

A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
POLICY AREA: People

Focus on Children: Recommendations from Religious Actors
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Abstract

Protecting children has long featured on many global agendas, perhaps best exemplified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international UN treaty, that marks its 30th anniversary in 2019. However, many challenges stand in the way of full acceptance and implementation of basic principles involved and some topics loom large in contemporary realities. These include trafficking of children, the large presence and special perils facing children in refugee and migrant situations, stubbornly persisting child labor, child marriage, and threats linked to digital media, as well as many other forms of violence. Tragically, abuses and violence occur within places that are supposed to be the safest for children, and violence is most often perpetrated by those adults that children trust the most and that are closest to them. Emotional, physical and/or sexual violence affect more than one billion children around the world. The global direct and indirect costs of violence against children represents 8 percent of global GDP, equivalent to US\$7 trillion¹. With conflict or displacement causing such harm, immediate and comprehensive interventions are needed, matching the gravity of the challenge..

Children and young people’s voices are amplified today and their sense of urgency is a cogent challenge to world leaders, religious and non-religious alike. Children, often portrayed as helpless victims, are actively involved in their communities as agents in their own right and despite significant barriers to increased participation are engaged in issues directly affecting them.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) point the way to specific areas for priority attention, including SDG 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. Beyond protection from harm, fostering safe and dignified development of the child is key to the future of the global economy. Children grapple with the ethical questions of technological advancement, and meeting the world’s greatest challenges including climate change.

A sharp focus on children is enshrined in the teachings of widely diverse religious and spiritual teachings. All religious traditions affirm the dignity of each child and the sacred principle of care of the most vulnerable. Religious and interreligious networks and communities have long worked to provide shelter and education for children, and find ways to provide social and emotional support and protection to many of those hardest to reach. Religious actors and experts can, with well-tuned capacity, provide wisdom and help foster partnerships between children’s rights activists and local communities. The

¹ Perezniето, Paola et. al, “The costs and economic impact of violence against children,” Child Fund Alliance, 2014, <http://childfundalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ODI-Policy-Brief.-The-cost-and-economic-impact-of-violence-against-children.pdf>

Arigatou International Global Network of Religious for Children exemplifies the potential power of a global religious alliance that focuses on the wellbeing of children.

There are too many gaps in knowledge and partnership in what should surely be a priority common effort. Children belong centrally on the G20 agenda, which cannot be achieved without priority attention and action to address children's issues.

This brief highlights recommendations to integrate Children's Rights with the key themes and central topics of the 2019 G20 Summit, from the perspective of religious actors deeply imbedded in the field.

The Challenge

Violence against children takes many forms, undermining the rights of over 1 billion children worldwide. One billion children around the world are exposed to various forms of physical and sexual violence; close to 300 million (3 in 4) children aged 2 to 4 worldwide experience violent discipline by their caregivers on a regular basis; 250 million (around 6 in 10) are punished by physical means; and every 7 minutes, somewhere in the world, an adolescent is killed by an act of violence. In 2015 alone, violence took the lives of around 82,000 adolescents worldwide.²

The root causes of violence against children are complex and varied. They include socio-economic causes such as poverty and social exclusion, injustice and exploitation, and other deeply rooted political, cultural, and familial factors. Protecting the freedom, dignity, and rights of all children is a challenge that requires integrated strategies of poverty relief, protection of refugees, anti-trafficking efforts, and a sharp focus on education.

Violence perpetuated against children often differs significantly for boys and girls. The global homicide rate is four times higher among adolescent boys than girls and they are more likely to become child soldiers. However, evidence suggests that girls are generally more vulnerable to certain forms of sexual victimization. Worldwide, around 15 million adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have experienced forced sex in their lifetime.³ Child marriage is also a widespread form of abuse, and religion often plays a complex role.⁴

² "A Familiar Face – Violence against Children and Adolescents." UNICEF. November 2017. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-familiar-face/>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ For more on the challenges and opportunities for working with religious leaders on ending child marriage see: Elisabet Le Roux and Selina Palm, "What lies beneath? Tackling the roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage," Girls Not Brides, 2018, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FINAL-Religious-leaders-report-High-Res.pdf>; Katherine Marshall, "Religious Challenges and Child Marriage, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2018, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/religious-challenges-and-child-marriage>; "Working with Religious Leaders to Address Child Marriage," Girls Not Brides, 2019, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/working-with-religious-leaders-to-address-child-marriage/>

Digital abuse, including cyber bullying, online child sexual abuse, dark web transactions and currencies that make it easier to conceal trafficking, and other illegal activities that harm children, must be confronted as a perversion of technological advancement. One in eight children have been bullied online via social media. Whether perpetrated by a family/community member or a stranger, online or in person, all forms of abuse of children undermine their self-worth and ability to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually, and socially in a healthy environment.

No society is without some level of violence against children, and overall legal protections remain weak. Adolescent homicides occur most frequently in Latin America and the Caribbean, while conflicts or civil insurrections kill more adolescents in the Middle East and North Africa than in all other regions combined. The United States faces the highest rate of school shootings. Only 54 countries have adopted legislation that fully prohibits corporal punishment in all settings, including the homes, 732 million (1 in 2) school-age children between 6 and 17 years live in countries where corporal punishment at school is not fully prohibited; and in 33 States, child offenders may be sentenced to corporal punishment under criminal, religious and/or traditional law. Children also are vulnerable to trafficking, forced labor, recruitment as soldiers, and abuses of refugees that occur most often where corruption is rampant and legislation is weak.

The common gap between important rhetorical commitments and the lived experiences of many children demands political will for action. Global commitments to address violence against children are at an all-time high, particularly with the integration of relevant targets into the SDGs. Implementation, monitoring, and improving the policies and programs that result from these commitments should engage partnerships with all relevant actors including children and their families, schools, and religious communities/actors.

Religious Dimensions

The shared imperative to protect children links religious traditions in significant ways. There is wide variety in how this principle translates practically, with implications for educational decisions and authority structures. Religion at times has and is still misused to legitimize, justify, and even perpetuate violence against children. Nevertheless, there also exists an intra- and inter-religious will towards action on protecting children against various forms of abuse, hardship, and violence. In recent years, momentum has built to capitalize on the social capital vested in religious communities to advocate and take action to end violence against children. Local faith groups are often at the forefront of providing shelter and education for children facing various forms of hardships. Partnerships that provide models of success are also well established and UNICEF, for example, works with religious communities across the globe.⁶ However, many initiatives

⁵ “Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children,” Global Report, 2018, <http://endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/global/Global-report-2018-spreads.pdf>

⁶ “Sharing common goals: UNICEF, faith-based organizations and children,” UNICEF, 2019 https://www.unicef.org/media/media_4537.html

at local community level are informal and lack robust documentation and evidence, which results in lessons learned often being lost.

The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), an interfaith network of organizations and individuals specifically dedicated to securing the rights and well-being of children worldwide, exemplifies both commitment and potential for common action. In 2016-2017, grassroots efforts in more than 43 countries around the world were inspired by diverse faith practices and a strong belief that “every child is priceless in dignity and deserves to grow up safe and sound.”⁷ The focus on ethics education to foster interfaith and intercultural learning translates broad principles of living together into practical instruments and have helped to create safe learning spaces for children, where they are empowered and free to express their religious beliefs, and capacities to learn from and respect other children from different cultures and beliefs.

Many additional religious and interfaith organizations work collectively and respectively to prevent violence against children and protect their wellbeing. Among other examples, the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities⁸ has convened global faith leaders specifically to focus on the dignity of children online, a concern that was not present when the CRC was first ratified, but that is now paramount; and World Vision, a Christian faith organization, global in scope, places child protection and wellbeing at the center of their agenda.⁹

Translating the Rights of the Child into on-the-ground realities demands collaborative work by global leaders in partnership with communities, including religious actors, that shape the context in which children are raised. Religious communities have a special obligation to work to ensure that religious spaces are safe for all children, welcoming them with empathy and respect, and working to address violence against them. This means supporting the elimination of harmful practices inflicted on children, including publicly identifying and challenging problematic religious justifications for such practices whenever they occur, and educating leaders and communities about the different forms of violence against children. The rights of parents to freedom of religion or belief, including their rights to educate their children according to their own conviction, should be respected, respecting the child as a rights holder from early on. The infringement on a child’s right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) poses challenges, particularly when linked with other abuses, such as forced marriage. Religious actors can provide guidance on how education and advocacy for the rights of children can be undertaken in ways that are culturally and religious sensitive.

Religious communities play a critical role in morally, spiritually, and practically supporting and shaping families and other caregivers in child upbringing. Their assets can be harnessed. Liabilities need to be recognized and addressed, for example patterns

⁷ “GNRC Annual Report 2016/2017: Securing a Better Future for Children,” 2017, <https://gnrc.net/images/zdocs/GNRC-Annual-Report-16-17-Singles-25-04-17.pdf>

⁸ <https://iafsc.org/>

⁹ <https://www.wvi.org/publication/our-progress-child-well-being>

that can silence children. Religious leaders are well positioned to advocate for violence-free and healthy child rearing practices in their communities. Their focus on the ethical aspects of child upbringing, including non-violent approaches to parenting and promoting the spiritual development of children, can make crucial contributions to creating peaceful and harmonious families and communities, helping to break vicious cycles whereby violence is transmitted between generations, and challenging and reinterpreting religious justifications often given in multiple faiths to justify forms of violent parenting or adult/child interactions. Education (and parenting) policies that create learning and disciplinary environments free from violence and interfaith learning in schools and/or local communities to promote social coexistence and peaceful and inclusive societies offer particular promise.

Recommendations

G20 leaders should focus explicit attention on children's rights and protection, with a robust commitment to translating promises and principles into practice. This applies with special force to implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and optional protocols. New and emerging challenges facing children, including the impact of new information and communication technology, impacts of extremism on children, and refugee and migrant situations, deserve special attention.

Interfaith initiatives involving common work by to religious communities and child protection experts to address violence against children in all its dimensions deserve G20 attention and support. Such initiatives can challenge identified social and cultural norms and beliefs that condone and justify violence against children.

Development actors should recognize and treat faith communities as key partners in child protection and actively integrate faith communities into all levels of child protection. Religious leaders can play key roles in breaking the silence on ending violence against children, recognizing and referring cases of child abuse and educating their communities around prevention. Faith assets are often overlooked or excluded, but many faith communities contribute positively to ending child violence at multiple levels. Faith communities creatively harness religious mandates around care and protection of children in faith traditions to mobilize faith communities spiritually. Capacity building of faith communities is a critical step in achieving child protection aims, with consultative co-creative way of working with faith communities to counter instrumentalization and assure sustainable multi-sectoral partnerships that work for children. Partnering with faith communities can bridge gaps between high level policies and grassroots practice, and between senior faith leaders and local faith communities as well as across different faiths. Robust documentation of effective mechanisms of partnership and engagement with faith communities for ending violence against children should be supported in order to share evidence generated.

Religious communities and leaders should commit themselves to strengthening their advocacy and action for children. A positive step would be a common commitment to ending child marriage. Communities need to take a contextual approach to understanding

child violence realities in their own community so that the agendas are not perceived to have been identified and imposed from outside. Faith leaders should be held accountable for child abuse to the fullest extent of the law and congregations should be enabled to hold those leaders accountable. Faith communities can be better equipped overall to reflect critically on indirect ways in which their beliefs and traditions will need to be reinterpreted in the light of child protection.

Child participation in the work of local faith communities and in policy implementation can enrich approaches at many levels. Child centered approaches are essential. Linking child participation and protection improves child social status, enables the voices of children to be part of the changes needed, and avoids a passive victim lens. Heeding the cry of youth voices and movements is essential to achieving every SDG and item on G20 agendas, including but not limited to those centered specifically on ending violence against children. Without addressing issues for children, 2030 goals are unlikely to be achieved.

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