Violence against children is ubiquitous. In 2015, at least three out of four of the world’s children – an estimated 1.7 billion – had experienced some form of interpersonal violence\(^1\) in a previous year.\(^2\) When the cumulative impact of violence is considered, almost no children – whether they live in rich countries or poor, in the global North or South – experience violence-free childhoods.\(^3\)

**Data gaps and availability**

Violence in childhood occurs on a global scale. But because it occurs in so many forms and settings, the true scale of the problem is difficult to grasp. It is difficult to gather data on a subject that embraces intimate family relationships, involves societal taboos, and is so normalized that those perpetrating it are often absolved of any guilt or punishment. The difficulties are even more when it comes to children. Very small children may simply not have the capacity to report an incident of violence or abuse.

Because of these reasons, nationally representative data on violence against children and violence against women (which has significant ramifications for violence against children) are only available for a limited number of countries. All the eight countries in South Asia, for example, report data for child homicide rates.\(^4\) However, only half the countries report data on corporal punishment at home (for children aged 1-14);\(^5\) three countries report data on indicators of school violence (bullying and physical fights between children aged 13-15);\(^6\) physical violence against adolescent girls;\(^7\) and only two countries report data on adolescent girls’ lifetime experience of sexual violence.\(^8\)

The countries reporting on these forms of violence do not necessarily overlap, that is, the same country does not always report data on all indicators.

**The burden of childhood violence in South Asia**

The extent of data gaps makes it difficult to form an integrated view of childhood violence. Yet without such a view, it is difficult to stimulate a global conversation about ending violence. Know Violence in Childhood has therefore made efforts to estimate the scale of childhood violence globally and across regions.

Given the limited number of countries for which data are available, a common practice has been to apply the prevalence rate of a country (say Afghanistan) for which data are available to the entire global region to which it belongs (South Asia), in order to arrive at regional estimates of the number of children experiencing violence every year. To improve on this, Know Violence in Childhood used the econometric method of multiple imputation to arrive at national estimates of missing prevalence rates.

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\(^1\) This estimate includes child homicide, violent discipline (or corporal punishment) at the hands of caregivers, peer violence (including bullying and physical fights), and sexual and physical violence experienced by adolescent girls.

\(^2\) See Evidence Highlights 2 in this series. Violence in Childhood: Key Facts.


\(^4\) Number of homicide victims among children aged 0-19 per 100,000 population.

\(^5\) Corporal punishment at home (1-14 years): % of children aged 1-14 who experienced any violent discipline (psychological aggression and/or physical punishment) in the past month.

\(^6\) Bullying: % of children aged 13-15 who reported being bullied at least once in the past couple of months; physical fights: % of children aged 13-15 who reported being in a physical fight one or more times during the past 12 months.

\(^7\) Physical violence against adolescent girls (15-19 years): % of girls aged 15-19 who experienced any physical violence since age 15.

\(^8\) Sexual violence against adolescent girls (15-19 years): % of girls aged 15-19 who ever experienced forced sexual intercourse or any other forced sexual acts (including in childhood).
The picture of childhood violence that emerges is disturbing. Millions of children experience inter-personal violence across all regions of the world. (FIGURE 1)

Figure 1 shows that in South Asia, 831 children per 1000 children aged 1-14 (nearly 83 per cent), faced violent discipline – both physical and psychological – at the hands of their caregivers in 2015. As a proportion, this was lower only to children living in West and Central Africa. Levels of peer violence in school (bullying/physical fights) and physical and sexual violence against adolescent girls were in contrast lower than other regions, though still considerably high (79 per cent for peer violence and 29.4 per cent for violence against adolescent girls). Added to the fact that South Asia has nearly 516 million children of school-going age,⁹ the absolute number of children who might be facing violence in schools is staggering.

Scale of different forms of violence

**Child homicide**: Child homicide rates (0-19 years) are generally low in South Asia when compared to countries in other regions, such as Latin America. The only exceptions to the rule are Afghanistan and Pakistan, which report child homicide rates of 8 and 4 per 100,000 children, respectively, due perhaps to conflict. (FIGURE 2)

**Corporal punishment at home**: The use of violence to discipline children is widespread throughout South Asia, with most children – nearly three out

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**FIGURE 1: Regional burden of violence against children, 2015.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Corporal punishment (1-14 years)</th>
<th>Bullying and physical fights (13-15 years)</th>
<th>Physical and sexual violence against adolescent girls (15-19 years)</th>
<th>Child homicide (0-19 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West and Central Africa</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>960</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern and Southern Africa</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>0.064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>821</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and Eastern Europe/CIS</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>718</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>665</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>0.113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrialized Countries</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Numbers abused per 1,000 children in that age cohort

**FIGURE 2: Child homicide rates (children aged 0-19), 2015.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Child homicide (0-19 years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maldives</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Per 100,000 children

Source: Shiva Kumar and others 2017 for Know Violence in Childhood 2017.
of four in the age group 1-14 years in every country – having experienced violent discipline (psychological aggression and/or physical punishment) in the previous month. This is still lower than countries like Mozambique where violent disciplining is almost universal, but considerably higher than the levels seen in Cuba (37 per cent). (FIGURE 3)

The wide use of corporal punishment at home in the region needs to be read against a cultural context that accepts inculcating in children a ‘fear of the rod’ as a part of child rearing. Administering a ‘reasonable’ degree of violence therefore is normalized and overlooked (even encouraged) in the ‘better interest’ of the child.10

Bullying in schools: The extent of bullying varies between countries, with levels ranging from Bhutan (where about 30 per cent of school-going children aged 13-15 report being bullied in school at least once in the past 2 months) to Bangladesh at the other extreme (where levels of bullying are higher – at about 65 per cent of school going children). These levels are extremely high considering that in countries like Morocco, bullying is almost non-existent. (FIGURE 4)

While there are no significant age differences noted in the propensity of school-going children facing violence, boys are more likely to face physical violence in schools as compared to girls.21 The relatively new phenomenon of cyber bullying,
is also on the rise in South Asia, with India alone reporting more than 500 million internet users, many of them children.\textsuperscript{12,13}

**Physical fights in schools:** The indicator on physical fights among school-going children aged 13-15 follows a more or less similar pattern to bullying, with Bhutan reporting the lowest and Bangladesh the highest rates in the region. Like bullying, however, these levels are considerably higher than those seen in Morocco. (FIGURE 5)

Another form of violence faced by school-going children, on which statistics are available mostly through small area studies, is the punishment meted out to children by teachers. Though usually dismissed as a common cultural practice to punish errant students (mostly boys), corporal punishment is one of the most stated reasons given by children for not wanting to go to school.\textsuperscript{14} Experts working in the child protection and education space in the region argue that school violence as a driver of poor education outcomes needs far greater attention than received – both in terms of dropout rates which remain the highest in the world (for every 100 children who started primary school in 2009, 33 will leave before the last grade), as well as through the impacts

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\textsuperscript{12} Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Kantar IMRB. 2017. *Internet in India 2017*. New Delhi.


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it has on cognitive development, self-esteem and self-efficacy.²⁵

Physical and sexual violence against adolescent girls: The proportion of girls aged 15-19 who experienced physical violence since age 15 is the lowest in Nepal and Maldives, where 1 in 10 girls experience some form of physical violence and the highest in Pakistan and Bangladesh. (FIGURE 6) Sexual violence against girls however follows a different pattern with girls in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan more likely to experience it than say in Maldives. (FIGURE 7)

Overall, while the proportion of adolescent girls reporting sexual violence is low, prevalence appears to increase with age. Interestingly, and although boys and girls both speak about sexual violence in micro studies, it is dismissed as unfathomable for boys. In one of the qualitative discussions carried out by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) as part of their study on school-related gender-based violence in South and South East Asia, a school teacher for instance remarked, "It (sexual violence against boys) does not matter. Raping is not a problem for them." ²⁶

A closer look at the prevalence rates also suggests the need for deeper analysis of the interconnections between different forms of childhood violence. For example, Maldives reports (mostly) low levels of all forms of childhood violence. However, we do not see such consistent patterns across countries. India, for instance, reports relatively low levels of child homicide and sexual violence against girls, but it has amongst the highest rates of corporal punishment at home. Deficiencies in statistical estimation might account for some of these anomalies. But a more nuanced understanding of the cultural context, patterns of social arrangements and norms around child-rearing is needed to better explain differences in more everyday forms of inter-personal violence.

The Violence in Childhood (VIC) Index

Composite indices, like the Human Development Index can help draw public attention to critical concerns of society. The Know Violence in Childhood initiative constructed a Violence in Childhood (VIC) Index to do precisely this. The Index combines available and imputed data on indicators measuring the prevalence of two dimensions of violence: violence against children and violence against women. The inclusion of the latter is in recognition of the harmful effects on children of witnessing violence against women, and reinforces the importance of ending domestic violence as a necessary component of efforts to end violence in childhood. A VIC score of 100 indicates that all children experience violence. Conversely, ending childhood violence requires that the VIC score go down to zero. To do so, a country would have to reduce the prevalence rates of all forms of childhood violence to zero.

Of the 168 countries for which estimates were generated, the VIC Index ranged from a low of

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14.2 for the Czech Republic to a high of 43.9 for Bangladesh. The average score for countries in the South Asia region was 31.7 – lower than only two other regions in the world (West and Central Africa with an average score of 32.1, and East and Southern Africa with an average score of 33.5). The average value of the VIC Index for South Asia was also considerably higher than the average value of the Index for all countries in the world (25.5), implying that the region still has significant work to do to end violence against children. Within South Asia, the worst performer was Bangladesh (a VIC Index score of 43.9), followed by Afghanistan (32.3), Pakistan (32.1) and India (30.3). In comparison, prevalence of violence against women and children was lower in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives as indicated by their VIC Index scores (28.0, 26.5, 25.0, and 26.0, respectively).

**Nature and drivers of violence**

**Deprivation:** There is significant evidence to suggest that income poverty and other forms of deprivation create conditions for violence within the home. Income poverty can “sap parental energy, undermine parental sense of competence, and reduce parental sense of control.”77 Parents may feel unable to meet the basic needs of their children, often blaming themselves for this. They may also withdraw from attending to their children if they are trying to secure an income or are dealing with employment or housing issues.8 Such stresses are likely to be common in South Asian households with significant numbers of people living in poverty.

**Norms around gender:** Countries in South Asia are known for their gender inequities that arise from deeply-rooted patriarchal norms which shape the roles men and women are expected to play in society. Patterns of gender discrimination are reproduced and reinforced in learning environments, including in curricula and textbooks. Rigid notions of masculinity are linked to several forms of violence against children in education settings, and such violence negates the common perception that boys can be perpetrators but not victims of violence. In many cases, children and adolescents (both girls and boys) face physical, sexual and psychological violence when they are perceived as deviating from prescribed gender roles.

**Differences by social groups and individual characteristics:** Evidence also indicates that both hierarchies and inequalities in society as well as individual attributes play a crucial role in driving childhood violence in South Asia, with discrimination around caste, ethnicity, religion and socio-economic status on the one hand and individual characteristics like obesity and disability on the other, being an underlying current across episodes of violence.19

**Cultural taboos:** In societies where teachers are revered and are accorded high social status and standing, children are often reluctant to report acts of school-related violence, including corporal punishment by their teachers, because they fear reprisal and further punishment. Cultural taboos around sexuality and stigma attached to those who have experienced sexual abuse also prevent cases of sexual violence coming to light.

**Normalization of violence:** Certain forms of violence are widely accepted in the region as part of ‘normal’ life. In school settings, for example, violence is often tolerated as a means to enforce discipline or just another element of the rough and tumble of school life. Corporal punishment and other humiliating acts against children are a way for teachers and school staff, and even peers, to establish their authority and power. Accepting attitudes towards violence, combined with the authoritarian structure of schools, allow violence in schools to often go unreported.

**Conflict and natural disasters:** The region has been prone both to armed conflicts as well as natural disasters, which put children at greater risk of violence, including sexual violence, serious injury or even death.

**Policy frameworks, laws and programmes**

Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a strategic platform to address issues of childhood violence by encouraging synergies and partnerships across sectors. In addition, the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) provides a framework to address violence against children, particularly in schools, within the larger framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

On their part, individual countries in the region have put in place legal frameworks to restrict the use of forms of violence. The Education Act (2008)


in Afghanistan, for example, bans all forms of violence in schools. India’s Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, prohibits ‘physical punishment’ and ‘mental harassment’, and makes it a punishable offence. The new Constitution of Nepal, promulgated in September 2015, guarantees schools as violence-free sites for education. However, awareness about these laws is low and even though penalties have been prescribed, the laws do not necessarily align with social norms which condone punishment.

Sexual violence against adolescent girls, similarly, has attracted attention. India increased its age of consent to 18 years with its apex court ruling recently, that marital sex with a child bride that is girls married below the age of 18 amounts to rape. But activists contend that the ruling is difficult to enforce, with many young brides not having the courage to file a case against their partner/husband. Finally, there are no laws to prevent corporal punishment at home, which is largely considered to be the exercise of personal judgement relating to how children are disciplined.

Besides the changes attempted through laws, there have been attempts to change attitudes towards the use of punishment through changes in pedagogy, curriculum and by investing in teacher training and capacity building. However, these approaches are yet to be mainstreamed and are more likely to have been led by non-government actors, such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh, Save the Children in Afghanistan and Blue Veins in Pakistan (which works with religious leaders – ‘Imams’ – to end violence against children). Civil society organizations have also been instrumental in leading capacity development programmes around violence prevention – by promoting social values such as kindness and empathy; by emphasizing violence as one of the key dimensions of women and children’s well-being that impedes human development; and by engaging families, communities, teachers and children themselves to question norms and stereotypes (such as those around gender) which lead to violence.

In addition to legal frameworks, programmes and projects aimed at prevention and Child Helplines operate in many countries in the region, responding to victims’ calls and providing emergency support. However, their outreach is not universal. Moreover, children are either not aware of such helplines, or do not feel empowered enough to report an incident of violence for fear of stigma, retaliation and rebuke. To address this issue, some countries in the region have attempted to empower children to report on violence and talk about issues related to violence, for example, through child clubs in Bangladesh or the Children’s Parliament in Bhutan.

Despite all of these innovations, there remains a large gap in mainstreaming violence against children in sector-wide policy and planning discourses. Adequate training and support to teachers, parents and communities, coupled with children’s own empowerment to report can potentially help change norms and behaviours around forms of violence such as corporal punishment. But these need to be viewed against the ground reality that the South Asian context presents – of large numbers of parents who are under economic stress and for whom violence is an easy tool to discipline their wards, and millions of teachers who work in remote, tiring conditions and take punishment as almost a given practice.

### Conclusion

Comprehensive and holistic violence prevention and protection policies can help address childhood violence in South Asia. These policies need to have a strong focus on prevention and need to be an integral part of national child protection systems strengthening.

Strengthening the capacities of caregivers both within the family as well as in services and institutions where children spend time is at the heart of violence-prevention. This includes providing training and ongoing support to ensure that they function effectively as the first port of call for children, and refrain from using harsh discipline and abuse in their own interactions with children.

Violence-prevention is a cross-sectoral and integrated approach, bridging sectors such as child protection, social welfare, education, health, justice, and social protection. Policies and programmes should target both physical and non-physical forms of violence including harassment and the new threat of technology-based violence, and should be gender-sensitive addressing specific vulnerabilities of boys and girls as well as the unequal power balance arising because of social markers and individual attributes.

Finally, systems of measuring prevalence and impact of violence, scaling up evidence-based interventions and strengthening accountability structures are fundamental to addressing childhood violence. Without evidence-based monitoring and accountability, prevention of childhood violence cannot be mainstreamed in cross-sectoral planning and policy discourse.

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[See for instance the work of Advocating the Rights of Children (ARC) NGO in Maldives.](http://www.arc.org.mv/).
[See for instance the work of Breakthrough in India.](https://inbreakthrough.tv/).

[See for instance ICRW’s Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS).](https://www.icrw.org/asia/).
Every day millions of boys and girls around the world experience fear and violence – physical, emotional or sexual. This need not happen. Violence in childhood is preventable – through concerted and collective action that addresses the root causes of violence and lays firm foundations for both sustainable development and more peaceful societies.

To fulfill the commitments to ending all forms of violence that are enshrined in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, states and societies must analyze the causes of childhood violence, and invest in preventing violence against women and children.

Know Violence in Childhood is a learning initiative dedicated to informing and supporting a global movement to end violence in childhood. Established in 2014 for a three-year period, the Initiative analyzed existing data, commissioned new research and synthesized knowledge on the causes and consequences of childhood violence worldwide. Its work highlights the impact of childhood violence on individuals, families, communities and societies, expands the research base on this global crisis and promotes evidence-based strategies to prevent violence.

The full report and related outputs are available at: www.knowviolenceinchildhood.org