

Combating Child Sexual Abuse in Bhutan

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The Situation

Bhutan is dealing with all the complexities of human society in change. This article looks at the abuse of children from the experience of RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women), a Civil Society Organisation established in 2004 to look at the situation of Bhutanese women in the context of gender equality.

From this perspective, the abuse that a growing number of Bhutanese children are subjected to is disturbing and calls for a stronger response from the Bhutanese system and from families. The main concern, however, is that, without professional analysis and data, we do not even know the scale of the problem.

RENEW sees a range of abuse that children suffer because of broken families, single parents, children living as dependents with relatives, children living with stepparents and alcoholic parents. Children with disabilities are sometimes victims of sexual abuse but there is no professional attention to address the issue, nor do they have adequate family support and protection. Sexual abuse is often associated with shame and stigmatisation and, therefore, very difficult to discuss.

There are reports of sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy almost every day, but usually only after the child has suffered the abuse. This is so for almost 99 percent cases of child abuse. RENEW receives reports of abuse by friends of parents, fathers, stepfathers, teachers.

Children are made to abort babies, infected with STDs, and subjected to verbal abuse within families. There are cases where both mother and daughter are abused. Unfortunately, the issues are shoved under the carpet because of the complexity of relationships. While it is known that girls are mostly the victims, boys are also victimised, and the extent of sexual abuse against boys is not known.

Since 2018, RENEW has received 44 reported cases of child sexual abuse, with children, as young as 12 or 13 years, being pregnant. The girls had no knowledge of pregnancy, some had no family support, and some were too frightened to report it. For some mothers, their survival is at stake because they are economically dependent on the perpetrator.

Data Not Fully Known

The prevalence of child abuse is known but there is no epidemiological information about the areas and target population and underlying causes contributing to the situation. Child abuse cases in Bhutan are under-reported. Recent incidents featured in the news are indicating the extent to which children are victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.

A study conducted by the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) in 2016 revealed that most of the violence against children happens at home and in schools. A majority of reported cases are intrafamilial abuse, where perpetrators happen to be the ones the children trust the most. The incidents reported from schools where teachers and care givers are perpetrators are the second category of child abuse. A survey conducted by the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) also revealed that people living with disabilities are victims of sexual abuse, but these are not reported.

According to a national survey on violence against children, more than 1 in 10 children, aged 13 to 17 years, have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence in their lifetime (12.8 percent) with 13.5 percent girls and 11.9 percent boys. The most common type of sexual violence was sexual touching (13.1 percent girls and 11.5 percent boys); 7.7 percent children reported that sexual violence occurred at school (5.4 percent in boarding schools) and 2.3 percent at home.

Many reported that a majority of the perpetrators are peers. Parents, teachers, caregivers and peers are among the common perpetrators of violence.¹ Teenage pregnancy is of serious concern in the country, and the lockdowns during the Covid-19 crisis worsened the situation. Records show that there were 330 reported cases of teenage pregnancy in 2020. This only goes to show that the protection system for children, be it at home, school, or public places, is weak.

¹ Research on violence against children in Bhutan, NCWC & UNICEF, 2016

Protection of Children

Bhutan's Monarchs have always placed children and their development at the centre of the country's agenda and emphasised the importance of children as custodians and the future of the country.² According to the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan (PHCB), 2017, children constitute about 33.6 percent (244,5791) of the total population (727,145) with 123,779 (17 percent) male and 120,800 (16.6 percent) female children.³

Guided by the values of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan's Constitution encompasses the rights of children, and the protection of children from all forms of discrimination (Article 9:17) and exploitation, including trafficking, prostitution, abuse, violence, degrading treatment and economic exploitation (Article 9:18).

Bhutan has progressive legislation to protect the rights of children. It is guided by the National Child Policy to strengthen efforts in establishing an effective and sustainable child wellbeing and protection system in the country. The country has ratified most of the international instruments related to children. Prominent among these are the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC 1989) ratified in May, 1990; Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2013 ratified in August 1981; Optional Protocol to the CRC on sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography in November, 2009; SAARC Convention on Regional Arrangement for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia ratified in June, 2004; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in September, 2010.

As a signatory to these international conventions, and with the need to develop laws to protect children, Bhutan has enacted and endorsed several national legislations, significantly, the Child Care and Protection Act, 2011 (CCPA, 2011). This Act has laid clear responsibilities of different agencies, including central and local government, educational institutions, mass media, communities and families, in protecting and responding to the needs of the children facing problems. The Act underlines that the "best interest of the child shall be the fulcrum for any activities". The objective of the Act is to create a uniform child justice system and legal framework with adequate provisions for dealing

² National Child Policy, NCWC

³ National Child Policy, NCWC

appropriately with all aspects of children in the context of the changing economic, social, and cultural conditions prevailing in the country.⁴

Protective Measures

The Child Care and Protection Act, 2011 states that the government will endeavour to establish as many Child Homes and Remand Homes, Special Homes including Closed Facilities and Aftercare Homes as possible. These activities remain to be fulfilled. The Protection Officers, Social Welfare Officers in assessing the situation of children have been mentioned but implementation is still under process.

In line with the Act, the Royal Bhutan Police has established a Women and Children Protection Division, under which there are protection units and desks in the police stations, but it is yet to be established in all 20 dzongkhags. The capacity building of the police personnel at all levels in responding to the violence against children remains a critical area, as they are an important stakeholder in child protection.

There is a family and child bench only in Thimphu district court, and the establishment of such a bench in other courts still remains to be prioritised.

The Ministry of Education is identified as one of the key stakeholders in the prevention of violence against, and the protection of children. They have school counsellors and health coordinators to disseminate awareness programmes for children, and provide psychosocial support to the children facing problems. The ministry is yet to ensure all schools, especially in the rural areas, have one. In addition, with the current situation where our children have become vulnerable, equal priority must be given for overall development of the child's psychology and physical wellbeing, besides academic advancement.

The safety and security of children in school has become an important area to be emphasised under any circumstances. Although schools are burdened with multiple tasks, schools are where they spend most of the day, besides the home. Schools have maximum reach to children and parents as well. Any amount of investment in schools is worth it to ensure future sustainability.

⁴ Study on status of vulnerable children, RENEW, 2015

The good news for us is that the Ministry of Education has initiated the integration of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) into their curricula. RENEW will be working closely with the Ministry of Education in enhancing CSE among the students and school faculty members so that they are well equipped to prevent and respond to sexual abuse.

The parenting skills development has received significant attention over the past years but more needs to be done, especially in rural areas, because the programme has not reached parents in the rural areas.

The NCWC, the competent authority to oversee the welfare of women and children in the country, has achieved some milestones in putting together the rules and regulations for child protection, based on CCPA. It has developed a Standard Operating Procedure to respond to gender-based violence - Early Identification and Safe Referrals, Case Management, Gender Equality Policy.

The effective implementation of the acts and procedures by the key service providers is yet to be assessed. RENEW, being one of the key stakeholders in the protection of children, is rolling out training on Case Management, Early Identification and Safe Referrals and Consensus Building initiative to the GCFP (Gender and Child Focal Persons), and Community volunteers (constituting teachers, health workers, police, religious figures, local leaders, and community).

RENEW has a network of youth volunteers called DAISAN (Druk Adolescent's Initiative for Sexual Awareness Network) in 35 schools and institutions across the country. They have been instrumental in creating awareness of the gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health. However, the network needs to be strengthened and streamlined. We are working towards engaging men and boys to be more effective and efficient in our advocacy towards ending violence against children.

What is Needed

Despite the progress to address the issue of sexual abuse, much more remains to be done as there are gaps:

- No epidemiological survey/study has been done to assess the extent of prevalence and analyse the underlying causes of child sexual abuse in terms of cultural norms and family dynamics.

- Child policies and programmes need review to accommodate children from diverse backgrounds, as some are burdened by their family responsibilities, some come from poor families, and some are with disabilities. Therefore, we cannot treat children homogeneously, as we may be hampering the overall development of children.
- Prevention and protection measures are not adequate and not equally distributed, especially in rural areas. The need for dedicated service centres for children in rural areas is crucial.
- Knowledge on puberty and sexuality, and skills to respond to the needs and challenges that children and adolescents face, are not adequately disseminated. The subject of sexuality education remains difficult to discuss for many reasons. Parents and teachers, identified to be the best educators, are not adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills to handle the subject.
- Children have limited access to quality guidance and learning of personal development, as schools are found to be academically focused. A gap exists between a child's academic learning and his/her wholesome development.
- There are no dedicated institutions for children, and this limits the potential opportunity to establish one-stop care services, with facilities such as psychosocial support, medical and legal aid, and after-care services for children who face abusive exploitation.
- There are 137 criminal cases unresolved, including the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl in Paro and a nine-year-old girl in Dechencholing in Thimphu in 2019.⁵
- Awareness and advocacy campaigns to end violence against children are not consistent and adequate and sustainable.
- Comprehensive Sexuality Education in schools and within communities needs to be enhanced and expedited. Advocacy programmes to curb substance abuse among children need to be stepped up.
- Parenting programmes need to be enhanced and extended to the parents in the rural areas.
- Literacy and awareness raising programmes for children, parents, and caregivers on the proper use of technology - the Internet and social media platforms - need to be introduced to address the increasing cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation. There needs to be a stronger emphasis on how to responsibly use social media.⁶

⁵ <https://kuenselonline.com/what-after-a-forensic-lab-facility/>

⁶ Shadow reporting on CRC 2021, RENEW

Conclusion

Bhutan has progressive legal provisions for the protection of children and has ratified several international instruments related to children. The NCWC is the competent authority to oversee the child's rights and protection. CSOs focused on working with child victims and children in difficult circumstances are established with a range of support services. The Child Care and Protection Act 2011 and Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2013 are two popular acts that clearly spell out the prevention of violence against, and the protection of children.

However, the biggest challenge is the inadequate knowledge and skills of the parents, teachers, and service providers (police, health, CSOs and schools) to prevent and respond to the issues. The power of legal provisions is limited by lack of evidence, and when it comes to sexual abuse, victims go through painful experiences in producing evidence, leading to serious mental health issues.

The bigger solution, therefore, lies in the mindset and the behavioural change of the people, and the outlook of various institutions and service providers, to prevent and eliminate violence, instead of waiting for incidents to happen. Therefore, a multi-sectoral approach at all levels, including children themselves, has to be encouraged.

“Prevention is better than cure”