

Protecting Children in Bhutan from Violence: A Call to Action

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The 2030 development agenda, popularly known as the Sustainable Development Agenda, includes a global commitment towards the elimination of all forms of violence against children. The world over, countries have made significant progress in enacting legislative provisions to protect children from violence. In Bhutan, the Constitution and progressive legislation such as the 2011 Child Care and Protection Act guarantee children protection from violence, abuse and exploitation.

This article focuses on the subject of violence against children, adolescents and youth in the context of Bhutan. Attempting to develop a common understanding of violence, the article goes on to explore the concept within the sociocultural milieu, and delves into the various types and forms of violence that children face. Further on, it highlights the importance of investing in prevention of violence, and elaborates key strategic actions that are essential to protect children.

Understanding Violence

Violence¹ is a broad concept and must be understood carefully. According to the World Health Organisation, violence involves intentional use of physical force or power which could be actual or a threat. Violence can be inflicted on self or on others, and results in or has a potential of resulting in physical injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation². The World Health Organisation's Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) further enunciates the various typologies associated with violence, such as self-directed violence, interpersonal violence and collective violence. Interpersonal violence is further categorised as physical, sexual, psychological violence and deprivation or neglect.

For the purpose of this article, we will focus on interpersonal violence experienced by children³, adolescents⁴ and youth⁵. Interpersonal violence, as the name suggests, refers to

¹Throughout this article, if not indicated otherwise, "violence" is referred to in the context of interpersonal violence against children, adolescents and youth

²WHO; 2002; World Report on Violence and Health

³As per the Child Care and Protection Act (CCPA), 2011, children are defined as persons in the age group 0–18 years

⁴Adolescents are persons in the age group 10–19 years

⁵The National Youth Policy of Bhutan defined youth as persons in age group 13–24 years

violence that takes place between individuals. This type of violence can take place within the family, between intimate partners, as well as between acquaintances or strangers. Some examples of interpersonal violence within the family include child maltreatment within the family, domestic violence between intimate partners, as well as abuse of the elderly. Interpersonal violence between acquaintances and strangers could mean youth violence, assault by a stranger, violence in the workplace, property crimes and so on.

Regardless of their social or economic status, culture, religion or ethnicity, violence is a reality for children across the world⁶. Violence against children is often not acknowledged, and when it is acknowledged, it is usually justified by the perpetrators based on prevalent cultural norms and social or economic conditions. Over the past decade, violence against children, adolescents and youth has become a global concern—this is partly because violence has now reached endemic levels in some parts of the world, and partly because we now know much more about the causes of violence, and its short and long term impacts.

Violence Against Children and Youth in Bhutan

In 2012, the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) undertook comprehensive mapping and assessment of existing provisions for protection of children from violence, abuse and neglect. This report stated that there is a dearth of data on the prevalence of violence, abuse or neglect of children. This lack of information has many reasons—the absence of reporting mechanisms, lack of information and skills among children about how to report violence, and because violence and abuse are considered to be “family matters”.

Based on the recommendations from mapping and assessment, NCWC, in 2013, embarked on research into violence against children in Bhutan. This comprehensive three-phase research carried out over a period of nearly three years, provides some valuable data on the prevalence of violence, its drivers and the availability and uptake of services by children, adolescents and youth.

Children’s Own Experiences

The research on violence against children in Bhutan⁷ tells us that children across the country have a comprehensive understanding of violence, which includes physical, sexual and emotional harm. This understanding is further nuanced in that children consider emotional violence as harmful as physical violence in terms of its impact on their own wellbeing. Although not explored as part of the research, children

⁶UNICEF, 2014; Hidden in Plain Sight – A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children

⁷NCWC/UNICEF, 2016; Research on Violence against Children in Bhutan

identified poverty and discrimination as forms of structural violence. More than 60 percent of children (13–17 years) and over half of young adults (18–24 years) reported having experienced some form of violence within the 12-month period prior to data collection⁸.

Children could identify various forms in which violence can be experienced in different settings, e.g., children identified a range of forms of physical violence at home, in school, in the community, in monastic institutions and so on. Children could also differentiate between light and severe beatings, and elaborated on how physical violence is administered, i.e., by using physical force and by using objects. More than 64 percent of children had experienced physical violence at least once in their lifetime. Most common forms of physical violence include corporal punishment administered by parents, caretakers and teachers. Boys and young men also report physical violence that is perpetrated by their peers.

Children in Bhutan understand emotional violence with all its facets. Maltreatment by parents and teachers in the form of scolding, screaming and intimidation as well as witnessing verbal or physical abuse between parents is cited as emotional violence. Preferential treatment by step-parents towards their biological children, and lack of love were also referred to as emotional violence. Nearly half of all children interviewed (48 percent) reported having experienced emotional violence at least once in their lifetime. It is important to note that more than 35 percent of female respondents (13–17 years) reported experiencing lack of love.

Sexual violence is understood well by children, and includes unwanted sexual acts—ranging from unwanted touch to rape, verbal sexual harassment and sexual exploitation. The research indicated that girls experience more sexual violence than boys: 11.5 percent of boys reported having experienced sexual touching, vis-à-vis 13 percent of girls. More than 17 percent of young men (18–24 years) and 13 percent of young women (18–24 years) reported experiencing sexual violence at least once. Children (13–17 years) who experienced sexual violence reported their peers to be the most common perpetrators.

The research also notes that children and young people rarely disclose the violence they experience. Those who choose to disclose do so with friends and family, rather than with any of the welfare services. There are a number of reasons for this lack of disclosure, e.g., boys and young men cite fear of repercussions and embarrassment as reasons for not disclosing physical violence. Disclosure of sexual violence is reported to be lower than that of physical violence. While girls tend to disclose violence more than boys, proportionately more boys tend to seek help or services.

⁸Data collection for this research was carried out between December 2015 and March 2016.

The Costs of Inaction

Researchers have highlighted the negative short-term as well as long-term impacts that violence has on children—poor performance in school, early initiation into smoking, drug use, teenage pregnancies, and the learning from and repeating of violent behaviours when violence becomes an intergenerational phenomenon. Deborah Fry, in a recent publication⁹, highlights how violence has multiple detrimental long-term impacts on children. Advances in neuroscience have led to better insight into how various types of violence affect brain development among children, and its long-term interpersonal and social consequences. Exposure to parental verbal abuse has been found to be associated with alterations in the left side of the brain, which is important for language and speech.

Fry, citing other recent research, states that the processes in the brain responsible for the regulation of energy, balance, memory, learning and motor control were significantly lower among victims of child sexual abuse than among other children who did not experience abuse. Toxic stress in early childhood and adolescence—two critical phases of brain development—has broad impact, particularly on learning and memory. In adolescence, toxic stress and trauma can cause more problems for attention span and impulse and emotional control, including sexual behaviours, as these parts are developing rapidly during this period.

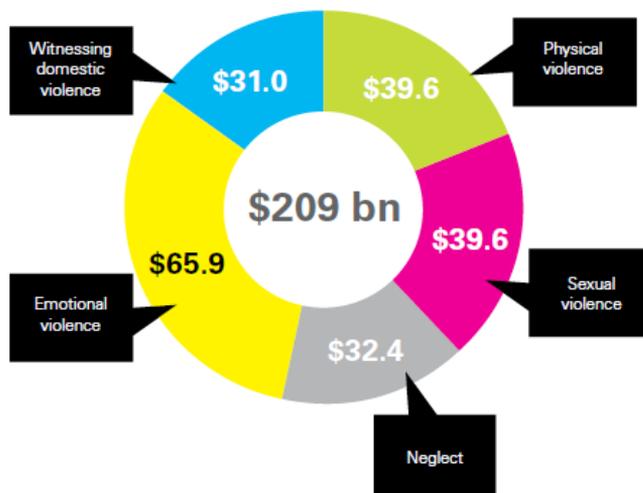


Diagram 1: The Economic Cost of Violence Against Children in East Asia and the Pacific Region (billion US\$). Source: Fang, et al., UNICEF EAPRO, 2014.

⁹Fry, D. (2016). *Preventing Violence against Children and how this contributes to building stronger economies*. Thematic Research Paper for the 3rd High-Level Meeting on Cooperation for Child Rights in the Asia-Pacific Region, 7-9 November, 2016. Kuala Lumpur: Government of Malaysia and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Until recently, very little attention was paid to the economic costs of inaction in preventing violence against children. However, social scientists and economists are increasingly interested in understanding how much it costs countries to turn a blind eye to violence. Research in 2014 in East Asia and the Pacific found that the total cost of violence against children, specifically on health and health risks and behaviour outcomes, was a staggering \$209 billion, which is nearly two percent of the region's Gross Domestic Product (Diagram 1).

The more we know about violence against children, the more we are convinced that a large part of our effort, including investment, should be targeted at preventing violence. A recent UNICEF evaluation¹⁰ of its work on violence against children calls for renewed focus on preventing violence. Work on violence prevention is a multi-sector effort—ranging from actions related to social welfare, health and education, to cultural, employment and economic improvement.

More specifically, these efforts would mean better implementation of existing laws, along with a review and introduction of new legislation, addressing negative social and cultural norms, promoting positive norms, safe and child-friendly spaces for children—at home, school and in the community—as well as improving parent-child interactions and relationships and teaching children essential life skills.

Seizing the Opportunity to Prevent Violence Against Children

In Bhutan, we are fortunate to have all the key ingredients to ensure that children, adolescents and youth are protected at all times. Bhutan has a strong legislative framework along with some promising programmes, which, if implemented with concerted effort, can directly contribute to preventing violence. Some of these opportunities are elaborated in the ensuing paragraphs.

Working with parents and caregivers: Every child has, and must be able to enjoy, the right to a loving and caring family. As far as possible, children should be able to live with their parents and families and feel secure at all times. Positive parenting programmes such as those run by the Ministry of Education help in improving the knowledge and skills of parents and caregivers to promote stable, safe and nurturing relationships between children and their parents.

Working with children and youth: Depending on their age and maturity, all children have evolving capacities to protect themselves and their peers. Engagement of children and youth in their own protection should be increased, providing them with

¹⁰UNICEF; 2015; Protecting Children from Violence: A Comprehensive Evaluation of UNICEF's Strategies and Programme Performance.

the necessary knowledge about violence, and skills on how to protect themselves. Youth groups in Bhutan can and must play their part in educating peers on how to protect themselves. The Ministry of Education's Life Skills programme can equip children and adolescents with skills to deal with the demands and challenges of daily life by providing them tools and techniques to adopt positive behaviours.

Promoting online safety of children: Increasing access to the Internet is an opportunity as well as a challenge. Social media can help reach a large number of children and young people effectively with messages related to protection from violence. At the same time, being online can exacerbate children's vulnerability. Programmes that promote online safety, such as the ones implemented by the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), can provide children and youth with tools to stay safe online and make the most of what the internet has to offer.

Working with religious leaders: Religious leaders such as monks and nuns can play an important role in changing prevailing social norms like corporal punishment. By promoting supportive norms such as positive discipline practices, they can help turn the tide of violence against children. Religious leaders can also use various religious and cultural platforms to spread messages related to violence prevention, highlighting the negative impacts of violence on children.

Strengthening law enforcement and securing justice: Violence, by its very nature is a criminal offence, which means that police play an important role. Violence prevention would mean acting swiftly to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice within the existing legal framework. For this to happen, the first step would be openness to receiving cases of violence against children—traditionally considered a “private” or family matter—followed by sensitive handling of cases.

The Royal Bhutan Police's Women and Child Protection Units, and the recently introduced comprehensive training for police personnel to work effectively with women and child victims, is an important step in the right direction. Community level efforts such as the Police Youth Partnership, Friends of Police and Community Police Centre should be more involved in violence prevention. By using community-based awareness programmes, police can effectively promote trust among children to approach the police and report violence. The Child/Family Bench in the offing should be established on a priority basis, as should the child-friendly police interview rooms that are currently being established in Thimphu.

Promoting social protection measures: The economic vulnerabilities of families that contribute to lack of safety for children must be addressed through economic empowerment and social protection measures. Vocational education, training and

employment-guarantee programmes can ensure family income stability in the long term. Additionally, available options such as foster-care can be explored for short and medium-term care of children whose parents are unable to look after them.

Strengthening the response mechanism: The 2011 Child Care and Protection Act provides for a robust child protection mechanism for victims of violence. Implementation of the legislation would mean setting up of a Child Welfare Committee able to provide all the necessary support to victims of violence. Simultaneously, all the stakeholders, including civil society organisations, should be trained in dealing with cases of violence. For this to happen, the Standard Operating Procedures being established by the National Commission for Women and Children must be made effective on an immediate basis.

Improving financial and human resources: Last, but by far the most important, is the financial allocation and human resources available to child protection. The social and economic costs of not protecting children from violence means that investments in preventing violence are more economical than the costs incurred in responding to it, including the loss of GDP. Investment in qualified and trained human resources, including trained social workers, will provide long-term gains in terms of overall development of the country and the economy.

Conclusion

Violence against children, adolescents and youth is far from hidden—it is everywhere to be seen, provided we don't turn a blind eye. The costs associated with violence are way too high to ignore. The detrimental impact of violence on children is long-term. It is important for us all to ensure that we invest enough in financial and human resources to take up the issue of violence prevention as a priority. A collective voice and collective action will definitely make Bhutan a safer place for children.