

Will we ever be able to comprehend the impact of sexual abuse on a child?

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A call to understand deeper the multifaceted burden of  
child sexual abuse on children

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



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# Will we ever be able to comprehend the impact of Sexual Abuse on a CHILD?

A call to understand deeper the multifaceted burden of child sexual abuse on children

- The question and the answer
- The evidence that shapes our understanding
- The living testimonies of children that demand of us a response
- An idea to consider, and a global response to co-construct for our children

## Will we ever be able to comprehend the impact of Sexual Abuse on a CHILD?

The honest answer is NO. Millions of children speak or continue to suffer in silence for years as a result of the pain, the agony, the violation, the dehumanization that they have experienced at the hands of their perpetrators. It might never be possible for any of us to fully comprehend the impact of sexual abuse on a child, no matter what expertise we possess or leadership role we play. It is with this acknowledgement and humility I present my reflection.

### The evidence that shapes our understanding:

Although sexual violence occurs everywhere, risks surge in emergency contexts. During armed conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies, women and children are especially vulnerable to sexual violence – including conflict-related sexual violence, intimate partner violence and trafficking for sexual exploitation – as well as other forms of gender-based violence, says UNICEF. We are in the midst of one such crisis, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Almost 1.5 billion children have been affected world-wide. In my own country, and around the world, the most vulnerable carry the heaviest load of deprivation, exploitation and abuse.

I am grateful that we have come together in this time of unprecedented crisis, the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has affected over 130 million brothers and sisters around the world. This willingness to dialogue, to study the evidence, to challenge ourselves, our governments and our communities, to do better for our children is something I value. I hope our work will find ways to influence policy and ways to challenge societal norms that helps in perpetuating this pandemic of child sexual violence.

Just like the non-discriminatory nature of the Corona Virus, this human contagion combining violence, sexual violation and abuse too has a virulent nature. The only difference is that this contagion can be actively modified by commitment, legal compliance and community engagement.

WHO states that at least 120 million girls under the age of 20, about 1 in 10, have been forced to engage in sex or perform other sexual acts, although the actual figure is likely much higher. Roughly 90% of adolescent girls who report forced sex say that their first perpetrator was someone they knew, usually a boyfriend or a husband. But many victims of sexual violence, including millions of boys, never tell anyone.

A recent study from India has shown a spike in reporting of child sexual abuse during the initial lockdown brought about due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The national children's helpline, CHILDLINE, received 92,000 calls on child abuse and violence in just 11 days.

This data is staggering. This cannot be the world we offer to our children. Each statistic is a child, and we must acknowledge and humanise these numbers if we are to create policies that care for the holistic healing of children who have been victims of abuse.



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ARIGATOU  
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## **The living testimonies of children that demand of us a response:**

*We all know that sexual violence knows no boundaries. It occurs in every country, across all parts of society.*

We also know child sexual violence results in severe physical, psychological and social harm.

There is an expanding body of evidence, personal sharing, data, analysis, literature and reflections on this issue. I encourage you to read it, understand the implications and most importantly identify what you can do individually and collectively to address this issue.

In particular I would invite you to read the stories and experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse themselves. It allows us to dwell on the human dimension of this shared problem. Over the past decades interacting with survivors of child sexual abuse, I have realized that the scars are deep, the silence speaks of the continuing social and structural barriers that silence them rather than help them seek healing and support. I have also realized that their entire childhood is lost in this suffering and most of their adult life is consumed too.

A young woman, ready to enter the second decade of her life came quietly to me one evening during this COVID-19 pandemic. I have known her since early childhood, but on this particular evening she came to me to speak of the sexual abuse she had suffered in the hands of the men, 3 men to be precise, in her apartment complex. She remembered the moment of sexual abuse vividly and the names of the men clearly, and she, like many other, decided not to speak out as she felt it would pain her parents, whom she loves very much. I did not write my usual prescription after hearing the child's problem, as I normally do as a trained child health practitioner. I sat quietly by her side that evening wanting to understand her pain, to think of her and to try and comprehend the impact this abuse has had, and continues to have, on this young woman.

While I continue to follow her, and together find a way forward with dialogue, counseling and healing, my mind ever so often wants to find ways beyond the macro-strategies we are developing, to directly connect with the heart of a child. Will this young girl, almost a young woman now, ever forgive us adults for violating her dignity, for breaching her trust, for not providing an environment where she can speak up because she fears that someone else will be hurt?

May we never forget that every child has a name, a story, a body, a being. And while we may never affect the lives of every child violated, to that one child, to a community of children, we the leaders of our communities may just be that living link between hope and despair, policy and practice, life or death. The story of a single child is enough for me to be a willing member of this coalition of informed, able and committed global institutions.

This is why we at Shanti Ashram continue to do what we do, working to improve the lives of over 70,000 vulnerable children, and this is why I partner with faith inspired institutions and leaders through Arigatou International to continue that call to end violence against children. I am indeed encouraged by what we have so far achieved down the road and around the world.

Thank you for allowing me to speak from the depth of my heart, because on this topic, as a responsible leader, I cannot speak from my mind alone. I am in some ways living in this effort the call that Mahatma Gandhi gave at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and so relevant even today, 'Faith does not admit of speaking alone, it has to be lived.....it has to be lived in the service of others!'



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## **An idea to consider and a global response to co-construct for our children**

Our colleagues at UNICEF remind us that while sexual violence is fundamentally a crime of power, it is increasingly driven by economic motives. The internet has opened a rapidly growing global market for the production, distribution and consumption of content depicting and pertaining to the sexual abuse of children. When online, children may be susceptible to sexual coercion and in-contact sexual abuse by offenders who attempt to extort them for content and financial gain. The harmful norms that perpetuate sexual violence take a heavy toll on families and communities too. Most children who face sexual abuse experience other kinds of violence. And as abuse and exploitation become entrenched, progress towards development and peace can stall – with consequences for entire societies.

In the already well-articulated global strategy to address child sexual violence, our effort really must be in effective implementation, and of how to build a conducive environment – how to challenge existing social norms that perpetuate child sexual violence. Changing social norms requires a harmonization of the law, of morality and of culture. This is where faith-based organisations must play a key role, one that is complementary to the legal system, and one that promotes the moral and cultural dimensions of the rejection of violence against children.

**An idea therefore I would like you to consider in the prevention of child sexual abuse** and one that is in some ways natural to faith communities - is for us to use our congregations as learning spaces. Since these spaces are already inter-generational in nature, we might have a vantage point in embedding current information on child sexual abuse, its cause and its consequence, but most importantly, in re-orienting the ways we lead our dialogue, to have young people and survivors lead the dialogue on this important issue. This will not only help us to be creative, but also in partnership break the silence, and model how to create more open spaces for sharing and healing.

**A global response to co-construct for our children** must address the limited care and support infrastructure we currently have for affected children. This can be from overnight shelters, to short stay homes, to counseling and health services, to education, vocational training and gainful livelihood options. Faith communities historically have these assets well positioned and developed locally. In our efforts to concretely create strength and expand the care and support infrastructure, we have much to gain by forging newly imagined public-private partnership. This will necessitate growing pains, accommodation of mutual interest, but collectively our children will benefit by our coming together. We have first-hand experience in doing so at Arigatou International's Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC). We will be happy to share these models and experiences with you.

Together, I am certain that inspired by our Faith, we can do something for our CHILDREN in the Face of Childhood Sexual Abuse and create Strategies for Prevention and Healing.

**We may never be able to fully comprehend the impact of Sexual Abuse on a CHILD.** But we still present to them a collective, a sincere attempt and an informed course of action where the dignity and the flourishing of EVERY CHILD is made central to our deliberations and efforts. As the Learning to Live Together resource says, 'Every child is a promise, a sacred gift, a living sign of the future. The challenge before us is therefore how to empower children and enhance their innate ability for hopeful and positive living'.

So let us come together, brothers and sisters, to fulfil our moral obligation, through support and healing, to uphold the dignity of every child.



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