, which themselves exposed children to street violence and future poverty. Other protective factors include wealth and positive parenting.

Child protection system in Vanuatu – strengths and gaps

The situational analysis showed that there has been significant progress in strengthening the child protection system in Vanuatu over the past 10 years. Formal legislative and policy frameworks have improved, the first child protection legislation is close to being finalised, and the child protection workforce has grown. However, there remains a significant gap between children's lived experience of violence and the formal and community-based systems in place to both prevent and respond to that violence.

Governance

The main government body responsible for the governance of the child protection system in Vanuatu is the Child Desk Office of the Ministry of Justice and Community Services. The Office holds broad responsibility for child rights monitoring and coordination, as well as receiving reports of criminal breaches of the Child Safeguarding Policy 2017.

The National Child Protection Working Group is a coordinating group, working directly on child protection issues and concerns, with membership from non-government organisations and civil society organisations. In addition, the National Children's Committee is a regulatory body with broad membership that directly coordinates the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While child protection stakeholders considered the Ministry's stewardship and leadership as a strength, they were concerned about its limited financial and human resources. Stakeholders reported a lack of coordination, in particular between services for violence against women and those for violence against children (National Stakeholder, Female). Furthermore, they added the need for centralisation of data management on child protection issues, including its analysis and use (UNICEF, 2017c).

66 Child marriage I can say is decreasing because many girls have access to education. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, male.

Legislation and policy

The key policy document for child protection in Vanuatu is the *National Child Protection Policy* (Ministry of Justice and Community Services, 2016), which sets child protection goals and identifies strategic areas for action. However, there are substantive gaps in this legislation, which include:

- The lack of legislation outlining state responsibility for child protection;
- The absence of a framework for prevention, early intervention and response; and
- The lack of legislation to regulate alternative care.

The Ministry is addressing these gaps by drafting the *Child Protection Bill* and the *Adoption Bill*. Stakeholders, however, are concerned with the lack of progress on the Bill, which they hope will be presented to parliament in early 2024. Until the Bill is passed, stakeholders said children remain vulnerable to violence as authorities are unable to prosecute child abuse.

Additional policy, the *Vanuatu Child Protection Policy 2016-2026*, sets out the Government's commitment to developing a child protection system. While it includes eight strategic areas, it has set no specific budget allocation for implementation.

There remain a number of other gaps in the legislative framework. These include:

- Violent discipline in the home and other settings being legally permitted;
- The practice of corporal punishment in schools, despite this being prohibited;
- Child marriage being legally permitted for girls from 16 years of age; and
- Child labour being permitted for children aged 14 years of age (whereas international standard for employment is minimum 15 years).

Reporting pathways

Vanuatu has made good progress in establishing formal mechanisms for reporting and response to children who need protection. However, in practice, many barriers remain and findings suggest that the proportion of reported cases of violence against children remain low (Tabi, 2023).

Vanuatu's key referral mechanism is the National Child Protection Referral Pathway, administered by the National Child Protection Working Group, which outlines the roles of different stakeholders and service providers for support provided to children, such as, psychosocial support, access to healthcare, access to safety and justice. While the Pathway was established relatively recently, it has been identified by stakeholders as an emerging strength. The Government, supported by Save the Children, is currently making progress in raising awareness about the Pathway, and training child protection system actors in their responsibilities and its use, including in remote areas (Child protection stakeholder, female).

Stakeholders described some of the barriers for reporting violence against children, beginning with children's unwillingness to disclose abuse for reasons largely linked to socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, if children do disclose, they then face additional barriers within the services to adequately respond and protect them:

Socio-cultural norms are cited as a primary barrier for children to disclose violence.

“When children experience violence, sometimes it’s hard for them to report it to their parents or relatives, because that person might be a very close relative or sometimes their parents won’t believe them.” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

Consistent with existing literature, study participants cited a general lack of human and financial resources within child protection services, which impede proper implementation of reporting processes, as well as a lack of specialised training within the police, creating a reluctance by children to report (UNICEF, 2017c).

Child protection response services

Stakeholders noted that while Vanuatu’s forthcoming body of child protection legislation constituted a strength, the lack of implementation, resourcing and enforcement of these laws constituted a general gap (UNICEF, 2017c).

Child protection stakeholders identified the following limitations with respect to resourcing response services:

- Lack of financial resources, with a tension in allocation of funding between staffing and operational budgets.
- Lack of human resources, in terms of both numbers and training.
- Lack of formal qualifications in child protection (some training in child protection, but not qualified social workers).
- Limitations in geographical reach of services.

66 We have very good laws in Vanuatu but the thing is that we cannot enforce these laws especially in the remote areas... 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male

66 The majority of child protection workers are not qualified social workers. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, male.

66 Child protection officers sit at the provincial headquarters. There are many challenges to being able to reach children and families in the communities. Even though Vanuatu’s quite small in terms of population, you’ve got people living in remote rural communities where it’s often very challenging for the child protection officer, as well as police in the provincial headquarters to be able to get out to respond to cases. 99

- Child protection stakeholder, female

Police

Family Protection Units within the police manage cases of domestic violence, including those involving children, however, child protection stakeholders identified the need for a dedicated child protection agency within the force *“for investigating and prosecuting cases of abuse and neglect”*.

Although most child abuse cases are managed by general police offices, this should be carried out in accordance with the *Policy for Young Victims and Witnesses*, which provides guidelines for child sensitive investigations (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, 2016). Yet existing data and study participants identified a number of gaps with respect to the generalised police approach:

- Limited police reach, with children and their families facing financial barriers to accessing the police (National Stakeholder, Female) (UNICEF, 2017c);

- Despite a 'no-drop' policy, police continue to refer reported crimes against children back to the community for informal resolution (UNICEF, 2017c);
- Police are slow to follow up on reports and cases involving children are not prioritised; (UNICEF, 2017c); and
- Children also continue to experience physical and verbal abuse at the hands of police (Child protection stakeholder, Female) (UNICEF, 2017c).

Justice

Strengths and gaps were identified across the three main justice bodies in Vanuatu: Magistrates Court; Islands Courts (outside capital/on remote islands); and the Juvenile Court in Port Vila (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu, 2008; UNICEF, 2017c).¹⁰

Child-centred processes within the justice system are limited, with some specialised handling of children as victims, witnesses and offenders. For example, the Supreme Court dispenses with wigs and clears the courtroom, and in the Magistrates Court a more informal 'round table configuration' is used (UNICEF, 2017c).

A significant gap within the justice system is the absence of a mechanism for removing a child from the custody of their perpetrators, although, the forthcoming *Child Protection Bill* intends to address this.

Education

While corporal punishment is permitted in the home, it is prohibited in schools under the *Education Act 2014*. In addition, the Ministry of Education has established a *Child Safeguarding Policy 2017* that includes a number of strengths with respect to the policy environment in the education sector. These include:

- Every school is required to develop and implement a "Safe School Policy" addressing child protection among other issues;
- Child safeguarding focal points, to be the first point of contact for any reports of alleged or suspected child abuse or other serious breaches of the child safeguarding policy;
- Teachers, volunteers, and other school staff are subject to mandatory reporting of child protection incidents and are required to take the child to the nearest health centre for medical examination and/or the nearest police station for safety where required;
- Safeguarding and reporting training is required for staff. (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2017).

However, stakeholders noted a general lack of sector awareness about the importance of creating or fostering child-friendly environments to encourage or enable reporting in the education sector. Previous studies have also identified substantial discrepancies in children's access to confidential counselling (Thuso Limited, 2022).



Children at a school in Vanuatu. Photo credit: Save the Children Vanuatu.

¹⁰ For the full overview of the justice sector actors in Vanuatu, refer to the Full Situational Analysis Report, Table 28, page 195-196.

Information systems

There was limited data from participants regarding information systems in Vanuatu. The Ministry of Justice has established an administrative dataset in relation to violence against children. In preparation of the forthcoming Child Protection Bill, there should be consideration on how to strengthen existing administrative information systems for case management, and broader monitoring, evaluation and learning regarding system assessment.

Community approaches to child protection

Customary processes remain the primary mechanism for conflict resolution in Vanuatu, with the village chief the paramount authority over these processes for the community. However, study participants, consistent with existing literature, found customary conflict resolution processes for cases involving violence against children were detrimental to the children's best interests:

66 The families will use customary laws to solve the issue, which doesn't help at all, because the victim is still hurt and that person might abuse her again if they didn't lock him up. So it's best to go directly to the police. **99**

- Child protection stakeholder, female

In other examples, stakeholders highlighted the risks involved for children when customary practices are the only form of resolution or protection. In one instance, a village chief circumvented formal police processes to ensure rape charges against his son were dropped, and the matter was settled *“via custom ceremony so the case can be forgotten”*, (Stakeholder, female). The stakeholder commented that, as a result, the case would *“no longer reach the courts. This means that the boy is a free man and what he did was okay”*.

Nevertheless, many caregivers expressed support for village authority structures, identifying them as structures that contributed to child protection. While it is important to acknowledge the weaknesses of traditional dispute resolution practices in addressing violence against children, the continued strength of the community's belief in these structures highlights the importance of finding ways to engage and leverage cultural values and customary processes in future child protection programming.

Cultural approaches for informing programming

A number of beneficial approaches and focus areas for future community-level programming emerged from this situational analysis, consistent with existing research (Feinstein et al., 2022; Homan et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2021; Thompson & Wadley, 2019). These include:

1

Long-term involvement and relationship-building

Research participants emphasised the importance of long-term involvement with communities, if not through direct involvement by partners, then by establishing programme sustainability through local capacity building:

“You come to our country, you must have counterparts. When you leave, your counterparts can take over the job. You do not come and run the show then leave without building local capacities! Many times the international partners give us money to implement it in [a] very short period of time. They give us money but they do not give us enough time!” (Child protection stakeholder, female)

2

Contextualisation and adaptability in programming

Participants stressed the diversity of Pacific communities. This means programmes must fit the context for the community its engaging with, including the cultural needs to protect traditions and values, as well as be flexible enough to adapt to better serve local needs.

3

Linkages with formal child protection networks and specific target groups

Existing literature draws on the importance of building linkages between informal child protection networks and the formal child protection systems. Existing data noted the relative success of these efforts was in large part dependent on the ability of formal networks to respond to and service community child protection needs.

CONCLUSION

As with other Pacific Island countries considered in this analysis, violence against children in Vanuatu is widespread and a generalised experience. Children face high rates of violent discipline in their home and school, and are vulnerable to sexual violence, particularly girls. Furthermore, there is growing concern about children's safety online, and the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Gendered social and cultural norms remains the dominant driver of violence, as well as poverty, migration, climate change and digitisation. At the same time, the analysis highlighted a number of intersecting risk factors for children, including gender, poverty, disability, living away from parents, and parental use of drugs and alcohol.

The situational analysis shows significant progress in strengthening the child protection system in Vanuatu over the past 10 years. However, there remains a major gap between children's lived experience of violence and the formal and community-based systems designed to both prevent and respond to that violence.

Children's voices are at the forefront of this analysis and they must continue to be to shape the solutions required to honour their rights and better protect them from violence that has detrimental impact on their development and sense of safety in the world.

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