

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Urgent Call for Coordinated National Action to Combat Horrendous Sexual Abuse Cases Involving Children.

Save the Children Fiji is calling for a coordinated national action plan to combat the continued horrendous and shocking sexual abuse cases involving children. The June 2024 statistics released by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions is horrific and adds to the worrying trend of rising sexual abuse cases against children and added to that horror is that most of the perpetrators are known to these young survivors. The DPP's statistics reveal that 15 individuals were charged with a total of 32 counts of sexual offences in June. Of these accused persons, two were juveniles. There were 15 victims, and tragically, 10 of them were under the age of 18, including one male and 14 females. Six of these incidents involved perpetrators who were related to their victims.

Save the Children Fiji's Chief Executive Officer, Shairana Ali, said:

"We are deeply concerned and strongly condemn the sexual abuse of children as revealed in these statistics. While we stand in solidarity with the survivors of these horrendous and diabolic attacks, we call on the State to do more to address these run-away statistics. Fiji has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993 which obligates the State to do more to address all forms of violence against children. Sexual abuse is an inhumane gross act of violence inflicted on children. It is alarming to note that despite the awareness and preventative programs, each month, more and more cases are being reported. The horrific acts that children are encountering especially from people known to them is a gross violation of their rights and leaves long lasting trauma which

children live with for the rest of their lives. Therefore, there is an urgent need for national action and for a stronger coalition to end all forms of violence inflicted on children with special attention on ending sexual abuse of children.

While the State has the primary duty to protect and promote the rights of children, it is also our collective responsibility to address this ongoing scourge against our children. We must act together now and with urgency to prevent abuse of children and ensure that the next generation are not faced with the debilitating long-term impact of violence.

There is an urgent and immediate need for vigilant supervision of children and for society to stand up and take action, report child abuse and educate and empower communities to better protect children from harm. The protection of our children is a shared responsibility that requires immediate action from all sectors of society. We call upon policymakers, law enforcement agencies, educators, faith-based institutions, community leaders and parents and guardians to prioritize child safeguarding and take decisive steps to address this crisis.

Moreover, there is an urgent need to continue educating parents, caregivers, educators, and the community at large about the importance of child safeguarding. Awareness campaigns and educational programs must be intensified to teach children about their rights, how to recognize signs of abuse, and the steps they can take to seek help. The legal framework must reflect the severity of these offences with harsher penalties strictly enforced for perpetrators of child sexual abuse. The Child Care and Protection Bill 2024 and Child Justice Bill 2024 must be designed to ensure the best interest of all children and provide the appropriate legislative frameworks to enhance the protection and wellbeing of children in Fiji. Furthermore, a comprehensive support system, including psychosocial support and counselling, legal aid and safe spaces, must be readily available to children and their families. We urgently call on the government to work with development partners in addressing this issue. Furthermore, we urgently call on the Government through the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Protection to revive the National Coordinating Committee for Children (NCCC) to ensure cross coordination among all stakeholders in Fiji.

Those who commit these atrocious acts should be held accountable and face the full brunt of the law and we hope that the sentencing process can reflect the evils of this criminal behaviour. Such criminal behaviour should always be met with lengthy jail sentences that are appropriate for such horrible offenses. We urgently call on the government to consult with key stakeholders regarding the implementation of the Registration of Sex Offenders Act 2021 and activate the Child Sex Offenders Registry passed in 2021 under the Registration of Sex Offenders Act 2021.

It is crucial to provide an environment where children feel safe and supported. The prevalence of abuse within families highlights the need for stronger community and family support networks. Initiatives to strengthen family relationships, promote open communication, and provide resources for at-risk families must be prioritized. We urgently call on community and faith-based leaders, families, villages, provincial officers and parents to work together in raising awareness and addressing the issues of child sexual abuse.”

Save the Children Fiji has been providing essential preventative programmes to end violence against children throughout Fiji. In partnership with the Fiji Government, local civil society organisations, communities, and children, a child protection project focused on building collective action to end violence against children is being implemented which includes initiatives that target formal systems and policies (advocacy, technical support); community behaviour change (norms and attitudes towards parenting and protection of children); and building the individual agency of children to assert their rights.

Our rising cases of child abuse is an urgent wake-up call for society to collectively confront the stark reality of inadequate child supervision. The safety of children cannot be left to chance nor can it be compromised by negligence or complacency. SCF is calling on everyone to support a safer environment where every child is free from sexual violence.

Save the Children also conducts Child Protection and Safeguarding training and this is available for any organisations working with children. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Call the Child Helpline toll-free number **1325** available 24/7 or reach out to Save the Children Fiji on **3313178** to report any concerns with children.

For more information please contact:

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For more information, please send us an email on Info.Fiji@savethechildren.org or contact us at +(679) 3313178

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