Violence against Children: The Pandemic of Abuse and Neglect.
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CHAPTER: VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION
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1.INTRODUCTION

Considerable progress has been made in recognizing, exploring, understanding and responding to widespread violence against children (VAC) in the Asia Pacific region[i] 10 years since the United Nations Report on Violence against Children 2006 first provided a first-ever global status report on the overall situation, causes and effects of this phenomenon in various settings. Although today we know more about violence in the lives of children and the numerous global, regional and national policies and initiatives at different levels to combat it, unfortunately the scourge of VAC still continues, often unabated and with impunity.

The Asia Pacific region is the setting for a high incidence of VAC, being the most populous region and with countries at different levels of social and economic development. Globalization and the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have led to rapid economic growth in the region influencing and shifting family and community structures, identities and cultural practices towards children.

Across the region, physical and emotional violence on children remains pervasive and generally socially accepted as part of their growing up. Research in the region confirms that violence continues to be perceived by both parents and children as an acceptable tool for shaping good behaviour and values among children, and a normal consequence of the failure

to meet responsibilities in the home and at school – linking two important spheres in children's lives. The experiences of violence changes, depending on age, gender and setting, with economic shocks – like death, illness or loss of a job in the household – also plays an important role (UNICEF Office of Research, 2016)[ii].

A multi-country study by UNICEF on the drivers of violence affecting children's perspectives noted that the patterns and forms of VAC in the Asia Pacific region is deeply rooted in the social, economic, cultural and religious context and traditional practices prevalent in the region. Many of these traditional practices are embedded in the history and cultural context of these countries, especially at the family and community levels. (UNICEF Office of Research, 2016)

This chapter reviews the status of VAC in the Asia Pacific region to track progress and highlight persistent causes and drivers that impede policies and interventions to eliminate this practice. It will conclude by identifying some of the new patterns and trends in VAC in the region, and the urgent actions that are needed, especially by governments, in terms of policy reform and institutional mechanisms and regulations. Such actions gain urgency today as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) now includes a specific target to eliminate violence against children by the global community – viz, *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children* by 2030.

2. CHILDREN AND VIOLENCE IN ASIA PACIFIC – AN OVERVIEW

The Asia Pacific region, which comprises of East Asia, South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific, is home to most of the estimated 120 million girls and 73 million boys who have been victims of sexual violence globally, and almost one billion children who are subjected to physical punishment on a regular basis.[iii] While VAC is grossly under-reported and many of its forms are still hidden from public scrutiny, it exists in all countries and cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnic identity and age. Children's exceptional vulnerability to violence is rooted in the patriarchal norms that permeate social and political institutions across the region. Violence seems to be a conscious attitude, act or behaviour among some adults and especially those who are close to them, including parents and other family members, friends and schoolmates, peers and partners, teachers and employers.

A growing body of research in many countries in the region in recent years, generally framed around the five settings identified by the UN Report on Violence against Children shows certain distinct features in the pattern of VAC, including violent discipline at home and in school, adult attitudes towards violence as a means of child upbringing and normal way of growing up; and the intergenerational transmission of violence – i.e., experience of violence inherent in the family setting, passed on from parents to children. Some of the main conclusions emerging from these country level studies on various settings of VAC include the following.

Violence within home: While the family is one of the most basic and respected social institutions in the countries of the Asia Pacific region, *"the incidence of violence against children is most pervasive in family and home settings".* (UNICEF EAPRO, Domestic Laws, 2015, p.v). Children are introduced to violence typically when they are young, often through corporal punishment or exposure to domestic violence within the home. When children interact with adults and are exposed to violence, the behavioural script may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of violence (Fry, D., 2016).

Widespread physical, sexual and psychological violence against young children, including neglect and abandonment, have been documented and many studies point out the increase of domestic violence against children in nearly all countries in the region. To a large extent, this increase is a result of higher rates of reporting on domestic violence, which signifies that more families and communities are perhaps more aware and concerned about incidents of violence against children. And yet, some of the most grotesque and inhuman acts of violence against children takes place in the domestic setting, behind closed doors, and often, perpetrated by close members of the family, including parents, husbands and partners.

Recent research estimates the prevalence of physical abuse among boys and girls in the East Asia and Pacific Region between 10 per cent to 30.3 per cent, with three in four children experiencing violent discipline at the hands of teachers or parents; the prevalence of sexual abuse range from 1.7 per cent to 11.6 per cent; and prevalence of emotional abuse range from 31.3 per cent and 68.5 per cent.[iv]

Violence in the family and domestic settings is one of the most difficult challenges for Governments and other partners to address. The home is a "private sphere" and the family is considered sacrosanct in all countries in the region – this fact poses particular challenges for government agencies and child care-givers to access, to enforce legislation, monitor and provide support.

Violence in Schools: Corporal punishment has been a core issue in the Asia Pacific region. Several cases of physical violence in schools are reported from across the region but they represent just a fraction of the actual incidences. A large number of incidents are left unreported due to a tacit cultural approval for disciplining children by parents, teachers and school authorities even if that entails violence and abuse. Meanwhile, studies have found that parents and teachers who subject children to corporal punishment lack understanding of the negative impact on their self-esteem and psychology. Information and capacity development on alternative and positive forms of discipline are often not available or utilised in schools and communities.

A Young Lives and UNICEF multi-country study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam in 2015 (Young Lives & UNICEF, 2015, pp.5-6) found a high prevalence of corporal punishment in these countries in spite of legal prohibition, significantly increased likelihood of boys and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds to experience corporal punishment, and association with poorer outcomes as children transition from 8 to 12 years (Young Lives & UNICEF, 2015, pp.5-6). Over a quarter of the children surveyed in India and over half in Vietnam, cited physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers in school as the foremost reason for disliking school (Young Lives & UNICEF, 2015, p.5).

Violence in work places: Given the population size of countries like China and India, the Asia Pacific region has the largest numbers of child labour - almost 78 million or 9.3 per cent of child population according to ILO estimates. (ILO, 2013, p.17)

South Asia has the largest child population in any region with about half-a-billion children and a large number of them engaged in child labour and employment. Drawing upon national statistics in 2015, ILO estimated 17 million child labour in the 5-17year age group in South Asia, including 10 million in the 5-14 year age group. In absolute terms, child labour in India was estimated at 5.8 million, followed by Bangladesh at 5 million, Pakistan at 3.4 million (10-

17 year olds) and Nepal at 2 million. (Khan and Lyon, 2015, p.x). In the East Asia and Pacific Region, child labour has been estimated to range between 6.5 per cent and 56 per cent. (UNICEF-EAPRO, 2015, p.ii).

Research has long established the adverse effect of child labour on education. In China, about 90 per cent of child laborers combined work with school. Child laborers worked 6.75 hours per day on average, spent 6.42 hours less per day on study and had higher school dropout rate than children who were not working. A child living in rural areas is significantly more likely to work, as is a child with fewer adults in the house —and given the enormous population of "left behind" children, whose parents have migrated in search of work, this is a sobering statistic. (Tang et al, 2016). Child labour is more prevalent in the relatively poorer western and central regions in China, but as wages rise in coastal areas and manufacturing moves further west, the risk of child labour occurring in the domestic and global supply chains will increase.

Regulating the workplaces has proved to be extremely difficult due to limitations of available institutional mechanisms to operate effectively in the informal sector, where children mostly work. Children work in agriculture or for household enterprises in many instances where the distinction between home and workplace is often blurred and their work is equated with acquisition of practical skills. In some instances, personal circumstances force children to work in conditions of bondage that do not permit them to resist or complain about violence they often experience. In all such cases, the risk of violence is high, hidden and rarely reported.

Violence in Care and Justice Institutions: Lack of national standards or benchmarks for child protection in institutions are a major lacunae in juvenile justice administrations in most countries in the region. Justice is generally grounded in formal police and court-based interventions and institution-based rehabilitation, rather than ensuring that child-friendly procedures are set in place in the criminal justice system to handle children in conflict with the law, provide special protection, and utilise family/community-based diversion and non-institutional and alternative rehabilitation methods that benefit the child.

There is considerable research that indicates that children in care and justice institutions due to conflict with the law tend to come from socio-economically deprived and marginalized backgrounds, who have themselves been survivors of violence. In welfare institutions and justice systems they encounter biased mind-sets that seek retribution. The worrying trend towards treating juvenile offenders as adults for crimes generally associated with adults and increasing public outrage against some high profile cases of sexual abuse can be discerned in some countries in the region. For instance, India has diluted legal protection for juvenile offenders in the 16-18 years age group, Brunei Darussalam and the Maldives have legislated to introduce the death penalty for child offenders, and Pakistan lifted its long standing moratorium on the death penalty to carry out the executions of people who were children when the offence was committed.

ECPAT reports that children who are sexually abused and exploited are particularly vulnerable when it comes to accessing support and services from law enforcement agencies. While discrimination is a key barrier to children accessing support and services, research points out that fear, discrimination, the lack of information and access to documentation, and the lack of child friendly support all impact on the child's ability to access services they may need to help them in their recovery and reintegration. The lack of sensitive, child-friendly, confidential, consistent support, greatly impacts on children's willingness to engage with services.

Abuse by police and officials in justice institutions is common in many countries. In Malaysia, for example, while the Child Act includes some provisions on the arrest of children, it provides limited guidance with respect to issues such as alternatives to arrest, restrictions on use of force or restraints, duration and conditions in police custody, and the presence of parents, probation officers, or lawyers during investigative procedures. While the police are generally cognizant of the need to handle children's cases more sensitively, they have not been provided the necessary skills, directives, facilities, and oversight to ensure that this happens in all cases. As a result, complaints of police abuse persist. (UNICEF Malaysia, 2013, p.10)

Violence in the community*:* VAC in situations of conflict and war have received very little attention, although conflict is widespread in several parts of the Asia Pacific region largely aggravated by ethnic separatism, ultra-leftist ideologies and religious resurgence.

In Afghanistan, decades of conflict have led to high levels of gender-based violence and child sexual abuse and with nearly 40 years of armed conflict a "Daesh franchise"[v] has now surfaced as an additional, deadly component.

Major attacks on civilian population in the neighbouring Pakistan have caused deaths, injuries and trauma among children. Children in India have been exposed to violence due to the civil disturbance in the Kashmir valley, the conflict of ultra-leftist groups with the State in parts of the central region, and ethnic tensions in the North East. Nepal is emerging from a decade long Maoist insurgency while Bangladesh has seen a resurgence of religious fundamentalist groups that have been recruiting young people. The Philippines has experienced Moro insurgency in Mindanao region for over a century. Timor-Leste experienced nearly three decades of conflict that killed about 250,000 people before the restoration of independence in 2002, which was soon followed by political instability and civil war in 2006. Papua New Guinea experienced conflict in the Bougainville region for almost a decade. In many of these countries, children have been caught in the cross-fire, killed or seriously injured, forcibly recruited to the paramilitary forces and subjected to violence and abuse.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights recently reported that children have been killed, blinded, crippled – or inadvertently caused the death of their friends – while playing with unexploded ordnance that is negligently left behind by parties to the conflict. The consequences of each act of violence ripple through families and entire communities that are left broken, unable to sustain themselves and largely failing to obtain any semblance of justice or reparation.[vi]

Ascertaining the costs of conflict on children is difficult due to insufficient and reliable data and research in the region. Every conflict has directly contributed to the vulnerability of children to death, major injuries, psychological trauma or disabilities. More important, war and conflict has decimated large numbers of children and youth thereby wiping out potential social capital for these societies.

One of the most prevalent forms of VAC in a family or community setting is child marriage, which is gaining increasing attention in the Asia Pacific region. Child marriage undermines a child's right to education, entrenches gender inequality and heightens the vulnerability of girls

to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.[vii] Although there has been some decrease in child marriage over the past 30 years, it continues to occur albeit unevenly across the Asia and Pacific region, and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. About 45 per cent of girls under age 18 are married in South Asia.[viii] India and Indonesia have featured in the top ten countries with the highest absolute number of child brides in the world.[ix] Recent data however shows a significant decline in women aged 20 to 24 who were married before the age of 18 years from 47.4 per cent in 2005-06 to 26.8 per cent in 2015-16 (NFHS, 2016).[x]

The main factors that cause child marriage include poverty, absence of security and protection of girls, lack of education, gender discrimination, cultural traditions, and religious traditions. Other elements that can influence the practice include the lack of an adequate legislative framework that can be enforced to address cases of child marriage. While many countries legislate for a minimum legal age for marriage, this is often not effectively enforced at the local and community levels. In some countries, child marriage practices are often condoned in communities and societies that uphold customary laws, especially in countries where domestic legislation is neither harmonized nor implemented efficiently. It is generally more prevalent in jurisdictions that offer fewer protections for women and girls. Child marriage is more common in the poorer countries and regions and is often concentrated among the poorest households. Economic factors are, therefore, not the only sole factor in the prevalence of child marriages.

In Papua New Guinea, for example, about 21 per cent of women aged 20-24 years were married by the age of 18 years and two per cent were married before the age of 15 years in 2014. Customary and traditional practices permit the marriage of girls as young as 12 even though the legal age of marriage for girls is 16 years, and 14 years with the consent of parents and the court. A survey in 2013 found that 11 per cent of unmarried young males and females aged 15-24 years had had sex before the age of 15 years.[xi] Cultures, traditions and customs are frequently invoked to justify early marriages, the payment of bride-price and polygamy. Polygamous marriages have been used as an excuse for initiating girls and young women into adulterous relationships or commercial sexual exploitation.

During the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997, many girls were forced to marry by their parents who saw marriage as a form of protection against rape and as a way to safeguard the family's reputation. The growing religious influence after the civil war saw promotion of a misinterpretation of girls' and women's status in Islam with an increasing numbers of the religious leaders (mullahs), many of whom lacking in adequate religious and secular knowledge.[xii] Girls from poor families are nearly twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls from wealthier families, as marriage is often seen as a way to provide for a daughter's future.

A study by the Al-Azhar University and UNICEF has argued that child marriage is unacceptable under Islam by highlighting that Shariah sets a fixed standard of mental maturity and sound judgment by differentiating between the biological fact of puberty and the mental ability to judge things reasonably and to manage life, and recognizing that both husband and wife must be enlightened and sensible. Islam demands the consent of the bride for validating the contract of marriage but in practice girls and women are rarely consulted in the decision of marriage or the selection of their spouse and any resistance can have tragic consequences (Al Azhar University and UNICEF, 2005).[xiii]

3.   CYBER-SAFETY AND ONLINE PROTECTION

In recent years, increasing attention has focused on cyber-safety and online child protection given the rapid penetration of the internet and the easy access to mobile technology, especially for children and young people in the Asia Pacific region. The internet and social networking is a "double-edged sword" – on the one hand, it is a powerful tool for communication and accessing information for learning and knowledge development; on the other hand, it is also the rapidly growing and popular platform through which children are at high risk of being exposed to online pornography and sexual exploitation. Over the last 15 years, internet pornography has become the predominant channel through which young people learn about sex. (IDS Bulletin, 2016, p.1)

ECPAT International states that this is exposing children in the Asia Pacific region to sexually exploitative situations through increasingly unmonitored and unguided use and access of information technology. The explosion of social networks and SMS technology and other online platforms is making protection and counter-action ever more challenging. The dynamics of proximity to an offence and the perceived anonymity of on-line interactions are also potential drivers to offending behaviour. In addition, the increasing production and distribution of child abuse materials has shifted the availability and access to child pornography from static images and traditional videos to easy on-line, chat and real-time pornography. While in the past, much of the sexual exploitation of children was done by western paedophiles, research indicates that the more common form of sexual exploitation is perpetrated by domestic abusers as well as social networking through smartphones and live streaming of pornographic materials. (ECPAT International, Annual Report 2016).

The Global Kids Online Research[xiv] conducted in 2015-2016 concluded that: *"children predominantly access the internet at home and on mobile devices; the majority of children learn something new by searching the internet; younger internet users lack the digital skills of their older peers; younger children's internet safety skills also needs support; a substantial majority of young internet users have had contact with unknown people online; countries vary with the risks encountered and the balance with online applications; and children are most likely to seek support from a friend, and rarely from a teacher"*. (Global Kids Online, 2016, pp.8-10)

Few countries in the Asia Pacific region have developed appropriate legislation to combat online sexual exploitation and provide online child protection. (UNICEF EAPRO – Legal Protection, 2015, p.240). There is an urgent need for all Governments in the region to learn from the good examples of some countries to undertake policy reform or draft new legislation, in collaboration with private/corporate sector, to combat online pornography and sexual exploitation. It is also important in addressing cyber-safety and online protection to pay special attention to the more vulnerable children, such as, indigenous or ethnic minority children, migrants, children in poor or rural settings or those who have some form of disability (Global Kids Online, 2016, p.11).

In recent years, a number of initiatives on cyber-safety have been taken by international development agencies and local civil society. At the global level, the WePROTECT Global Alliance to End Child Sexual Exploitation Online is one such initiative that has secured high-level commitment from Governments, the information and communications technology industry, international organizations and civil society to tackling this issue by supporting

comprehensive national action on prevention and response, to informing and empowering children and to fighting impunity, including through cross-border cooperation. (UNGA-SRSG, 2016 report, p.3)

While these initiatives are commendable, internet governance by and large has not taken into account the distinct needs and rights of children and young people – who are the majority of internet users mostly from the developing countries. Moreover, even where legislation and policy has been developed, they seem to be "age-blind" – dealing with the population as a whole - and not taking into account the age-specific needs and behaviours of children and young people. The more that Governments and other stakeholders understand the "evolving capacities of the child", the more relevant and appropriate will be the policy and legal provisions needed to cater to the specific challenges faced. Furthermore, a clearer demarcation between the "positive" and "negative" use and effect of the internet on children in relation to their growth and development vis-à-vis the need for protecting them from harm and exploitation, is a pre-requisite for a balanced approach to dealing with children's engagement with the internet.

4.SOCIAL NORMS AND HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES IN ASIA PACIFIC

Harmful traditional practices are those *"acts carried out as part of a particular tradition, custom, religion or culture that have the potential to result in physical or emotional harm to a child are considered harmful traditional practices. These practices often serve the purpose of expressing and reinforcing the subordinate role and diminished value and position of children, particularly girls, within a given culture or society".* (UNICEF-EAPRO, 2015, p. vi).

The General Comment No.13 issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2011 – "The Right of the Child to Freedom from all forms of Violence" - mentions that the term "harmful practices" can be applied to a wide variety of practices within diverse cultures and traditions. These include: corporal punishment, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), violent and degrading initiation rites (including virginity inspection), forced and early marriage, so-called 'honour' crimes, accusations of witchcraft (and associated rituals), and binding, scarring, burning and branding parts of the body.

South Asia is faced with a situation where many forms of VAC are backed by traditional social norms even as newer forms are increasingly visible and growing. Ethnic and indigenous groups in many countries have their own harmful practices that are sought to be protected as a means of preserving their identity. Legal provisions when in conflict with these traditional practices are usually weak or poorly implemented. For instance, child marriage, sexual violence, domestic violence, karo-kari[xv], kidnapping and harassment are strictly prohibited by laws in Pakistan, but these are not enforced effectively and awareness on addressing the complaints through a proper channel is lacking.[xvi]

The South Asian countries share a number of similarities related to VAC, including a lack of social value given to girls, discrimination based on gender, caste and class and patriarchal societal structures embedded in culture, religion and history. The intergenerational transmission of gender norms and socialization processes force women in many parts of South Asia to justify domestic violence. The MICS[xvii] conducted in Afghanistan in 2010-11

reported that 92 per cent of women justified the hitting or beating by husband of his wife for at least one of the following reasons: going out without telling the husband, neglecting the children, arguing with the husband, refusing sex, and burning the food. In addition, 78 per cent believed that going out without telling the husband is justification for beating, while 31 per cent think the same about burning the food. Similar surveys in other South Asian countries also found women justifying domestic violence. http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2012/afghanistan-domestic-violence.aspx

In India, there are also serious legal loopholes that prevent the government from eradicating child marriage. For example, the fact that the colonial era Indian Penal Code (IPC) allows a man to have sexual intercourse with his child wife, has resulted in the Indian Supreme Court to issue a directive to the Central Government. An exception to Section 375 in the IPC does not find a man guilty to having sexual intercourse with his 15-year-old wife. This exception ensures that he will not be charged for rape even though child marriage is a crime. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act of 2012 defines 'children' as those aged below 18. It has specific provisions declaring that 'penetrative sexual assault' and 'aggressive penetrative sexual assault' against children below 18 is rape.

The above practices are the most formidable structural and cultural constraints in many countries across the Asia Pacific region that prevent the elimination of VAC. All countries in the region are historically traditional and based on values, beliefs and practices that have existed for centuries and which continue to persist, notwithstanding the rapid economic growth and development over the past decades.

At the same time, it must be noted that some Governments in the Asia Pacific region have tried to address these harmful traditional practices through laws and legislation,[xviii] but find it extremely challenging to implement, monitor and enforce the regulations. This is primarily because, at the family or community level, these traditional practices are embedded in the family and traditional social structures in the community as essential cultural forms of social control. In this way, they enforce and justify rigid and hierarchical norms and legitimise identities and roles in the family and community setting – including relationships between adult-child, man-woman, boy-girl.

This is another important area which has received little attention and lacks research in Asia Pacific. A recent literature review of the drivers of VAC in the Philippines, for example, discovered that there were no studies on the social norms and VAC in the Philippines, although the research on corporal punishment and violence in the home recognised that social norms and traditions are in many cases responsible for accepting the kind of violence children may experience at home, and the prevailing culture of silence that discourages speaking out against VAC. (UNICEF Philippines, 2016, p.98).

There is the urgent need, therefore, for national and cross-national studies and research on the social norms and traditional practices prevalent in the countries of the Asia Pacific region and how it impacts on VAC. This alone will address the root causes of VAC and enable Governments to apply laws and policies effectively at the local and community levels. Moreover, it is also important to build capacity of researchers and development partners in undertaking research on social norms, including development of communication for

development (C4D) approaches and methods to address social and behavioural change at the family and community levels.

5.   PROGRESS IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION

Over the last 10 years or more since the Global Violence against Children Study, much progress has been made by Governments in the Asia Pacific region. A major achievement has been the regional collaboration and inter-governmental bodies that have been setup in South Asia and Southeast Asia and the Pacific to combat VAC. Notably, the Global Violence against Children study has provided the impetus for this region to work towards policy development and country and regional actions.

Regional Mechanisms to combat Violence against Children

A major positive development in the region over the past decade, has been the establishment of regional institutional mechanisms at an inter-governmental level to combat VAC.

In South Asia[xix], soon after the launch of the UN Study on Violence against Children, the South Asia Coordinating Group on Action against Violence against Women and Children (SACG) organized a Regional Consultation in May 2005 in Islamabad, hosted by the Government of Pakistan. Participants included high level officials from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and government delegates together with representatives from INGOs, UN agencies, experts, children and young people and the media. The Consultation reviewed the status of VAC in South Asia, including legal frameworks and good practices, as well as the inputs from children and young people themselves. This was provided as input from the region to the UN Study on Violence against Children. The highlight of this Consultation was the formation of the "South Asia Forum for Ending Violence against Children" (SAF). SAF worked for over five years and held four major consultations during this period in Pakistan (2006), India (2007), Nepal (2008, 2010 and 2011).

At the 3rd Ministerial Meeting in June 2010, on the recommendations of the 4th SAF Consultation, the representatives of SAARC and SACG agreed to endorse a new institutional framework for ending VAC in South Asia – viz., the South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC). SAIEVAC is an inter-governmental body which includes the 8 SAARC governments and civil society representatives, including children in its Governing Body, with a Regional Secretariat hosted by the Government of Nepal in Kathmandu.

The relationship between SAIEVAC and SACG is still evolving with more work to be done on clarifying respective roles and the coordination mechanisms. Organizational mandates and leadership and conflicting views regarding scope, transparency and accountability appear to be key impediments to collaboration. However, notwithstanding these organisational constraints, SAIEVAC has provided a common platform for Government representatives from the conflictive South Asian region despite deep political divisions and growing tensions and agree on a common agenda to combat violence against children in the region. It has also helped to "localise" the global agenda and create a sense of ownership among Governments and other stakeholders in the region. Such an achievement is worthwhile noting.

In South-East Asia, all ASEAN member states have ratified the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),[xx] and their commitments have been reflected in the following: Resolution on the ASEAN Plan of Action for Children in 1993, Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN in 2001, the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration in 2012, and the Declaration of Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of VAC in 2013. The purposes and principles of the ASEAN Charter, including the Cha-am, Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community (2009, 2015), the Hanoi Declaration on the Enhancement of Welfare and Development of ASEAN Women and Children 2010, have adopted the elimination of VAC and women as a key strategy to be achieved in the region.

The two key regional mechanisms are the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC) and the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). A key landmark for this region was the adoption in October 2013 of the "Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children". The major objectives of this Regional Plan was for each ASEAN member-state to have policies to address the elimination of VAC and sustained support across key sectors; and to establish effective preventive and protective mechanisms and services supported by national legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms. The Plan covers eight key areas of action for Governments in the ASEAN region: prevention; protection, response and support services; legal framework, prosecution and justice system; capacity building; research and data collection; management, coordination, monitoring and evaluation; partnership and collaboration; and review and communication. At the 27th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, ASEAN member-states adopted the Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children (2016-2025) which is aligned to the SDGs and proposes concrete actions including, among others, the promotion of non-violent approaches to child discipline; the deinstitutionalization of children; the protection of children from online abuse; the promotion of child-friendly justice proceedings, promotion of alternatives to detention; and awareness-raising campaigns." (UNGA-SRSG-2016, p.16). In 2016, the ACWC adopted a "Declaration to implement the commitment to the elimination of all forms of VAC in ASEAN member states".

The ASEAN countries have made substantial albeit uneven progress in efforts to combat VAC. A comprehensive legal ban on all forms of VAC, a key component of any strategy for child protection, is not yet in place in this region. Only Mongolia has banned VAC in all settings.

Most other countries have yet to develop a National Plan of Action on the elimination of all forms of VAC, a commitment that all State Parties made while endorsing the UN World Report on Violence against Children. Governments in the Asia Pacific region also made major commitments on eliminating VAC at the High-Level Meeting on South-South Cooperation in the Asia Pacific region which have been held every three years in the region. The commitments made by Governments in the Beijing Declaration of the first HLM in 2010 included the following: *"We recognize the need to pursue an approach that is focused primarily on prevention in the first instance and which ensures sustainability, cost efficiency and effectiveness. We advocate that such a systematic approach to addressing child protection concerns should be based on laws and policies that focus on safeguarding children from potential harm, and banning all forms of violence against children, would form the foundation*

of a national child protection system. We also recognize the value of maintaining the positive aspects of safety nets for children offered by our traditions of communities and extended families" (HLM-1, Beijing, 2010).

The Pacific region poses some unique challenges given its geographical setting and highly diverse demographics in small island states spread across the Pacific ocean. Notwithstanding recent development and rapid urbanisation, populations are mainly rural, with many villages remote and difficult to access. Cultural traditions and practices not only vary between the micro states, but can also vary from one island to another within the same state. Languages (more than 1,000 different languages are spoken in the region), demography, religions, legal frameworks and resources are significantly different within the region (ECPAT International, 2015, p.4).

And yet, major initiatives have taken place recently in the island states of the Pacific region. A first-ever Pacific Islands Conference on Ending Violence against Children in Fiji in 2015 brought together over 13 Pacific Island countries to share good practices and lessons learnt in addressing violence against children is the island states. The Conference agreed to act on country action plans to build capacity and strengthen legislation to prevent VAC. The Conference also witnessed renewed commitment among leaders to ratify and enforce the key human rights instruments in their respective countries to combat VAC. An important study was also conducted in the Pacific in 2015 titled "Violence against Children in the South Pacific.[xxi] The study concluded that *"there is a strong correlation between violence perpetrated against children and violence perpetrated against adult women particularly in the home".* (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2015, p. 22)

Major challenges to address VAC in the Pacific region include the general lack of understanding of the complex and various cultures in the region, and the real extent of sexual exploitation and violence against children in this region remains largely unknown. The limited research conducted in the region however shows that violence against women and children is extremely high in many Pacific island countries and traditional cultural practices and beliefs tend to view women and children as having a low social status. In a recent literature review conducted by ECPAT International in 2015, child prostitution received the most attention. However, with the Pacific island countries undergoing an economic transition and opening their borders to a more global market, sexual exploitation of children online, child trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism are likely to increase in the coming years. (ECPAT International, 2015, p.49).

This progress in the Asia Pacific region is commendable but short of the targets set in the UN Study on Violence against Children 2006 which expected all Member States to integrate measures into national planning process to prevent and respond to violence against children, including a focal point, preferably at ministerial level by 2007, legal prohibition of all VAC and initiation of a process to develop reliable national data collection systems by 2009. Progress on these targets across the region is uneven even after several years have passed since the timelines set to achieve these targets.

6. THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN ASIA PACIFIC

UNICEF has undertaken a first-ever costing of child maltreatment in the Asia Pacific region in 2015. The research found that that child maltreatment is costing countries in the East Asia and Pacific region over US$ 209 billion per year, equivalent to 2 per cent of the region's GDP – emotional abuse ($65.9 billion), physical abuse ($39.6 billion), sexual abuse ($39.9 billion), neglect ($ 32.4 billion), witnessing domestic violence ($31 billion) and death from maltreatment ($0.5 billion) (UNICEF EAPRO, 2015). Furthermore, Fang et al estimated a total annual economic loss in the Asia Pacific of at least US$ 194 billion due to the burden from consequential mental disorders and common health risk behaviours (Fang X, Fry DA, Ji K, 2015, 42:146-162).

These findings indicate that VAC is a serious threat to social and economic progress of the countries in the Asia Pacific region and come at high costs for social services and government expenditures. It detrimentally impacts on children's physical and mental health, their schooling, and their work performance as adults. It contributes to the burden of health services, social welfare, costs of maintaining child/juvenile institutions and the judicial system.

Therefore, Governments in the region need to adopt a preventive – rather than a reactive – policy approach to ending VAC, matched with investment in prevention programmes and initiatives that address the root social causes that perpetrate violence and the structural/institutional bottlenecks that prevent its total elimination. The best way to do this is for Governments to place VAC at the centre of their public health, welfare and justice policies and programmes. Governments also need to realise that this investment will bring positive returns by reducing public expenditure on reactive and response services, improve the health and wellbeing of children, improve educational outcomes and bring down juvenile crime and inter-generational violence. (Fry, p.3). *"Most governments in the region do not significantly invest in measures to prevent violence, thus leaving one of the most vulnerable populations and a critical human resource for sustained productivity – children – unprotected".* (UNICEF EAPRO, 2015, p.1)

7.   CONCLUSION

One of the most formidable obstacle to addressing VAC in the Asia Pacific region are social norms and attitudes that influence all the other measures for prevention and response. As Deborah Fry has argued *"violence in childhood is so common and pervasive that is virtually a norm"* in the Asia Pacific Region. Moreover, public attention is more focused on the extreme and sensational forms of violence while the routine and everyday acts of VAC are often overlooked and ignored (Fry, 2016, p.6).

VAC is difficult to address when it is embedded in the deep cultural, religious and traditional practices and historically characterizes the family and community setting, as is the case in the region. While the traditional mind sets need to be contested, more research is required to identify and mainstream the positive values and practices that exist in our socio-cultural and religious contexts that respect children and safeguard them from harm and exploitation.

Gender equality is essential in order to have an effect on VAC but girls are not valued as they are "women to be," and women themselves are not valued in many cultures or societies in the

region. Another key area to address is to strengthen engagement with families. It is necessary to link with families and communities and especially those in marginalized communities.

Given the multi-dimensional nature of VAC and the need for cross-sectoral policies and solutions, building strong social movements by bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders to address VAC - including religious leaders, parliamentarians, media, private sector, professionals and young people is imperative – besides just working with government agencies and national and international non-governmental organisations. The launch of the Global Partnership to end VAC in 2015 offers the opportunity for everyone who believes in ending violence against children to come together, combine their efforts and maximise their impact. Governments, international organisations, NGOs and civil society, academia, the private sector, and children themselves are key actors in strengthening and expanding this global partnership.

In terms of targeting, we need to influence Governments to take seriously the SDG principle of *"no one left behind"* – to focus on the most marginalised and vulnerable children – including girls, children of ethnic and indigenous minorities, children with mental and physical disabilities, refugees and migrants. We need to challenge governments to act swiftly to begin delivering their commitments to end violence, helping convince them that investing in violence prevention will deliver substantial benefits for children and the broader society.

In this regard, four major tasks lie ahead for Governments in the Asia Pacific region as they focus on aligning and implementing the SDGs:
(i) Prohibition of all forms of VAC in all settings in national legislation;
(ii) Political leadership for mounting a challenge to social acceptance of violence through the development and implementation of a comprehensive national agenda for violence prevention;
(iii) Capacity development at all levels of society on prevention and response, positive alternatives; and
(iv) Data collection to support monitoring of progress and deepening the understanding of the causes, manifestations and effects of VAC. (Fry, 2016, p.4)

With the SDGs now prioritizing distinct and cross-cutting approaches to protection of children from violence, the time has come for urgent action on VAC. Five goals and eleven targets address violence and abuse, trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation, harmful practices and the worst forms of child labour, including children in armed forces, along with promotion of safe public spaces, safe and non-violent learning environments and birth registration. This provides the necessary policy and implementation guidance to Governments to address VAC in all settings and work towards total elimination of VAC by 2030.

Governments in the Asia Pacific region also need to learn from the emerging studies and evidence on the social and economic costs of VAC in the region, and use the results to revise existing policies and develop new policies and guidelines that focus on strengthening the child protection systems and preventive interventions required to eliminate all forms of violence against children in all countries in the region. The "cognitive capital"[xxii] in the Asia Pacific region is a "demographic dividend" for Governments and society that, if properly orchestrated, could contribute to increased economic and social development as well as the wellbeing of the younger generations in the years to come. Failure to capitalise on this social asset will be

another "missed opportunity" for Governments and stakeholders – nay more - another promise unkept, another costly lesson learnt – "too little, too late" - with the social burden being transferred from adults today to our children and young people – now and in the future.

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[i] It is always challenging to define the geographical boundaries of the so-called Asia Pacific region. For the purposes of this study, however, we cover the countries in the Asia Pacific region – ranging from Afghanistan in West Asia to the Pacific islands in East Asia, and Mongolia in North Asia to Indonesia in Southeast Asia (excluding Australia and New Zealand).

[ii] UNICEF Office of Research (2016) – Understanding child experiences boosts effort to end violence. Accessed on 2 February 2017: https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1489/

[iii] Office of the Secretary-General's Special Representative on Violence against Children, New York.

[iv] UNICEF-EAPRO, 2015, p.ii.

[v] Daesh is the Arabic acronym for ISIS while "Daesh Franchise" is a term increasingly used for its mode of operations for expanding its influence globally that *"seeks control both of the action of its scattered affiliates and of the territorial base that legitimates its claim to caliphal status."* See Edwards, David B., (2017). Caravan of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombings in Afghanistan. University of California Press, p.200.

[vi] Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, February 2017

[vii] Malhotra, A., Warner, A., McGonagle, A., and Lee-Rife, S, *Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows*, International Center for Research on Women, 2011

[viii] http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Child-marriage-around-the-world-Nov-2016.pdf

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[x] http://rchiips.org/nfhs/pdf/NFHS4/India.pdf

[xi] Tingim Laip Periodic Survey round 1, 2013.

[xii] http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/UNFPA-Child-Marriage-in-Tajikistan-2014.pdf

[xiii] Al-Azhar University & UNICEF – Children in Islam – their care, upbringing and protection.

[xiv] The Global Kids Online 2015-2016 report included studies conducted in Argentina, the Philippines, Serbia and South Africa, with support from UNICEF country offices, which piloted the Global Kids Online research toolkit and prepared national reports.

[xv] '**Karo Kari**' is a Sindhi term used for honor killing, specific for the province of Sindh. **Karo** means black man, and **Kari** means black woman; the term means they have blackened themselves by committing this sin, dishonoring the family.

[xvi] Statement of Zia Ahmad Awan, founder of Madadgar National Helpline 1098 and National Commissioner for Children. Retrieved from: https://tribune.com.pk/story/1348833/93-pakistani-women-experience-sexual-violence/

[xvii] Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)

[xviii] For an excellent review of laws and legislation in ASEAN countries, see UNICEF-EAPRO – Legal Protection from Violence – Analysis of Domestic Laws related to Violence against Children in ASEAN Member-States – Strengthening Child Protection Systems, Series, No.5, 2015, pp.56-79.

[xix] The South Asian Region comprises the countries of: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka,

xx The Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN – comprises of the following countries: Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.

xxi The study covered the following countries in the South Pacific: Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Island, Tonga and Vanuatu.

xxii "Cognitive capital" – represents the complete set of intellectual skills, nurtured primarily in childhood, that determine human capabilities, and drives global economies now and into the future. (Samson, M – Social Protection in the Asia Pacific Region, forthcoming).