



Background

What is the current problem?

Sexual violence affects children and young people of all ages and occurs in all countries. . Global prevalence estimates, however, focus on girls, suggesting they are at higher risk than boys with 1 in 10 girls under the age of 20 having experienced some form of forced sexual contact¹. Although, there are no global estimates on the sexual abuse of boys,² analysis from 24 countries shows that sexual violence in childhood ranges from 8% to 31% for girls and 3% to 17% for boys.³ As well as the research gap on sexual violence and boys, there is also a significant policy gap - there is a need for gender neutral laws to protect both boys and girls from sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse and exploitation significantly impacts on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, and varies according to the nature, severity and duration of the abuse as well as the coping strategies and responses from family, friends, communities and practitioners⁴. Impacts on physical health of sexual abuse include contracting HIV and drug and alcohol abuse⁵. Because the sexual abuse of children is a 'taboo' subject, victims of sexual abuse often suffer from stigma and discrimination, and the impact on mental health includes anxiety, depression, psychological trauma and self-harm⁶. The impact of childhood sexual abuse can be life-long and include issues with intimacy as well as socio-economic consequences such as homelessness and unemployment.⁷

¹ UNICEF (2020) A new era for girls: Taking stock of 25 years of progress, UNICEF/ UNWomen/Plan International: New York.

² UNICEF (2014). Hidden in plain sight: A statistical analysis of violence against children. New York, NY: UNICEF.

³ Barth, J., Bermetz, L., Heim, E., Trelle, S., & Tonia, T. (2013). The current prevalence of child sexual abuse worldwide: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Journal of Public Health*, 58(3), 469-483

⁴ Kendall-Tackett, K. (2008) Developmental Impact, in D. Finkelhor *Childhood Victimization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 65–101.

⁵ Sommarin, C. Kilbane, T. Mercy, J. Moloney-Kitts, M. & Ligiero, D. (2014) Preventing sexual violence and HIV in children, *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, 66: Supplement 2, July 1, S217-223.

⁶ Chen, L., H. Murad, M. Paras, K. Colbensa, et al. (2010) Sexual Abuse and Lifetime Diagnosis of Psychiatric Disorders: Systematic review and meta-analysis, *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, 85:7, 618–29; Haileye, A. (2013) Psychopathological Correlates of Child Sexual Abuse: The case of female students in Jimma Zone, South Ethiopia, *Ethiopian Journal of Health Sciences*, 23:1, 32–38; Maniglio, R. (2013) Child Sexual Abuse in the Etiology of Anxiety Disorders: A systematic review of reviews, *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 14:2, 96–112.

⁷ Fisher, C. Goldsmith, A. Hurcombe, R. & Soares, C. IICSA Research Team (2017) The impacts of child sexual abuse : A rapid evidence assessment, *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*, London.

How sexual violence against children is framed

Sexual Violence Against Children predominantly framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 34 of the Convention specifically focuses on children's right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation. Sexual violence is also referred to in Article 19, outlining the rights of children to protection, Article 37 on torture, cruel and degrading treatment and Article 39, focussing on measures to promote recovery and reintegration of victims of exploitation or abuse. Although the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has resulted in huge legal reform globally, notably on sexual violence⁸ it has been criticised for reducing the broad spectrum of children's rights to 'child protection'⁹ and for not addressing nuances of age and gender¹⁰. In practice, the work to address sexual violence against children is largely subsumed within the child protection sector and ending violence against children more broadly¹¹. Despite the huge push to address sexual violence in the Sustainable Development Goals, legal reform in many countries and initiatives such as the '[Out of the Shadows Index](#)' and [WeProtect Global Alliance](#) (online sexual abuse) that monitor and support national progress in ending sexual violence against children, it is clear that there is a lack of evidence on solutions to prevent sexual violence against children, in particular, solutions that incorporate local contextual knowledge and understanding¹²

How Family for Every Child is addressing the challenges

Learning from communities: Family for Every Child has created the RISE Learning Network, a community of local practitioner and advocates working on sexual violence against children. RISE members have undertaken participatory research to document the experiences of children and young people affected by child sexual exploitation of reintegration. Youth researchers in Nepal, Madagascar and Uganda undertook focus group discussions with their peers that resulted in recommendations on the key issues that reintegration services need to consider when enabling the reintegration of children affected by sexual exploitation into communities.

Recommendations from this research include:

- Provide interventions that take a holistic approach to reintegration where children who have experienced sexual exploitation are able to explore the trauma they are experiencing in a non-judgemental environment and acknowledge their resilience in overcoming difficulties.
- Explore the possibility of supporting young people to live with their peers and setting up integration programs in urban communities rather than re-integration programs with their families in rural communities.
- To encourage acceptance of children by the communities in which they are reintegrated, provide activities for the communities surrounding children who have experienced sexual

⁸ Skelton, T. (2007) Children, young people, UNICEF and participation, *Children's Geographies*, 5 (1–2), pp. 165–181.

⁹ Myers and Bourdillon, 2012 cited in Ansell, N. (2017) *Children, youth and development* (2nd edition). Routledge

¹⁰ Ligiero, D., Hart, C., Fulu, E., Thomas, A., & Radford, L. (2019). What works to prevent sexual violence against children: Executive Summary. Together for Girls.

¹¹ Veitch, H. and Cody, C. Discussion Paper: Understanding Sexual Violence Against Children as a Rights Violation: Addressing the Challenges, 2022

¹² Ligiero, D., Hart, C., Fulu, E., Thomas, A., & Radford, L. (2019). What works to prevent sexual violence against children: Executive Summary. Together for Girls.

exploitation to come together to celebrate events, such as festivals, or to work together, for example, on a community project.

Addressing sexual violence and boys: Family for Every Child's work on sexual violence against children has focused on addressing a key gap identified in evidence reviews¹³. The Caring for Boys Affected by Sexual Violence research initiative implemented in seven countries¹⁴ highlights how harmful gender norms mean sexual violence against boys is frequently unreported or ignored and concluded that more must be done to include boys to the fullest extent possible in prevention and response efforts. Although, the concerted global efforts to protect girls from sexual violence over recent decades is acknowledged, evidence from the research initiative supports the need for targeted, well evaluated, prevention and response interventions for specific groups of children who are at heightened risk of sexual violence.

Recommendations

Family for Every Child calls upon donor partners, policy makers and fellow practitioners to develop inclusive prevention and response initiatives on sexual violence against children:

- Address harmful attitudes and perceptions around sexual violence by supporting parents and caregivers to easily access high quality information, provide appropriate information and guidance to children, and challenge prevailing taboos and harmful social norms.
- Close the gap for boys affected by sexual violence in the child protection system through accurate measurement of the global scale of sexual violence against boys, the implementation of laws and policies applicable to boys, and the provision of services within a therapeutic environment to children and families.
- Provide specialised educational and prevention and support services for children at heightened risk, including those with disabilities, in institutional care, and from the LGBTIQI+ community.
- All children have the right to grow up in stable and caring families and communities, protected from sexual violence and its effects. Family for Every Child stands committed to work with and support all those working towards a safer, better future for all children.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Cambodia, Guyana, India, Nepal, Philippines, South Africa and Zimbabwe