

Some Recommendations for Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in Viet Nam

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Abstract: Crime prevention is an outreach measure to stop crime before it can occur. Prevention measures vary in different countries. Child sexual abuse is an issue of growing concern in Viet Nam. Child sexual abuse can cause serious damage to cognitive, social, and emotional development of a child. Effectively combatting this serious form of violence against children requires. Vietnamese government has initiated and supported services and policies that enhance children's development, health and safety as well as advocated for policies and programs to help meet the basic needs of children and families. In this paper, the author intends to exam the child sexual abuse situation and crime prevention in the world and Vietnam.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, prevent, Vietnam.

1. THE SITUATION OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN VIETNAM

The early discussion on legal approaches to address the demand for the sexual abuse of children is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (ECPAT 2016b). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child includes international provisions to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, as well as from the sale of traffic in children for any purpose or in any form (SAIEVAC 2016). Following that, the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography was drafted to address the problem of trafficking children for a sexual purpose and other forms of child sexual exploitation through a prohibition on the sale of children. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography are mandated "to investigate the exploitation of children around the world and to submit reports to the General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights, making recommendations for the protection of the rights of the children concerned".

These guidelines adopt the definition of child sexual abuse formulated by the 1999 WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention 1999 which stated that: "Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity

between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person. This may include but is not limited to:

- The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
- The exploitative use of a child in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
- The exploitative use of children in pornographic performance and materials"

Nowadays, young people are likely to be substantially more educated, affluent, urbanised and tech-savvy than their parents (ECPAT 2016a). However, child sexual abuse is still a serious problem affecting large numbers of our children and young people (Rama *et al.* 2015). With help, abused children can overcome their experiences, but many remain profoundly affected for the rest of their lives. Child sexual abuse occurs in all populations, with most incidents remaining unreported (ILO 2014). It happens to children in all socioeconomic and educational levels, across all racial and cultural groups, and in both rural and urban areas (ECPAT 2016a).

Research suggests that 1 in 6 children are sexually abused before they reach the age of 16. The costs are enormous, both to individuals who suffer the trauma of abuse and to their families and communities. Contrary to popular belief, research shows that children are far more likely to be abused by someone they know than by a stranger. The vast majority of child sexual abusers include someone the child knows such as a parent or other relative, teacher, clergy, neighbor, or friend

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(ECPAT 2016b). Approximately 60 percent of boys and 80 percent of girls who were sexually victimized were abused by someone the child knew. In this situation, children are particularly powerless to protect themselves. Few people realise that many children are abused by older children or adolescents; some of these young people have themselves been abused. Forty percent of reported sexual assaults against children ages six and under are attributable to juvenile abusers, as are thirty-nine percent of reported sexual assaults against children ages 6 through 11. Adolescent boys make up approximately 23 percent of sexual offenders. Research findings indicate that from 40 to 80 percent of juvenile sex offenders have themselves been victims of sexual abuse.

Three quarters of children who are abused do not tell anyone about it at the time and many keep their secret all their lives (ECPAT 2016b). Many incidents remain unreported as families of victims fear their children's dignity and privacy will be affected for their entire lives if the incidents are made public (Rama *et al.* 2015). Most families remained silent and failed to report the cases to authorities in a timely manner. Children who experience sexual abuse are more likely to be depressed and experience other types of mental health problems and to engage in high-risk behaviours such as violence and social evils such as drug abuse (ECPAT 2016a).

In Vietnam, inequality still remains, particularly for children coming from marginalised groups. Children from ethnic minorities, children living on the street, children living in extreme poverty and children with disabilities are at high risk of being exposed to different forms of abuse, including sexual abuse. Poverty has indeed been identified as a major contributing factor in Vietnam for the called 'voluntary or self-engaged prostitution', which implies that children decide to 'sell' their virginity and/or engage in prostitution. Research has also revealed that children from rural and remote areas are more vulnerable to trafficking, owing to economic hardship and low law enforcement (DESA 2017).

Between 2014 and 2019, over 1000 cases of abuse against children were reported each year, in which most of them are sexual abuse, with girls accounting for more than 80 per cent of child victims. Most of the cases were reported by relatives of victims or local residents, adding that they took advantage of close relationships with naive children whose victims' parents were at work. The number of rising child sexual abuse

cases to lack of parental care, lack of gender education and life skills at schools, and the explosion of the internet and social networks, as well as tourism development. A majority of victims were children of migrant workers who lived in boarding houses and left their children at home alone when they went to work. In some cases, child victims had sex with lovers who are also young.

The changing and expanding nature of travel and tourism, and increased use of Internet and communications technologies, combined with poverty and inequality throughout the country, influence both supply and demand with regard to child sexual abuse (ECPAT 2016a). Research suggests that particular groups of children are at heightened risk of child sexual abuse. These include poor children, children who are working, children who are out of school, homeless and street-based children, migrating children, minorities, indigenous children, children with disabilities, and children forced into early marriage (Rama *et al.* 2015). The rapid growth in tourism exacerbates child sexual abuse in the country. Further exacerbating the child sexual abuse situation has been the dramatic development in Internet and communications technologies, which have increased and diversified opportunities to sexually exploit children, or to profit from the sexual abuse of children. Online grooming, the increasing profitability of child sexual abuse material and ease of access to it, and the advent of live online child sexual abuse have significantly changed the modus operandi of child sex offending and have resulted in unprecedented numbers of vulnerable children being exploited across the region (ECPAT 2016b; SAIEVAC 2016).

2. CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The consequences related to the cited phenomena leave visible and invisible scars on their victims. These are the result of a series of events connected both to the sexual abuse itself and to the surrounding environment. If traumatic effects can constitute aftermaths even after a single event, a long period of victimization leaves indelible deep signs on the child. Child sexual abuse can cause serious, lifelong, even life-threatening consequences for the physical, psychological, spiritual, emotional and social development and well-being of a child (ECPAT 2016a). It is clear that the consequences of child sexual abuse far beyond the affected children and families. Enormous societal costs are also involved.

The physical signs of child sexual abuse are often hard to detect, as most perpetrators avoid physically

harming their victims so they can repeat the activities over time (ILO 2014; Rama *et al.* 2015). Because of this dynamic and the fact that children generally disclose long after the last contact, few children will have diagnostic findings (ECPAT 2016a). Child sexual abuse can be very different from rape, where force and restraint are used and signs of injury are generally present. When children are injured as a result of sexual contact, they may present with headaches, stomach pain, lower abdomen pain, skin diseases, body itching, and fatigue, asthma, and other rheumatic disorders. Children can also contract sexually transmitted diseases or become pregnant as a result of sexual abuse (Zimmerman *et al.* 2009).

In addition to the physically coercive context, the psychological pressure and trauma suffered have a crucial position (ECPAT 2014; Rama *et al.* 2015). They include feelings of guilt, altered sense of self and self-esteem, fears and anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, shame, powerlessness, self-chronic suicidal preoccupation, self-injury, sexualized behavior, role confusion, dependent relationship with the abuser, aggressiveness, and sexually provocative behavior (Zimmerman *et al.* 2009). Behavioral and emotional consequences/warning signs include: extreme changes in behavior such as loss of appetite, eating disorder, withdrawal, or aggressiveness; disturbed sleep patterns or a sudden fear of the dark; regression to infantile behavior; multiple personality disorders; and delinquent behavior or a drop of grades in school. Additional indicators may include intrusive thoughts, nightmares, heightened startle response, poor concentration, and hyper-vigilance, and in some cases the child may appear depressed, withdrawn, or lethargic (Zimmerman *et al.* 2009). Children will commonly respond to their victimization with sexualized behaviors and/or age inappropriate knowledge of sexual activities (ECPAT 2016a). Other long-term consequences for victims of child sexual abuse include: increased likelihood of homelessness, increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse. Research indicates that both women and men who have experienced child sexual abuse have an increased risk of drug and alcohol abuse in their adult life (Rama *et al.* 2015; ILO 2014).

3. PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Much progress has been made in understanding how to prevent child sexual abuse. Child abuse is the result of the interaction of a number of individual, family, and environmental factors. Consequently, there is strong reason to believe that the prevention of child

sexual abuse requires a comprehensive focus that crosscuts key sectors of society (ECPAT 2014). Therefore, in order to improve the efficiency of this type of crime prevention in the future, the government should take the following measures:

Strengthening Existing Prevention Programs

Current prevention programs are focused primarily on educating children on how to recognize instances of abuse and teaching them personal safety skills. Programs may also focus on helping children who are victims of past or ongoing sexual abuse by encouraging them to disclose such incidents to parents or other responsible adults. Research yields little evidence that such programs actually prevent the occurrence of child sexual abuse (ECPAT 2014). Although program evaluations demonstrate short-term knowledge gain, they fail to establish a link between such knowledge gain and the prevention of child sexual abuse.

Many experts are concerned that even when children retain the knowledge acquired through child sexual abuse prevention programs, such children are incapable of resisting abusive behavior directed at them by older and stronger offenders (Rama *et al.* 2015). Such concerns seem valid given that approximately 40 percent of child sexual abuse victims are aged 6 and younger, and thus may be especially impressionable and vulnerable to victimization.

Therefore, child sexual abuse prevention programs must be strengthened so that program strategies are more explicitly directed toward the goal of preventing child sexual abuse (Rama *et al.* 2015). Adults must exercise an affirmative obligation to safeguard children from sexual abuse. While strengthening existing child sexual abuse prevention programs, efforts must be made to create programs that shift the responsibility of child sexual abuse prevention from children to adults and public institutions (ECPAT 2014). The signals of child sexual abuse are often subtle and frequently defy detection even by knowledgeable parents and seasoned professionals. Additional efforts are needed, including parent education in methods for reducing the risk of child sexual abuse and training for professionals and other caregivers who work with children to recognize and appropriately respond to sexually reactive behavior. In addition, training and education of parents, caregivers, and professionals must also focus on what to do when a child discloses sexual abuse,

how to report sexual abuse, and how to respond to the child's needs when disclosure is made.

Raising Awareness of Child Sexual Abuse

Viet Nam has put in increasingly more efforts in raising awareness and educating people on the issues. These campaigns have targeted children, their families and the wider community as well as international visitors. An example is the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs has played in developing strategies to raise awareness at the local level. The campaign would involve dissemination of child law, the program on child protection, and the decree on defining a safe, healthy and friendly environment for children, as well as the organization of seminars and conferences on seeking solutions to prevent and control child sexual abuse and violence. The Ministry of Education and Training has also developed a life-skills training program, which includes a module on child sexual abuse, but this module is not mandatory. Local public security and women's unions have strengthened public awareness and public dissemination of materials about prevention of sexual violence against children, which can play a vital role. The effectiveness of the campaigns is unknown due to a lack of monitoring and evaluation of the campaigns. In addition, several manifestations are still not specifically targeted by awareness-raising strategies, and the coverage of those measures is limited.

Therefore, targeted education campaigns should be developed that are carefully planned and implemented. All adults and adolescents need to know that child sexual abuse is a crime that often causes severe damage to children, that help is available for those who seek it, and that children can never consent to sexual activity. Prior to the development of the campaigns, planning for the ongoing monitoring of the campaigns should be conducted so that the effectiveness of the campaigns may, in the future, be measured. For example, local public security and women's unions should work with schools to offer life skills education for children, especially in disadvantaged localities with poor academic standards. Further, a comprehensive prevention strategy should include increasing parents' and other caregivers' awareness and knowledge of protective measures they can take on behalf of their children (ECPAT 2014). Campaigns should carry clear and consistent messaging and easy to understand actions. Lessons learned and best practices should be shared widely. A powerful public education message must be transmitted to the general public, encouraging

society to recognize that child sexual abuse is both everyone's problem and responsibility. The goal of such public education efforts is to eliminate any tolerance for sexual abuse or confusion over what society condones as appropriate interactions between adults and children (ECPAT 2014).

Educating Children about Child Sexual Abuse

The impacts on a child who has suffered "sexual abuse" are varied (ECPAT 2014). The child may feel a sense of guilt and carry that guilt with them throughout their life. They may even become abusers themselves as they get older. They may find themselves addicted to alcohol, drugs or display other addictive behavior. Often the denial and hiding of the issues is the biggest burden the child has to carry. Quality child care and early childhood education can improve children's cognitive and socioemotional development and increase the likelihood that children will experience safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments, both in the child care and education settings and at home (ECPAT 2014; Rama *et al.* 2015).

The biggest problem in Vietnam in this matter is that there is no sex education. While western schools start educating children about this matter at 11 years old, Vietnamese students are not provided with this knowledge until they are finishing junior high school, or in high school, if not being skipped. It is also important to note that both parents and schools have the responsibility to educate children about this matter. However, since the government does not provide proper education, in most Vietnamese family cases, even parents have not been educated or had a proper understanding of the matter. Another problem is that there is still a lot of poverty in rural areas so not many children go to school, which makes it difficult to change people's mindsets, raise awareness, and spread the understanding.

Children should be educated as soon as they are able to understand language. They should be taught and re-taught at their age level, that it is not ok for an adult to touch them in their private places, or to kiss or fondle them. Parents should also teach their children it's not ok if a person who molests children tells them that it is a secret just between the two of them, and makes children promise not to tell anyone about what happened. The most important thing is "information." Your child needs enough information to clearly be able to judge what behavior is appropriate and what is not. Free communication with parents and others in a position of trust is very important.

That's not only the family's responsibility; schools must be very alert and check carefully the references of all the people that the child comes into contact with; not just the teachers, but all the staff (Rama *et al.* 2015). Also, schools should have an effective sex education program for students and staff. Schools are places where change can happen much faster. Although teachers might be inexperienced or uncomfortable discussing sexual abuse with students, it is important and could spare a lot of suffering and save lives.

Improving Child Protection Systems

Children who have been sexually abused may face severe and long-term physical and psychological consequences (Zimmerman *et al.* 2009). Mental health services, especially if timely, can help ease some of these consequences. They also may help stop the intergenerational transmission of child sexual abuse. Mental health services to those engaging in abusive behavior can help them address stressors that often lead to sexual abuse, helping end such abuse (ECPAT 2014). Whilst the government operate shelters for women and children who have experienced violence, abuse or exploitation, the nature and extent of these shelters and services are limited. Few shelters have the capacity to support child victims. Government shelters are generally under-resourced and understaffed.

The high quality of systems to protect children from abuse is required to protect children from a variety of social ills (ECPAT 2014). Strong child protection systems include child protection policies, policies for screening child-contact employment, institutions to accommodate and provide support services to children and their families and minimum guidelines on the care of children in institutions. Efforts should be undertaken to build additional facilities to accommodate and care for abused children. Alternatives to institutional care should also be explored and resourced. Guidelines and standards for the protection of children in care, for both government and non-government organisations should be developed. Model standards and guidelines should be drafted and shared widely with all relevant stakeholders (Rama *et al.* 2015).

Improving the Cooperation

Efforts to combat child sexual abuse depend on regional and international cooperation between governments and government agencies, as well as with other relevant organisations (ECPAT 2014). In practice, bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region is

challenging. Lack of written agreements, government agencies are usually unable to effectively cooperate and share information. Written agreements should develop preventing networks in each country, by mapping the key government and non-government actors. Those actors should frequently discuss child sexual abuse issues and progress on child sexual abuse. Counter-child sexual abuse advocates should highlight the importance of cooperative arrangements between countries in the region, and between local, national, regional and international law enforcement agencies.

Moreover, national governments, law enforcement authorities, social service organisations, and international agencies should make all efforts to improve coordination and avoid overlapping in their anti-trafficking initiatives. Such cooperation enables information sharing, timely decision-making, opportunities for capacity building, and a range of other benefits. Efforts should be made to strengthen existing cooperative mechanisms and to establish new partnerships that will enhance and expand child sexual abuse prevention and child protection networks. At the regional level, the opportunity for the establishment of a regional instrument to formalise cooperation in relation to child sexual abuse should be explored. Avenues for more informal cooperation and information sharing should also be explored. Regional levels platforms are necessary to promote inter-country collaboration and cooperation within South Asia, and between South Asia and other regions.

Strengthen Engagement with the Private Sector

Effectively combating global problems requires successful collaboration between all relevant stakeholders, including the private sector. The private sector has the potential to become a highly effective partner in preventing the problem, protecting children and supporting care and rehabilitation of victims. For example, in the tourism industry, the government have worked with the staff of hotels, restaurants, bars, taxi drivers, tour guides and other front-line employees in the identification of potential offenders and the identification of at-risk children. In Vietnam, the unique partnership between ECPAT and other agencies ensures that the advocacy messages are targeted and specific to national and international contexts. Regarding the use and abuse of Internet and communications technologies, the telecommunications, information technology, banking and finance sectors can aid in the disruption of the rapidly expanding 'child pornography' industry.

The current rising interest in ecotourism, adventure tourism and voluntourism presents a range of new potential threats to children. Therefore, it is essential that government continually engage with a range of entities and individuals that may be able to contribute to the prevention, including businesses, hotels, tour guides and others. NGOs and international organisations also have key roles to play in working with the private sector to improve the regional and national response to the problem. NGOs and international organisations should seek out new partnerships with relevant private sector organisations. NGOs and international organisations should develop group and one-on-one training and coaching sessions so that private sector agencies are cognisant of their important role in protecting children and are able to identify vulnerable children and potential child offenders. Training and advocacy with the private sector should provide practical strategies for reporting the potential abuse of children.

4. CONCLUSION

Child sexual abuse can cause serious damage to cognitive, social, and emotional development of a child. As a society, we have a collective responsibility to prevent child sexual abuse. To accomplish this, we must initiate and support services and policies that enhance children's development, health and safety and we must advocate for policies and programs to help meet the basic needs of children and families. We must also promote research, training, and public education to strengthen protective factors that buffer risk factors for sexual abuse while also directly addressing those risk factors.

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