



Save the Children

REGIONAL CHILD PROTECTION SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS – PACIFIC

Vanuatu

Photo credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands.

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- Katherine Gilbert, Minhui Law and Cormac Mercer, Nossal Institute for Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne
- Dr Holly Doel-Mackaway, Macquarie University
- Iris Low, Fiji and Solomon Islands
- Abel Yamba, Papua New Guinea
- Ruth Maetala, 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.

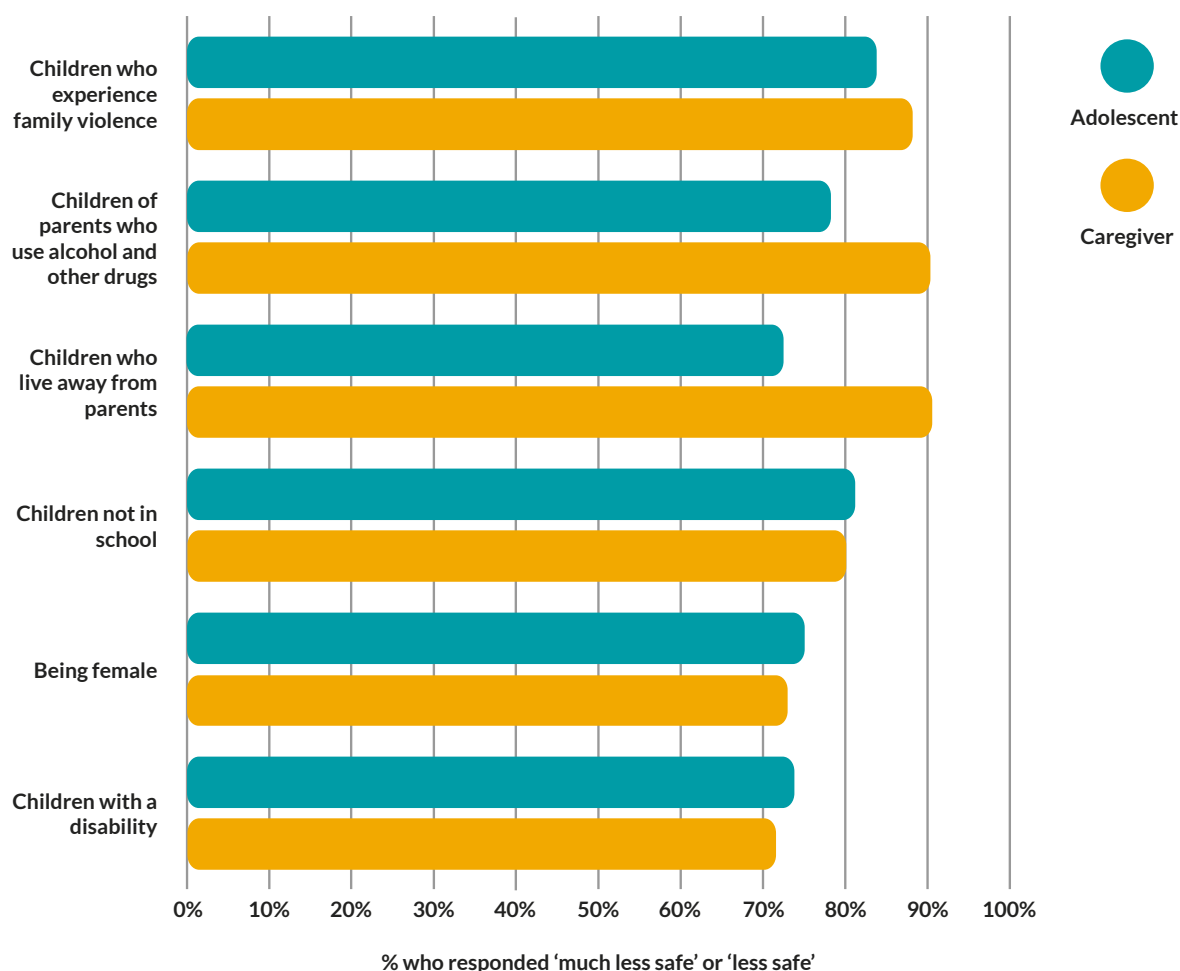
Risk and protective factors

- 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.

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).¹

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.

¹ 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.