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⚡ Renowned Buddhist dhamma orator Ven. Nadagamuwe Vijaya Maithri departs at 73

⚡ Only just



## Child abuse incidents reported in the media in June 2023: Negligence by school caregivers notable

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This information is the result of the aggregation and verification of media reported cases of violence against children in June, 2023.

Throughout June, in Sri Lanka, 78 incidents of child abuse cases were reported in the media, impacting a total of 80 child victims. Among the victims, 58% were female and 37% were male. Out of the abusers, 40% were individuals known to the child but not related to them, while 27% were strangers to the child's family.

The Kalutara District reported the highest rate of child abuse, accounting for 13% of the cases and affecting 10 child victims. The Gampaha and Colombo Districts followed closely, with each representing 10% of the cases and impacting a total of 18 children. Sexual abuse remained the most prevalent form of abuse reported in the media for the sixth consecutive month, comprising 35% of the reported cases. Negligence and physical abuse each accounted for 22% of the incidents.

A concerning trend is the ongoing negligence exhibited by school caregivers, which has persisted for the past three months. Two incidents resulted in approximately 60 students being hospitalised due to food poisoning, raising questions about the safety and well-being of children in educational settings. Additionally, three mothers abandoned their children for various reasons, with two cases involving newborns. In a separate issue, the authorities arrested five perpetrators in different districts with significant quantities of various drugs. It appears that these individuals intended to sell these drugs to school children.

Among the 78 reported incidents, sexual abuse stands out as the most prevalent form, accounting for over a third with 27 cases. Acts of negligence and physical abuse, each 17 cases, contribute significantly to the overall picture of abuse, constituting 44% of the reported cases. There has been a decrease in the reported cases involving abductions, incidents of children going missing and abandonment compared to the previous month (May), with only two cases each.

A total of 80 child victims have been reported during June. There have been 27 victims accounting for 34% of the sexual abuse cases. This is a decrease from the previous month's sexual abuse reporting which was at 54%. There is a rise in physical abuse and negligence causing 21% and 25% child victims, respectively. There have been five incidents where drug abusers have been caught by the authorities in which the victims were however not identified. It is important to acknowledge that not all reported cases had a specified child victim. Some incidents involved the arrests of drug sellers and allegations against teachers who generally punished children. These

cases, which lack exact victim related data, have not been included in the specific data provided. Additionally, there were cases of mass food poisoning that were considered as special cases and not included in the aforementioned data. These incidents of food poisoning, affecting a large number of children, require particular attention due to the potential harm and negligence involved.

Forty-six of the victims were female children, constituting over half of the total number of victims, which accounts for 58%. The remaining 42% comprised of 30 male children who experienced abuse, along with four victims whose genders were not specified. Among the female children, sexual abuse was the most prevalent form of abuse, affecting 21 children. Among the male victims, physical abuse was found to be the most common form of abuse, with 12 children enduring such assaults.

Physical abuse has emerged as the most prevalent form of abuse among teenagers, deviating from the more commonly seen trend of sexual abuse. Children between the ages of 11 and 14 years constitute 24% of the victims, with 19 children affected. Children aged six to 10 years account for 18% of the victims, experiencing sexual abuse as the primary form of harm. Children aged two to five years make up 11% of the victims, with nine children affected, while infants aged zero to one year, represent 6% of the total victims. In both of these age groups, negligence is the most prevalent form of abuse that they are subjected to.

The Kalutara District had the highest number of incidents, with approximately 13% of the reported cases, impacting 10 victims. The Colombo and Gampaha Districts accounted for 11% each of the reported cases. We observed a lower number of reported incidents in the Districts of Ampara, Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Ratnapura, Batticaloa, and Kegalle. In June, there have been zero reported incidents in the Districts of Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Vavuniya, and Kilinochchi.

A total of 78 cases of child abuse were reported, involving 116 perpetrators. Among these perpetrators, 40% were individuals known to the child, while 12% were identified as relatives. It is concerning to note that the majority of the abusers continue to be a part of the victim's immediate social circle. Additionally, 27% of the perpetrators were strangers to the child, while in 21% of the reported cases, the perpetrators remained unidentified.

Upon immediate examination, it is evident that the number of sexual abuse cases during May demands immediate attention. Notably, two high profile incidents captured public attention. The incidents have garnered increased media coverage, shedding light on the issue of sexual exploitation. Tragically, a 16-year-old school girl resorted to a desperate act, losing her life after jumping out of a third floor window near a motel and a rail line. Additionally, a tuition master exploited the trust placed in him, sexually abusing over 12 schoolgirls who were his students. These incidents received extensive media coverage, prompting the President, who also serves as the Minister of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, Ranil Wickremesinghe to address the matter. His response emphasised the need for stronger legislation to safeguard the well-being of children. The heightened awareness and public outcry generated by these high profile cases likely contributed to the significant increase in reported instances of sexual exploitation in May.

With regard to accidents involving children, 23 accidents were reported in the media involving 43 children in June.

In terms of the 20 child deaths that were reported, nine lives were lost in road accidents and eight victims of drowning, which account for the highest forms of deaths by accident. The remaining three deaths were caused by home accidents. A total of 13 students were injured in a collision between a school bus and private bus. This accounted for the highest number of children affected in a single accident.

Concerning unusual cases, instances of school children being targeted to sell drugs to, children dying due to guns misfiring, parents abducting children owing to love affairs involving the children, and mothers abandoning their children, were reported. In June, the Police apprehended five perpetrators who were actively targeting school children, attempting to sell them drugs. These individuals were found in possession of significant quantities of various drugs. Two incidents involving firearms resulted in the deaths of two children. Both occurrences exhibited signs of negligence, as the children were handling the guns, leading to fatal misfires. Two cases of abductions occurred due to parental intervention in high school love affairs. These parents, driven by misguided motivations, resorted to abducting the male counterpart of the couple, sometimes with the assistance of acquaintances. The child was then threatened to

break off the affair. In three separate cases, mothers abandoned their children, leaving four innocent lives in a state of vulnerability. Two of these cases involved the abandonment of newborns.

There were also more cases of mass food poisoning. We observed two more incidents of mass food poisoning, which is a trend continuing since April, 2023. Without adequate laws regarding food safety procedures, school children fall victim to abuse through negligence. With reports of 60 children affected in June, 40 children in May and 40 more in April, it is evident that comprehensive reforms in food safety policies are essential in order to prevent these recurring instances of abuse and to protect our children's well-being.

(PEaCE/ ECPAT Sri Lanka - Protecting Environment and Children Everywhere / End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism Sri Lanka, is a non-Governmental organisation focused on child protection by way of ending the sexual abuse and exploitation of children.)

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*The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of this publication.*

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