



Save the Children

REGIONAL CHILD PROTECTION SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS – PACIFIC

Fiji

Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

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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

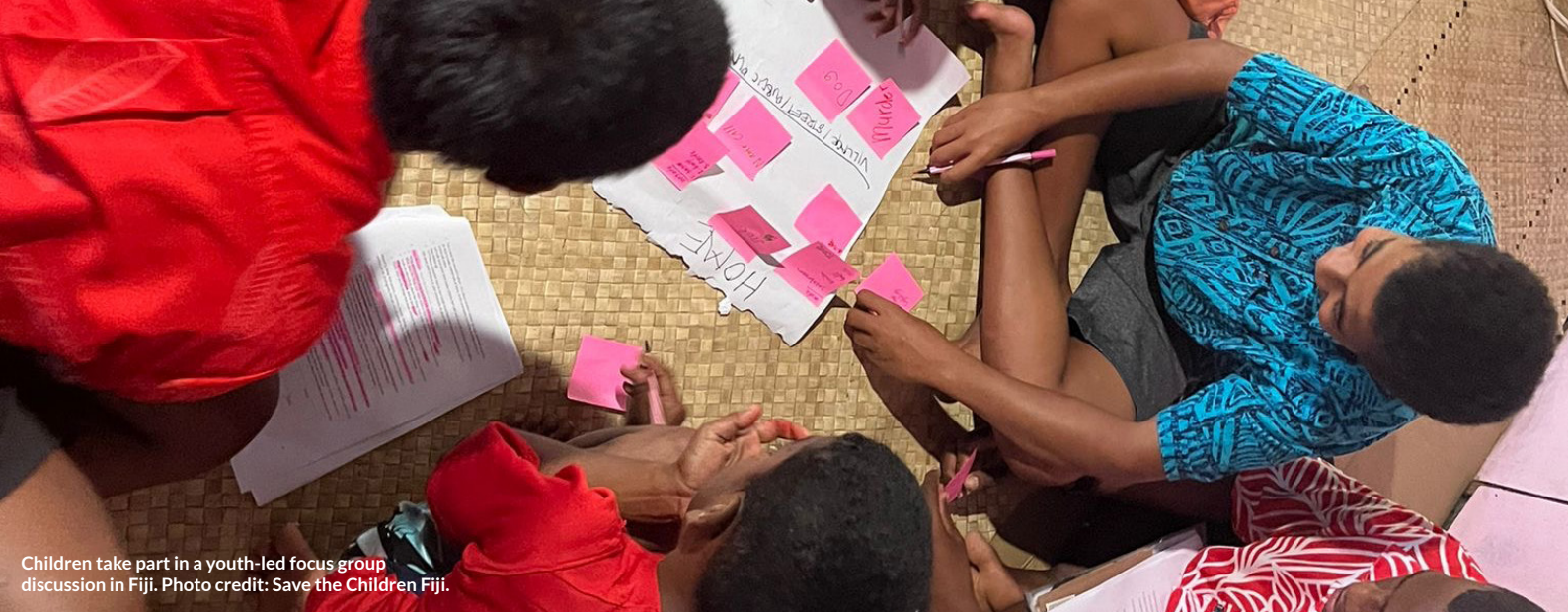
There were a number of limitations to the situational analysis:

- 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.

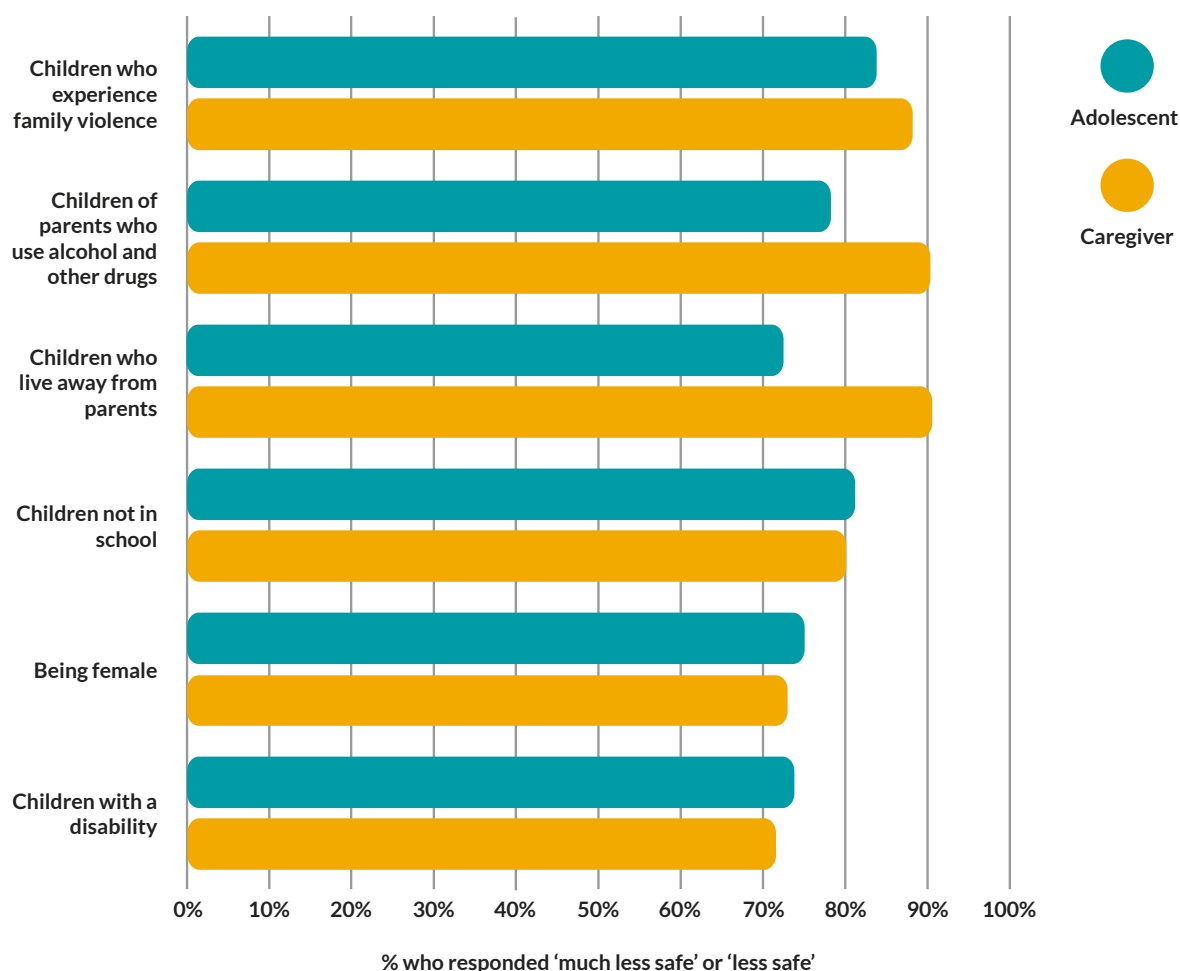
Risk and protective factors

- 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

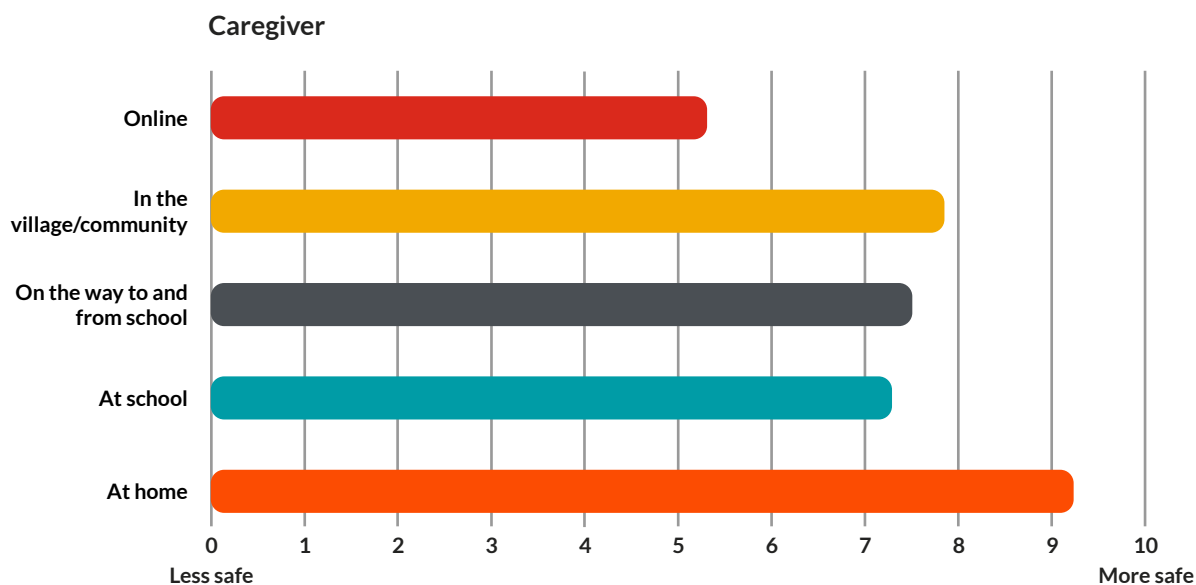
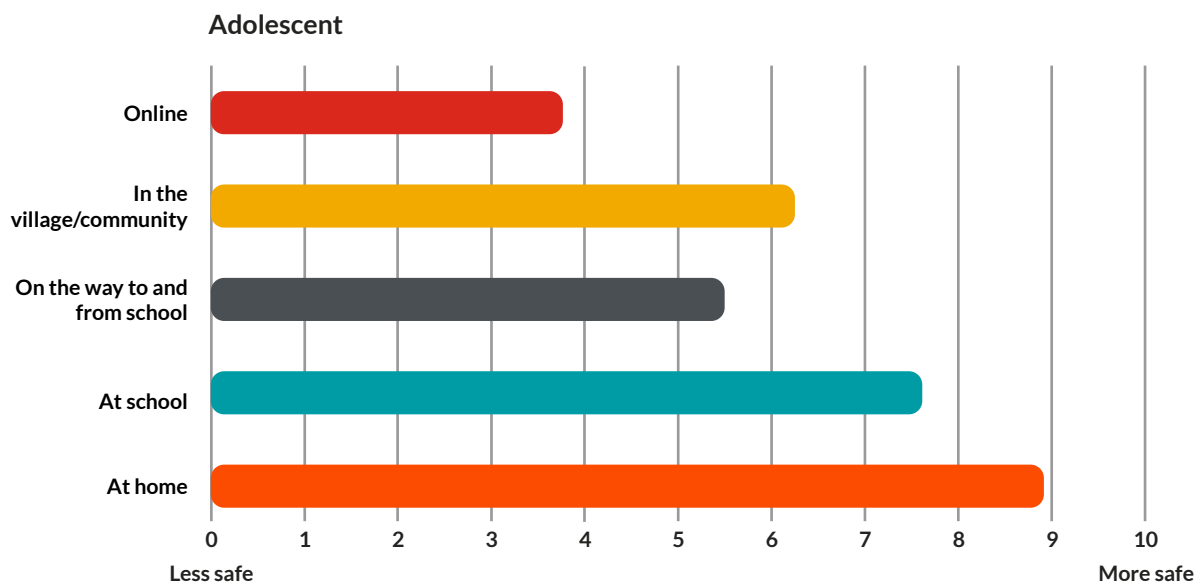
- Boy, 12-16 years.

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

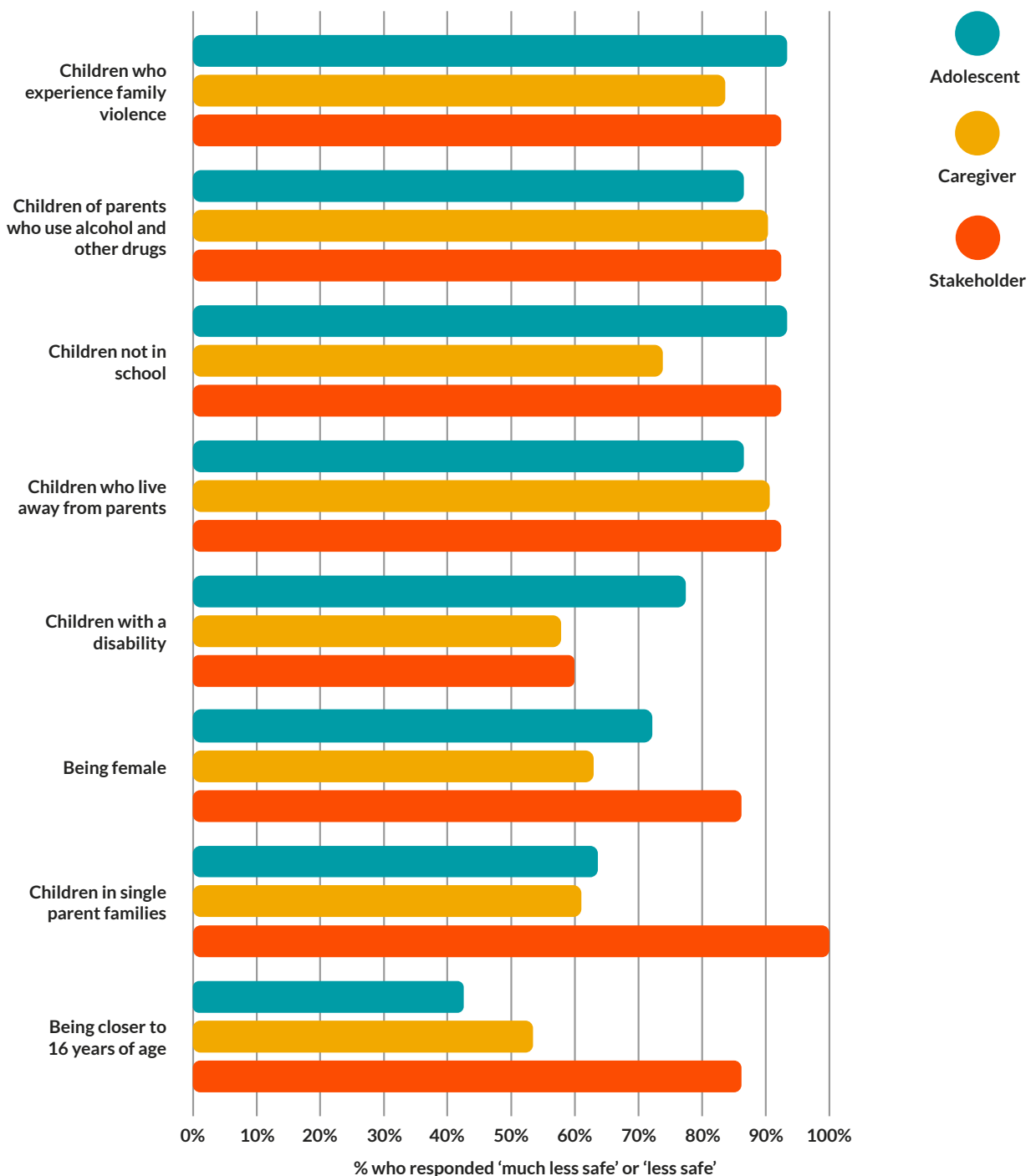
While the experience of violence was widespread and generalised, the situational analysis identified risk factors as children living away from one or both parents, experiencing family violence or breakdown, or with caregivers who use alcohol and other drugs, and children who are not in school or living 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.

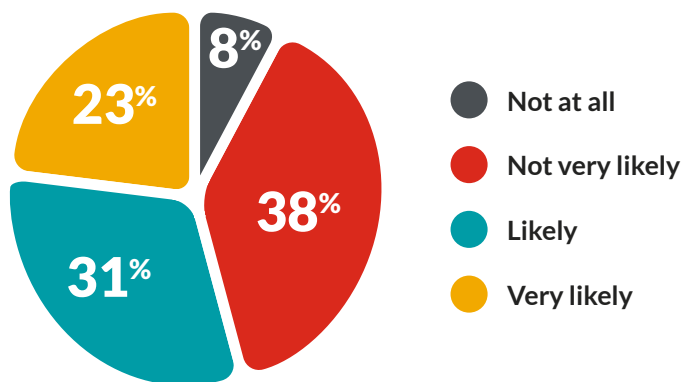
Reporting

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.

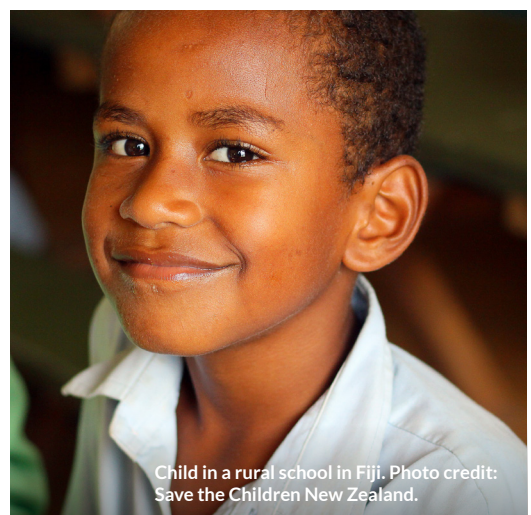
Save the Children Fiji is working with children and community members who seek to play a role in leading change in their communities. The programme design draws on a number of resources, including Child Safeguarding, Parenting without Violence and Children are a Precious Gift from God, and combines an 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.