Rising risks: what's driving violence against Pacific children

by Betty Barkha

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School children prepare for future tsunamis by rehearsing Disaster Action Plans
Photo Credit: Save the Children Solomon Islands

Children across the Pacific are facing escalating risks to their safety and wellbeing. Research from Save the Children reveals that violence against children is on the rise across five Pacific Island countries — Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tonga. Almost 200 children and adolescents as well as 300 caregivers and 110 child protection staff across the five countries participated in the research in 2023, which consisted of group discussions, surveys and child-led research, alongside a comprehensive literature review. The resulting picture is both sobering and instructive. The report confirms that violence against children in the Pacific is widespread and worsening. Children continue to face emotional, physical and sexual abuse in their homes, schools and communities.

Climate change, pandemic shocks, labour mobility and the rapid growth of digital connectivity are placing pressure on already fragile protection systems across the Pacific. Environmental shocks, including cyclones, drought and sea-level rise, are forcing families to relocate — sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. The breakdown of community ties and traditional safety nets that often accompanies relocation can weaken protective environments for children. The risks associated with climate mobility and its impacts on children will further exacerbate existing challenges. National and global responses to climate mobility should be proactive in addressing the specific needs and entitlements of particular groups, including women and girls and youths and children in general.

Across all five Pacific countries, the rapid expansion of digital connectivity has exposed children to new forms of harm. While access to mobile phones and the internet can offer educational and social benefits, it has also brought increased risk of online abuse and exploitation. Stakeholders reported concerns about cyberbullying, grooming and exposure to harmful content. Yet many children, families and schools lack the digital literacy or infrastructure to address these dangers. This is a rapidly growing protection gap that has yet to be fully recognised in national policy frameworks.

Children in the Pacific reported frequently experiencing emotional violence, including rejection, humiliation and neglect. This abuse, despite its lasting psychological impacts, rarely receives adequate attention in regional policy or practice. Compounding the situation, not only are rates of violence rising, but existing legal, institutional and community-based child protection systems are struggling to cope.

Many Pacific children endure corporal punishment and bullying, while child sexual exploitation and gender-based violence are on the rise. For girls in particular, early marriage and teenage pregnancy remain persistent threats to safety and development. Harmful gender norms continue to shape children's experiences of violence. Girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and early marriage: one in five girls in the Pacific is married before age 18, with countries like Solomon Islands and Tonga allowing exceptions down to age 15 with parental consent. Boys often experience physical discipline and pressure to conform to rigid ideas of masculinity. Children with disabilities, gender non-binary youth and those from marginalised communities face additional risks and barriers to protection. Transforming these norms will require long-term, community-based work and engagement with traditional leadership and faith-based groups.

Despite significant challenges, the study revealed promising strengths within Pacific child protection systems. Cultural assets like kinship care, extended family support and the authority of community elders can be powerful protective forces when aligned with child rights principles. In some areas, traditional leaders actively resolve disputes and reinforce social norms discouraging violence. However, these strengths are inconsistently applied, and formal systems often lack the capacity to support them. Government child protection services across the region remain underfunded, understaffed and concentrated in urban centres. Consequently, NGOs and faith-based organisations often serve as primary protection service providers in many rural and outer island communities, despite facing their own funding and coordination challenges.

The challenges children encounter in the Pacific are grave. However, we see a clear roadmap for action. Based on our research, we have five key recommendations for a stronger child protection system.

First, strengthen community-led child protection. This entails investing in community initiatives where traditional systems interact with formal child protection mechanisms. Capacity building is required for village leaders, religious institutions and caregivers so they can effectively act against and prevent violence against children and women.

Second, restore and expand social services. Social services fulfil an indispensable support and safety net function for vulnerable children and families that need to be made more widely available.

Third, ensure digital safety. With emerging threats in the digital space, online safety of children is essential. Measures need to be taken to provide safe online spaces and protect children from cyber threats.

Fourth, plan for climate-related risks. Climate mobility is an increasing risk across the Pacific. Both state- and non-state-led adaptation initiatives need to integrate child protection into disaster preparedness, relocation planning and climate adaptation programs. This includes safeguarding children's rights in temporary shelters and host communities, and during disaster recovery efforts.

Finally, elevate the voices of children and youth. Meaningful opportunities need to be created for children and youth to participate in the design and evaluation of child protection programs. This could involve school-based advisory groups, youth councils or participatory research, ensuring their perspectives shape the solutions.

The situation for children in the Pacific is serious, but it is not without hope. What is needed now is a sustained commitment: long-term investment in inclusive and culturally informed protection responses that truly reflect the realities of children's lives. Above all, it requires listening to what children themselves say they need. As the Blue Pacific region navigates compounding challenges — from the impacts of climate change to emerging digital risks — a critical opportunity exists to build child protection systems that are resilient, inclusive and future-ready.

Disclosures:

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