

The silence we choose to break together and
the dignity we commit to uphold for every child!

Prayer and Reflection by Dr. Kezevino Aram

President, Shanti Ashram &
International Center for Child and Public Health

International Symposium on Faith and Flourishing in the Face of
Childhood Sexual Abuse:
Strategies for Prevention and Healing

I join the children from India in their prayers and in their call

to move from darkness to light

to become that instrument of peace, so that we can ensure where there is pain, healing is possible

to ever be reminded that when we come together in the presence of the wise, the committed, we give ourselves a real chance to advance the common good...Sangam Sharanam Gachami!

The human face of the COVID 19 Pandemic: My mind runs back to a moment during the first phase of the absolute lockdown during the COVID 19 Pandemic, when a young mother walked 6 kilometers from Madukkarai to Shanti Ashram. In the absence of public transport, she walked all the way in the scorching heat for only one reason, to ensure that her daughter's name was included in the Bala Shanti Educational Scholarship applicant list. After being positively assured by one of our Program Heads, she sat down quietly. And in a minute, she poured her heart out again – *"I want my daughter to have a life different than me, I want her to study, I want her to play, I want her to have a childhood that is free of violence"* and she paused only after concluding, *"my child deserves respect, nothing more, nothing less!"*. This encounter has stayed with me because this cry is universal, it is the cry of every mother, of every father, of every human being wanting a life of dignity and meaning for children, all our children. With the COVID-19 dashboard reporting 131 million people testing positive worldwide, and 12.5 million testing positive in India, my country, we know our ears have to be to open to the ground reality and our hands ready to work actively for our children.

Faith and Children: My faith has always reminded me that every child houses the divine. In their presence, we celebrate God's presence, of the all-embracing love that my Ishta Devathai has blessed me and every human being with. It is therefore my ethical obligation, my Dharma, to care for every child, listen to children with respect and speak out when their trust is breached, their dignity scarred.

And yet when I look around, I see that the reality of our children is far from the ideal; millions of children experience violence firsthand, their introduction to life is one of pain and the examples they see upfront are not the ones they can learn from. But we also know that our faith traditions and scriptures speak to us of human frailness, they teach us to reflect, to change and to reform so that we can grow closer to the very essence of our being, the core of our dharma, our values.

The compounding effect of disease, deprivation and dehumanization of children by sexual violence is unfolding right in front of our eyes, even as 1.5 billion children, our children, are affected worldwide.

Based on data from the Crimes Against Children Research Center, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys is a victim of child sexual abuse; This is unacceptable!

When self-report studies show that 20% of adult females and 5-10% of adult males recall a childhood sexual assault or sexual abuse incident, we have to pause and think deeply about what kind of childhood we are giving our children, and what is the value system, the ecosystem that adults have co-created – it is not something we are proud of, and one that should haunt our conscience!

We must choose to break the silence together and how! We must choose to break the silence, not in whispers, not apologetically, not individually but together, driven by the suffering our children experience, often leading to irreversible damage. The evidence that the scientific community presents to us is of a pandemic of sexual violence and the moral imperative, the dharma, demands of us to speak the truth and act together, together for our children.

When one reads the definition of child sexual violence by the World Health Organization that states.... Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children who are – by virtue of their age or stage of development – in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim, one shudders!

Every year, millions of girls and boys around the world face sexual abuse and exploitation. Sexual violence occurs everywhere – in every country and across all segments of society. A child may be subjected to sexual abuse or exploitation at home, at school or in their community. The widespread use of digital technologies can also put children our children at risk.

That we as a human family break the trust of so many children, especially in the years their bodies, their minds and their world views are being shaped is unacceptable!

We can do better!

We must own up and acknowledge our wrong doings as leaders and members of our community, we must ask for pardon. We can and must stand together to prevent sexual violence, to bring justice to the children who have suffered, and we must commit ourselves to break the silence, track the trail of sexual exploitation of children, hold the perpetrators accountable and find new global standards of protection and care to uphold the dignity of every child, everywhere - in our homes and across society.

The power of the collective is for us to seize - different faiths must come together for common action to:

break the silence on child sexual violence together and

uphold the dignity of EVERY CHILD!

Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu!