



30 Years of Children’s Rights, Opportunities and Threats: Time to Act

Hosted by ChildFund Alliance, World Vision, Save the Children,
SOS Children’s Villages International, UNICEF and Plan International

Remarks by ChildFund Alliance Secretary General Meg Gardinier

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This afternoon I am going to be speaking with you about a disturbing epidemic taking place in the Small Islands Developing States, or SIDS. As many of you may be aware, the UN General Assembly today convened a one-day high-level meeting to review progress made on the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action, also known as the SAMOA Pathway. This is an international framework developed after the 2014 Small Islands Conference, which focused on identifying SIDS priorities for the 2030 Agenda.

The Small Islands face similar developmental challenges, ranging from geographic and economic isolation, to limited resources and vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. Unfortunately, they also have in common a high incidence of violence against children.

A report recently released by ChildFund Australia, Save the Children, Plan International and World Vision reveals that violence against children is at endemic levels across Pacific island nations and Timor-Leste. [*Unseen, Unsafe*](#) details how millions of children are experiencing exceptionally high levels of physical, emotional and sexual violence, as well as neglect in this region of the world.

Moreover, for the vast majority of children, this violence is occurring in a place where they should feel safest: their homes. The study concludes more than 70%—or 4 million children across 8 countries—experience violent discipline at home, including a staggering 2.8 million in Papua New Guinea, which equals 75% of their child population.

- ❖ In fact, more than one in four parents or caregivers in PNG reported beating their children “over and over as hard as they could.”
- ❖ In Timor-Leste, more than 612,000 children experience violent discipline.

Among adolescent girls, one in four in this region experience physical violence and one in ten experience sexual violence. Sixty-four percent of women in the Solomon Islands, between the ages of 15 and 49, reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, with 37% reporting they suffered sexual abuse before they were 15.

The high level of violence against women and children is in part due to gender inequality, which is a common problem across many countries in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. Communities are deeply patriarchal with entrenched notions of gender roles developed through traditional ideologies, customary practices and powerful religious influences.

Violence in general is a normalized and widely condoned part of everyday life in many societies in the Pacific and Timor-Leste. Its use as a form of punishment and discipline is socially accepted and considered a ‘normal’ part of behavior.

In addition, in Pacific societies, social status is associated with age, resulting in children being largely voiceless with minimal rights. Children must contribute to the family economy; complete household tasks; and abide by norms concerning obedience and family unity.

Other factors driving violence include rapid urbanization and growing poverty, both believed to be reshaping the family unit and removing many protective mechanisms. The practice of informal adoption is also leading to exploitative practices, with many children finding themselves victims of forced domestic labor, neglect or sexual abuse.

While the drivers of violence in the region are complex and inter-generational, targeted programs are making a difference. Interventions aimed at increasing children's resilience and their ability to seek support when they feel unsafe, as well as positive parenting training are reducing violence and abuse against children.

For real change, advocates and government leaders must offer interventions that work to change cultural norms in rural communities; they must provide school education programs focused on respectful relationships; and, they need to establish safe houses for women and children.

Determining the true depth of the scale of violence in the Pacific and Timor-Leste is complicated because there is limited nationally representative data on the crisis; violence against women and children is a stigmatized and under-reported issue; and variances in definitions and methodologies used in the region make comparisons difficult.

Given that the impact of abuse can last well into adulthood, more investment would drastically improve these children's life trajectories. Yet, the study concludes there has clearly been inadequate levels of funding and policy measures to address the epidemic.

Just \$1.1 million or 0.1 percent of all Australian foreign aid to the Pacific and Timor-Leste in 2017 went to programs specifically addressing violence against children. In addition, all foreign donors—in total—spent only \$3.4 million on this critical issue.

In the absence of adequate funding, we will not be able to make progress against this systemic crisis. World leaders, civil society and donors must engage in a constructive dialogue on how best to prioritize and integrate interventions across the region. Childhood violence is preventable, if we put child protection and child rights at the heart of government development programs.