

Right to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

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A project story by PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka

A Nationwide Programme for Child Protection

For the past two and a half years, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka implemented a comprehensive project to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, both offline and online. Through the KIOS-supported project “**Right to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation**”, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka led a coordinated, multi-sector effort that reached tens of thousands of people, strengthened essential public institutions, and provided direct support to survivors in their search for justice. Implemented across a challenging national landscape marked by economic instability, political transition, and rising reports of violence against children, the project not only delivered strong results but also left behind a lasting legacy of capacity, awareness, and protection.

A Transformative Journey in a Time of Crisis

The period between 2023 and mid-2025 was turbulent for Sri Lanka. Families struggled through an economic downturn, government institutions faced frequent staff transfers, and election-related disruptions created uncertainties in programme delivery. At the same time, reports of violence against children, especially sexual abuse and online violence, were increasing at an alarming pace. Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) has become one of the most pressing threats to children’s safety.

In this context, the project emerged as a strong, timely response. Despite the disruptions, PEaCE adapted quickly, revised programme plans, strengthened collaborations with local authorities, and ensured that activities reached the communities that needed them most. This flexibility proved to be a key factor in the project’s success.

Reaching More Than 18,500 People Nationwide

The project’s comprehensive approach engaged **18,528 Sri Lankans** across prevention, capacity-building, and access-to-justice interventions. Children, parents, teachers, lawyers, police officers, government officials, and community leaders all became part of a growing network of protection.

Empowering Students – The Heart of the Change

A major emphasis was placed on schoolchildren, who are often the most vulnerable yet least informed.

Through **77 school-based awareness programmes** in 11 high-risk districts, **12,901 students** were educated on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and OCSEA.

Sessions were delivered in Sinhala and Tamil languages, creating safe spaces for children to learn, ask questions, and disclose concerns. Teachers reported a visible improvement in children's confidence to seek help, bridging a critical gap left by the absence of structured sex education in Sri Lanka.

Strengthening Parents and Communities

Child protection begins at home, and parents repeatedly expressed that they lacked the knowledge to guide their children, especially in digital environments.

Through **31 specialised sessions**, **2,624 parents** and **404 community leaders** gained practical skills to monitor online behaviour, handle disclosures, and report abuse effectively. Public campaigns held in Kurunegala, Kolonnawa, and Kalutara mobilised thousands, turning child protection into a community-wide responsibility. These colourful events, featuring street walks, dramas, and child-led messages, helped shift public attitudes and brought the issue into the open.

Building Stronger Institutions and Skilled Duty Bearers

One of the project's most significant achievements was strengthening Sri Lanka's child-protection infrastructure.

Police: Improving Digital-Forensic and Trauma-Informed Response

Two major police training programmes equipped **78 officers** from the Children and Women Bureau with essential skills to investigate OCSEA, handle digital evidence, and conduct victim-sensitive interviews. For many officers, this was their first specialised exposure to the evolving landscape of technology-facilitated abuse.

Legal Sector: Expanding Child-Sensitive Representation

A total of **252 lawyers** across Gampaha, Kalutara, and Galle were trained on handling CSEA cases, trauma-informed legal practice, and courtroom strategies to support survivors. This created a stronger bench of legal professionals capable of representing victims more effectively.

Schools and Government: Strengthening the First Line of Defence

The project trained:

- ◆ **248 teachers and principals** to identify risk indicators and respond appropriately.
- ◆ **1,201 government officials** - including Child Rights Promotion Officers and Child Protection Officers on OCSEA prevention, reporting pathways, and victim support.

These cross-sectoral efforts significantly improved coordination between education, law enforcement, and child protection agencies

Justice for Survivors: Direct Legal Representation

Beyond awareness and capacity-building, the project ensured that survivors received the specialised legal support they urgently needed.

PEaCE provided **direct legal representation for 28 survivors** - 26 girls and 2 boys across **47 court appearances**, guiding victims and families through complex legal systems during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

In several cases, complaints were initiated directly by PEaCE following disclosures made during awareness sessions, demonstrating the direct impact of prevention work on access to justice.

District-wise Reach and National Footprint

- **Colombo** led participation with **2,546 individuals**, hosting school-based awareness sessions and community outreach programmes in urban and suburban areas.
- **Matara** followed closely with 2,137 participants, where school campaigns and child clubs became focal points for discussions on online safety and responsible media use.
- **Kalutara** recorded **2,090 participants**, including several high-impact sessions for preschool and primary-level educators on identifying early signs of abuse.
- **Badulla** reached 2,046 individuals, demonstrating strong engagement among parents and community groups in the plantation sector and rural areas.
- **Galle** mobilized 1,966 participants by combining awareness drives with teacher training programs.

Other districts such as **Gampaha, Ratnapura, Hambantota, Monaragala, and Kurunegala** also contributed significantly, collectively involving over **6,000 participants** through joint events and school-based campaigns. Even in smaller districts like **Vavuniya and Nuwara Eliya**, targeted outreach ensured inclusion of remote and vulnerable communities.

Amplifying Voices Through Media and Advocacy

The project also invested strongly in public messaging. Through campaigns such as **#TouchMeNot** and **#JusticeForEveryChild**, thousands were reached online, while **20 articles** in newspapers and **30 data-driven newsletters** helped shape public understanding and promote ethical journalism on child-related issues.

Key Lessons and Best Practices

The project's journey generated several important insights:

- * **Adaptability is essential** in volatile contexts; flexible planning ensured continuity during economic and political disruptions.
- * **Community ownership drives sustainability**, particularly when local leaders and schools are involved early.
- * **Integrated approaches are most effective**, linking awareness, institutional training, and legal services.
- * **Peer-education models multiply impact**, as trained teachers and officers replicated sessions in their own institutions.
- * **Bilingual, inclusive facilitation** ensured the participation of rural, plantation, and disabled groups.

A Strong Foundation for the Future

The KIOS grant strengthened PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka at both programme and institutional levels. The organisation expanded its team, enhanced internal systems, and reinforced its national reputation, leading to new partnerships, including with UNICEF.

Looking ahead, PEaCE is committed to:

- Institutionalising OCSEA training within government systems.
- Expanding legal-aid networks for child survivors.
- Strengthening community-based protection committees.
- Continuing high-quality research, advocacy, and public campaigns.

Our Appreciation

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka extends its deepest appreciation to the KIOS Foundation for its trust, flexibility, and firm commitment to advancing children's rights in Sri Lanka. Although this project has formally concluded, its impact continues through the trained professionals, empowered children, vigilant communities, and strengthened institutions it leaves behind. These collective efforts have created stronger pathways to justice for survivors and contributed to building a safer environment for every child. We remain committed to sustaining this progress and are actively seeking support to continue the vital work of ensuring that all children in Sri Lanka can grow up free from exploitation and abuse.