

Unveiling Our Journey

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



PEACE

Protecting Environment and Children Everywhere

ECPAT Sri Lanka



Acknowledgement

As the Chairman of PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the compilation of our 2023 Annual Report.

First and foremost, I wish to thank our dedicated team at PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka for their unwavering commitment, hard work, and passion towards our mission of protecting children from all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. Your tireless efforts in implementing various programmes have been crucial in furthering our cause.

I also wish to take this opportunity to extend our sincere appreciation to the government of Sri Lanka, as well as all state and non-state stakeholders and partners who have supported and collaborated with PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka throughout the year. Your collaboration, resources and commitment to improving the well-being of Sri Lankan children have been invaluable in our efforts to combat violence against children.

I am also grateful to the media outlets, school administrations, community leaders, lawyers, and other individuals who have engaged with our programmes, contributing to a greater understanding of the importance of child protection and promoting positive behaviours towards children.

I am extremely grateful to our generous donors, who have supported us generously so that we can continue our mission without any interruptions.

I also wish to extend my gratitude to my fellow Board Members, who have fully trusted me and have helped us in every way possible to lead the organisation.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the children and families who have placed their trust in PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka for support and assistance. Your participation in our programmes and your resilience and courage in the face of adversity inspire us to continue our work and strive to create a safer, more secure environment for all children.

Once again, thank you all for your collective contributions and dedicated efforts, which have laid the foundation for a brighter future for our children. Your commitment, support and partnership in our mission have helped us immensely!

Mohammed Mahuruf
Chairman
PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka

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SUMMARY REPORT AND STATISTIC HIGHLIGHTS 2023

Schoolchildren

Sessions **48**

Direct Beneficiaries **10,761**



Parents & Community Leaders

Sessions **11**

Direct Beneficiaries **1,817**



Awareness Sessions

Sessions **01**

Direct Beneficiaries **24**



Pre-School Teachers

Sessions **17**

Direct Beneficiaries **961**



Government Officials

Protect Children Online: Legal Perspectives and Reform Solutions Dialogue with Legal Professionals



One session

84

participants

Legal Aid

Assisting in the prosecution of a legal case in a court of law

32 Survivors



Media Monitoring

1036 incidents

of violence against children in the media were recorded

17 Newspaper articles in three languages



Publications

13 Newsletters

973 Subscribers



12 KI Interviews



Voluntourism

Country Case Study



1. Executive Summary

The Annual Report of PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka for 2023 highlights the challenges faced by children in Sri Lanka due to the economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the mass protests that occurred in 2022. There has been a rise in crimes against children, necessitating increased awareness and advocacy efforts. In this context, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka has conducted various programmes targeting children, parents, and caregivers while advocating for policy changes and providing legal aid to victims. In 2023, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka initiated projects such as Right to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse; Strengthening the Child Protection System in the Travel and Tourism Context; and Aggregation and Verification of Reported Cases of Violence against Children in the Media.

Through 77 awareness programmes and engaging over 13,600 stakeholders, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka has played a crucial role in educating communities across the country. In addition, a dialogue with legal professionals and law enforcement authorities emphasised the need for legal reforms to protect children online and combat cybercrimes.

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka's support initiatives have provided essential assistance to victims of exploitation, addressing high-priority cases. ECPAT Sri Lanka has demonstrated its commitment to protecting vulnerable children by advocating for justice. Sustained government and donor support, stakeholder collaboration, and advocacy for policy changes will be crucial to addressing the challenges Sri Lankan children face. PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka continues its mission to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse, striving to create a safer society for all children.

Three generous donors fervently believed in our mission and supported our programmes in 2023. At the beginning of the year, PEaCE entered into a two-year agreement with the KIOS Foundation to initiate collaborative activities. In September, ECPAT International joined forces with PEaCE for a 14-month project. UNICEF commenced funding in July 2023 for a project focused on media monitoring and newsletter publication, with support continuing through June 2025.

2. Introduction

As the country's landscape rapidly changes, we are pleased to share this 2023 annual report. It showcases our continued dedication to protecting and promoting the rights of children and preventing them from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation. The country's financial crisis has led to social problems, particularly affecting children in specific sectors. Notably, one-third of school students in Sri Lanka go without a sufficient breakfast, with 1.4 million children falling into this category. The situation also affected over six million people, who struggled to feed themselves, leading to increased school dropout rates, particularly among girls.

The dire circumstances faced by Sri Lankan children have also perpetuated the occurrence of violence against them. According to the Sri Lankan police, in 2023, 5,000 crimes against children, including sexual harassment, were reported, with over 4,000 of these crimes being related to sexual harassment. These alarming statistics further revealed that 167 underage girls became pregnant. Another 3,074 crimes, including murder, attempted murder, injury, sexual abuse and kidnapping of children, were reported. The report also revealed about 584 severe cases of sexual abuse against boys. In addition, 70 children were used in prostitution and exploited in sex work. It is important to note that these numbers only represent what has been reported to law enforcement, and the actual situation may be even more widespread.

In response to these alarming phenomena, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka has stepped up efforts to increase awareness programmes at the school level, targeting children aged 12 to 18, mainly in rural areas of the country. Parents, caregivers, government servants, lawyers and other stakeholders have been the recipients of these awareness programmes, which were conducted across six districts in the country. Special measures have been taken to investigate incidents of serious cases of child abuse with the intention of supporting victims and survivors. The legal professionals attached to our organisation appeared in court to seek justice for girls and boys who had been victimised by sexual predators. We also aggregated over 1,000 incidents of violence against children published in the media regarding all forms of violence against children in 2023. Information that had been systematically recorded and stored was disseminated to approximately 1,000 interested stakeholders. These stakeholders could, in turn, take action and formulate their own plans to support the affected and needy children.

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka remains committed to its mission to eliminate sexual exploitation and abuse of children and strives to promote the protection of children from all forms of abuse and exploitation. We, as an organisation, will continue to advocate for policy changes, raise awareness and provide support to affected children and their families. However, sustained government support, resources, and effective collaboration among various stakeholders will be crucial to improving the situation for Sri Lankan children and ensuring their safety and security.

3. The Organisation PEaCE

PEaCE (Protecting Environment and Children Everywhere) / ECPAT Sri Lanka is a leading non-governmental organisation that has operated in Sri Lanka since 1991. Established as part of the global ECPAT campaign to end child prostitution in tourism, it is a key member of ECPAT International, a network committed to eradicating the sexual exploitation of children worldwide. Notably, it remains the only NGO in Sri Lanka fully dedicated to addressing the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, with a core mission to protect and promote children's rights.

The organisation undertakes a wide range of initiatives to achieve its goals. A central focus is nationwide awareness-raising on child sexual exploitation and abuse. By educating communities, institutions, and the public, PEaCE fosters a shared understanding of the seriousness of these issues and the urgent need for protective action.

Capacity-building is another key area of work. Through targeted training programmes, the organisation equips stakeholders, such as educators, service providers, and law enforcement, with the knowledge and skills required to identify, prevent, and respond effectively to cases of abuse. This strengthens the overall child protection system across the country.

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka also provides legal aid to victims, ensuring access to justice and ongoing support throughout legal proceedings. This assistance helps reduce trauma and supports the recovery and empowerment of affected children.

Research plays a critical role in informing its work. The organisation conducts studies on child rights policies and legal frameworks to identify gaps and develop evidence-based recommendations. These insights contribute to policy reforms and legislative improvements aimed at strengthening child protection.

Advocacy is integral to the organisation's mission. By engaging with policymakers and government bodies, PEaCE works to influence laws, policies, and national priorities to better safeguard children from exploitation and abuse.

Close collaboration with the Sri Lankan government further enhances its impact. The organisation contributes to the development of national action plans, including efforts to address emerging risks such as online exploitation. These partnerships help create more comprehensive and effective protection mechanisms.

Ultimately, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka envisions a society where every child is safe, protected, and able to fully enjoy their rights. Through awareness, training, legal support, research, advocacy, and collaboration, the organisation continues to work towards eliminating the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Sri Lanka.

4. Our Projects

In 2023, the organisation embarked on three main projects at different times of the year. Details of these projects are given below.

4.1. Right to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), whether online or offline, is a widely acknowledged yet often overlooked crime that occurs globally. Unfortunately, specific countries, such as Sri Lanka, experience a higher frequency and wider spread of CSEA crimes. In Sri Lanka, the legal framework and law enforcement agencies are not sufficiently equipped to prosecute these criminals effectively. Additionally, the state's lack of resource allocation hinders efforts to address this issue adequately. Consequently, perpetrators of child sexual abuse go unpunished and often become repeat offenders, victimising numerous children. Their crimes become increasingly horrific as they gain confidence in the absence of consequences.

With the advent of social media and online anonymity, children are at risk of falling prey to CSEA even within the confines of their own homes. Offline CSEA is also prevalent, with an increasing number of child victims experiencing abuse at home, school, and other frequented locations. Initially, the abuse may start with grooming or boundary testing by the perpetrator, but soon escalates into more severe forms of exploitation.

This project aims to ensure that unpunished offenders are held accountable for their actions. Phase One of the project focuses on prevention by educating the community about the consequences of CSEA and providing training to children, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders on how to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse. Efforts will also be made to restructure the mindset of CSEA convicts through mental and psychological support, aiming to cultivate empathy towards their victims and deter future offences. Further, awareness has been raised among parents about the need to monitor their children's online activities.

Phase two of the project is strengthening the legal system to ensure better justice for CSEA victims. This involves collaborating with responsible state institutions, collecting recommendations based on previous experiences and implementing additional measures to improve the mechanisms for addressing child sexual abuse.

The main activities conducted under this project are given below.

| Details | Number of Programmes | Female Participants | Male Participants |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Awareness programmes for schoolchildren | 55 | 5,191 | 3,791 |
| Workshops for school prefects | 02 | 106 | 71 |
| Awareness programmes for parents | 28 | 293 | 1,400 |
| Awareness programmes for lawyers | 01 | 34 | 53 |
| Awareness programme teachers | 01 | 24 | 00 |
| Representing victims in a court of law | 26 | 09 | 19 |

During the 2023 project implementation, various activities were conducted under the KIOS-funded project, targeting different groups within the community. The above data show that more awareness programmes were conducted for schoolchildren than for other groups, with a total of 55 programmes reaching 3,791 male and 5,191 female participants. Additionally, workshops for school prefects were organised across two programmes, involving 71 males and 106 females. The project also focused on engaging parents through 28 awareness programmes, with 393 male and 1,400 female participants. Furthermore, efforts were made to support victims by representing them in court, with 26 cases handled involving nine male and 19 female victims. Moreover, awareness programmes were conducted for lawyers and teachers, albeit in smaller numbers. This data highlights the project's comprehensive approach to targeting various stakeholders to raise awareness and provide support in addressing the issue at hand.

4.2. Aggregation and verification of reported cases of violence against children in the media

Since its establishment, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka has been committed to collecting statistics on child abuse, particularly the sexual exploitation of children. To gather data on violence against children, we rely on the Sri Lanka Police and consult reputable international sources such as the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), INTERPOL and the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The NCMEC discovered alarming numbers of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) uploaded from Sri Lankan IP addresses, with 152,811 found in 2021, 73,202 in 2019, and 130,267 in 2020. These figures underscore the risks that the internet poses to children and explain why we have focused on combating Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) since 2015.

Since 2013, the organisation has been monitoring media reports on violence against children, subjecting each report to a thorough verification process to ensure its authenticity and gather essential details for further action. In January 2023, we initiated the publication of a monthly e-newsletter titled 'Stop Child Abuse' to summarise our findings. However, the absence of a centralised database for tracking violence against children in Sri Lanka poses a significant

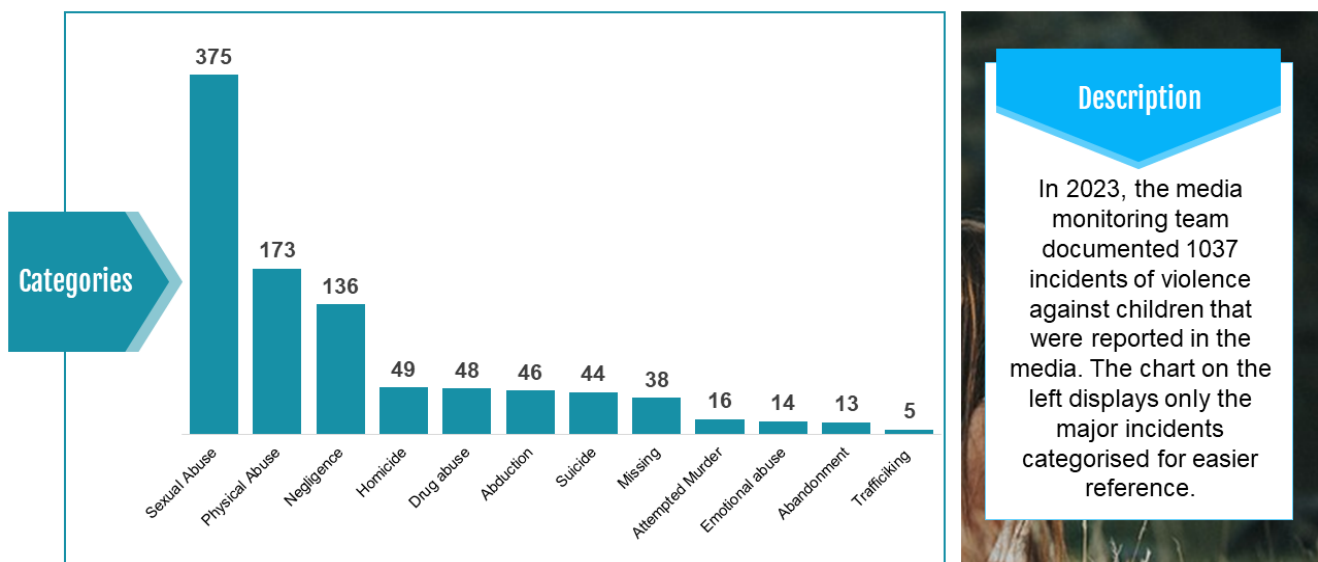
challenge. This lack hinders the effectiveness of organisations' awareness programmes, training, research, and advocacy efforts. While institutions such as hospitals, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), and the police maintain their own records, there is no publicly accessible national repository for the public and child protection advocates.

Consequently, the availability of data on violence against children, particularly Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA), is limited. Obtaining data on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) is even more challenging. PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka is dedicated to addressing these violations of children's rights by first identifying the victims and abusers. We meticulously collect and analyse publicly available information and records, compiling data on all types of violence against children.

The organisation emphasises the importance of addressing violence against children and safeguarding their rights by highlighting the gaps in data and the critical need for a centralised database. This comprehensive approach will enable better strategies, planning, and interventions to prevent and respond to violence against children in Sri Lanka.

Many people, including donors and UN agencies, are supportive of our initiative to regularly monitor mainstream and social media outlets for reported cases of violence against children. This helps us better understand the overall situation and disseminate information to raise awareness amongst civil society organisations, policymakers, academics, researchers, and concerned citizens. Monitoring media reports serves as a way to fill the void in reliable statistics on child abuse and sexual exploitation. The organisation also contributes to documenting violence against children by carefully reviewing publicly available information and maintaining digital archives. Through this documentation process, we can clarify the nature of abuses and identify the abusers, enabling us to develop more effective strategies.

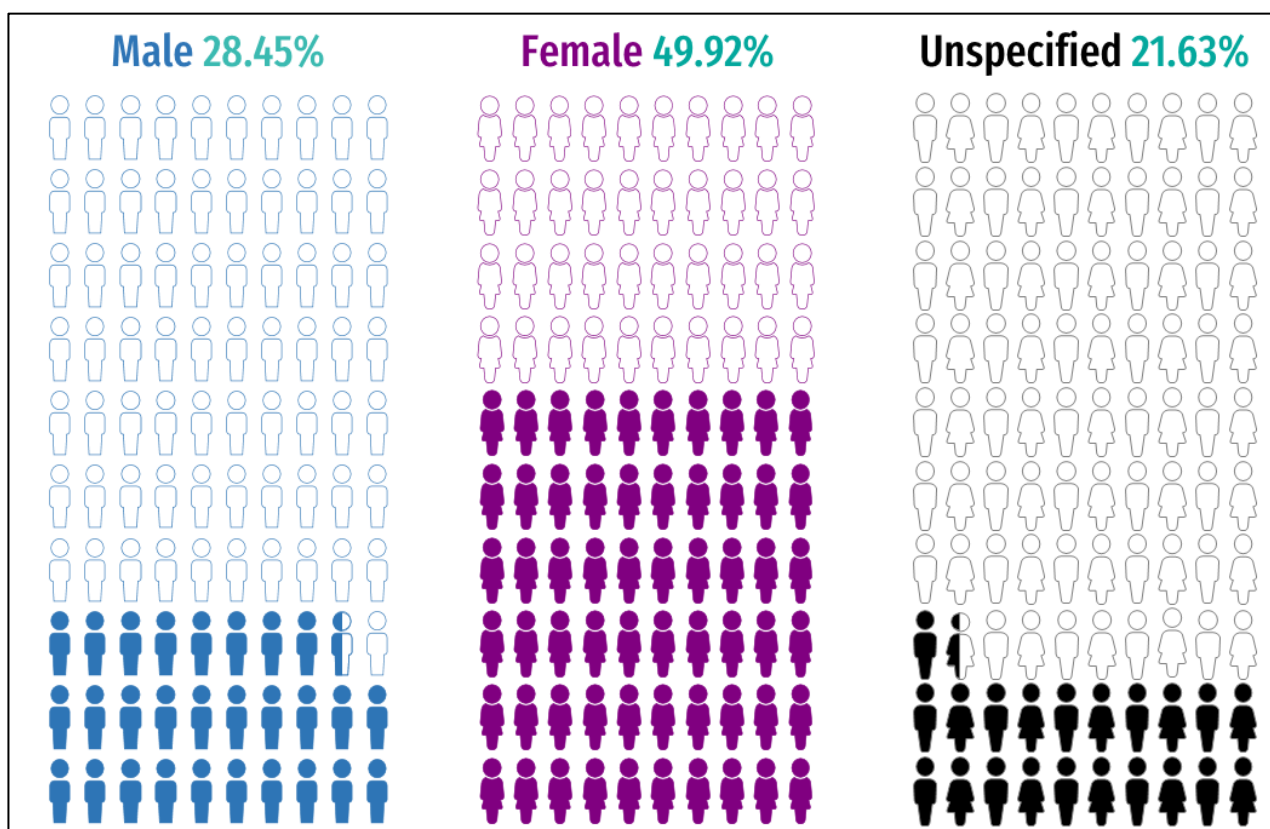
In 2023, the media monitoring team gathered information from various sources, including national and private television, radio channels, and newspapers (daily and weekend) in three languages; web-based media at the national level; and locally focused media channels run by concerned citizens. Overall, the team recorded 1036 incidents of violence against children in 2023.



Different forms of violence against children were reported in the media in 2023.

This information has been segregated based on several types of abuse, gender and age groups of victims, the relationship of perpetrators and geographical areas where the incidents occurred, among other criteria. Every month, we analyse the data and distribute the information as an e-newsletter to 973 local and international subscribers. The graphics below summarise the incidents in 2023 across four main areas. The above statistics, collected from various media outlets in 2023, highlight the prevalence of violence against children.

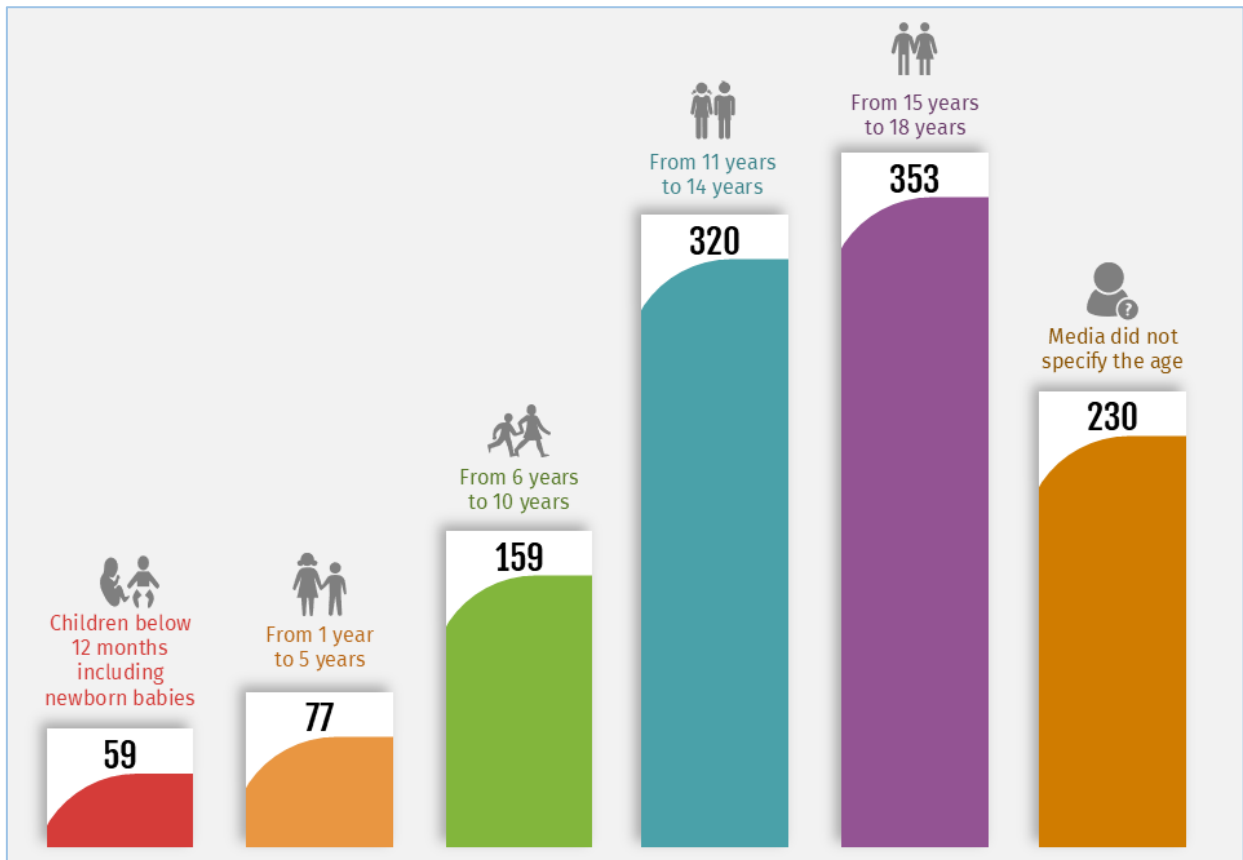
These numerous forms of abuse were reported, with sexual abuse leading at 375 cases, followed by physical abuse at 173 and neglect at 136. Sadly, there were also 49 reported cases of child homicide, underscoring the devastating consequences of violence on children. Furthermore, the data also highlighted other alarming issues like drug abuse, abduction, suicide and children gone missing. The information gathered in 2023 totalled 1036 incidents of violence against children from media outlets. The total number of victims involved in these incidents is 1304 children.



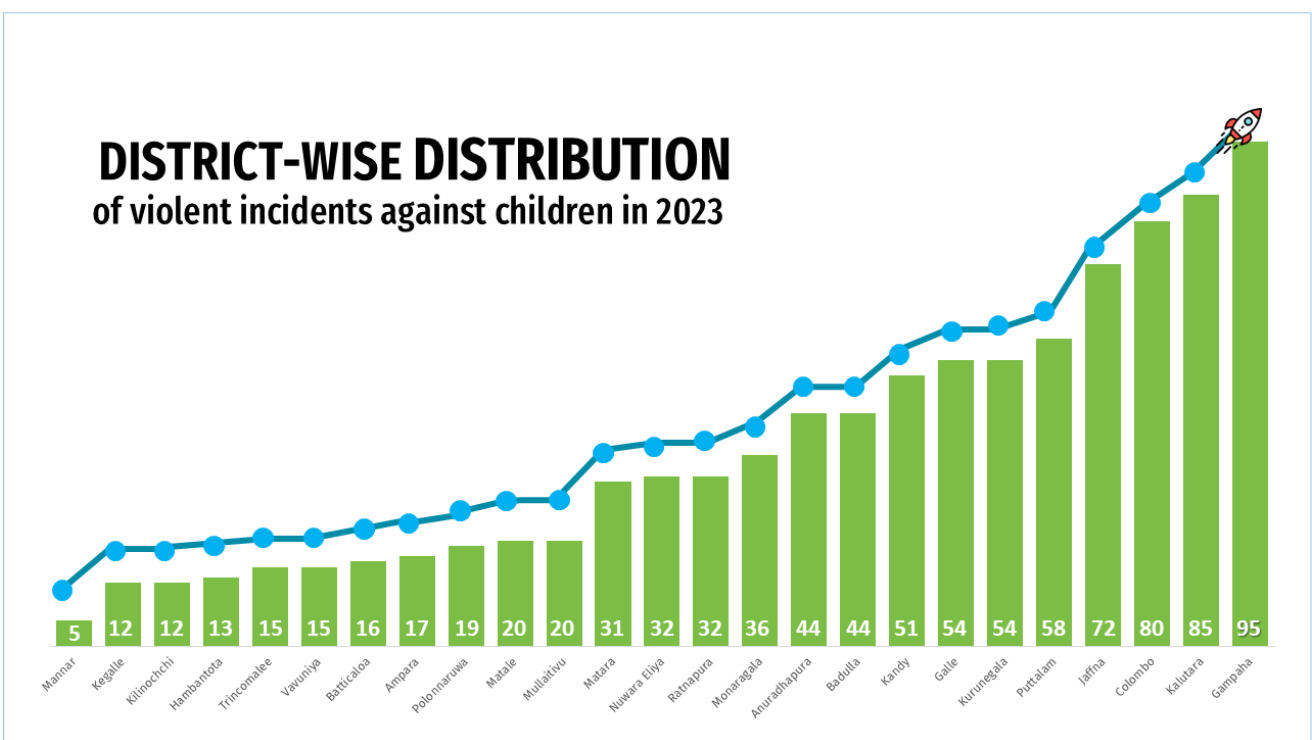
Gender distribution of victims

Among these children, girls have been the most abused, with 651 cases, accounting for almost 50% of the victims, while boys have 371 cases, representing 28.45% of the victims. The media, however, has not mentioned the gender of 282 victims, or 21.63%.

The analysis indicates a clear age-related increase in child victimisation. The highest number of victims was reported among children aged 15–18 years, with 353 cases, while the lowest was recorded among infants aged 0–12 months, with 59 cases. Reported cases rose from 77 among children aged 1–5 years to 159 among those aged 6–10 years. The figure increased sharply to 320 cases in the 11–14-year age group before reaching its peak among older adolescents. This pattern suggests that vulnerability to abuse and exploitation increases with age, highlighting the need for targeted prevention, protection, and intervention measures, particularly for adolescents.



The reported statistics show significant variations in child abuse cases across different districts. Gampaha district had the highest number of reported cases, with 95, followed closely by Kalutara with 85 and Colombo with 80. These three districts have the country's highest population densities, which may have contributed to the higher number of reported cases. On the other hand, districts like Mannar and Kegalle had lower reported cases of 5 and 12, respectively. It is important to note that these statistics may not capture the full extent of child abuse, as many cases go unreported. Efforts to prevent and address child abuse must be prioritised at a district level to ensure the safety and protection of all children across Sri Lanka.



To ensure the authenticity of cases, fact-checking and deep verification are conducted through thorough investigation, during which evidence is collected, and accounts are corroborated by state and non-state child protection mechanisms.

Furthermore, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka flagged seven highly attentive cases and responded urgently. We analysed these cases in detail and either acted upon them or referred them to the respective donor for further action.

4.3. Strengthening the child protection system in the travel and tourism context

ECPAT International is leading a pilot project in Cambodia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The project aims to regulate voluntourism both at the national and international levels. To achieve this, the project has developed actionable models based on the experiences of these three countries, presented as case studies. A case study was also created to support the launch of a report on the regulation of voluntourism at the UN General Assembly. Furthermore, the project focuses on actively training tourism professionals to contribute to the child protection system.

The project aims to implement and replicate effective child protection models at the country level based on commitments and progress made by regional bodies, governments, and the business sector.

ECPAT Sri Lanka implements targeted advocacy interventions, workshops and roundtables with key stakeholders. The goal is to develop case studies of actionable models that can be adopted regionally and globally.

The development of these actionable models incorporates the endorsement of the legal checklist and assessment matrix by the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC). The Legal Checklist will help improve the law and policy frameworks for child protection in Sri Lanka. The completion of this project will help develop the Voluntourism Policy Framework, which will incorporate the outcomes of all consultation processes on voluntourism and be used to advocate for the legitimisation of voluntourism in Sri Lanka.

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka contributed to the UN report on the exploitation and sexual abuse of children in the context of travel and tourism, with a specific focus on the phenomenon of voluntourism exhibited by Ms Mama Fatima Singhateh. She is the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children. This report was unpacked by the above special rapporteur on October 10th, 2023, in a panel organised by ECPAT International in New York. The report called upon all countries to regulate voluntourism and provide a basis for advocacy efforts.

The second pathway of the project focuses on documenting existing practices in the tourism industry. The organisation will contribute to this for ECPAT International by equipping tourism professionals with the knowledge and skills required to participate in the child protection system. A training manual on child protection for tourism education professionals will be

developed in partnership with tourism associations and will allow for the scaling up of vocational courses. The organisation is expected to be invited to participate in the international workshop and contribute its insights and experiences to the development of the manual. It is collaborating with tourism associations and schools to explore this possibility. The following are the key achievements between September 2023 and December 2023.

- Completed 12 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders in voluntourism.
- Conducted an extensive investigation into voluntourism programmes, identifying 39 stakeholders and 50 ongoing projects.
- Prepared and submitted a country case study to ECPAT for review.
- Engaged in direct conversations with 25 to 30 stakeholders, persuading them to join the cause of regularising voluntourism.
- Prepared an advocacy plan on regularising voluntourism.
- Received interest from at least 15 stakeholders willing to participate directly in advocacy efforts to regulate voluntourism.

4.4. Awareness Programmes

In the past year, ECPAT Sri Lanka has successfully implemented 77 comprehensive awareness programmes, reaching over 13,600 stakeholders in the country. These stakeholders encompass a wide range of individuals and groups, including children, their parents, teachers, principals, youth, members of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Village Child Development Committees (VCDC), law enforcement agencies, government child protection agencies, other government institutions, the legal sector, and various non-profit organisations.

The diverse nature of our initiatives allowed us to address the specific needs and concerns of different groups within the community. We conducted a total of 48 awareness programmes tailored explicitly for 10,761 students, ensuring that they are informed and empowered to protect themselves against child abuse and exploitation. In addition, we organised 11 programmes to educate parents and community leaders, reaching 1,817 individuals. For teachers, we conducted a specialised programme that reached 24 dedicated preschool teachers, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and tools to support their students effectively. Moreover, we engaged 961 government officials through 17 informative sessions, fostering a deeper understanding of child protection issues within the government sector.

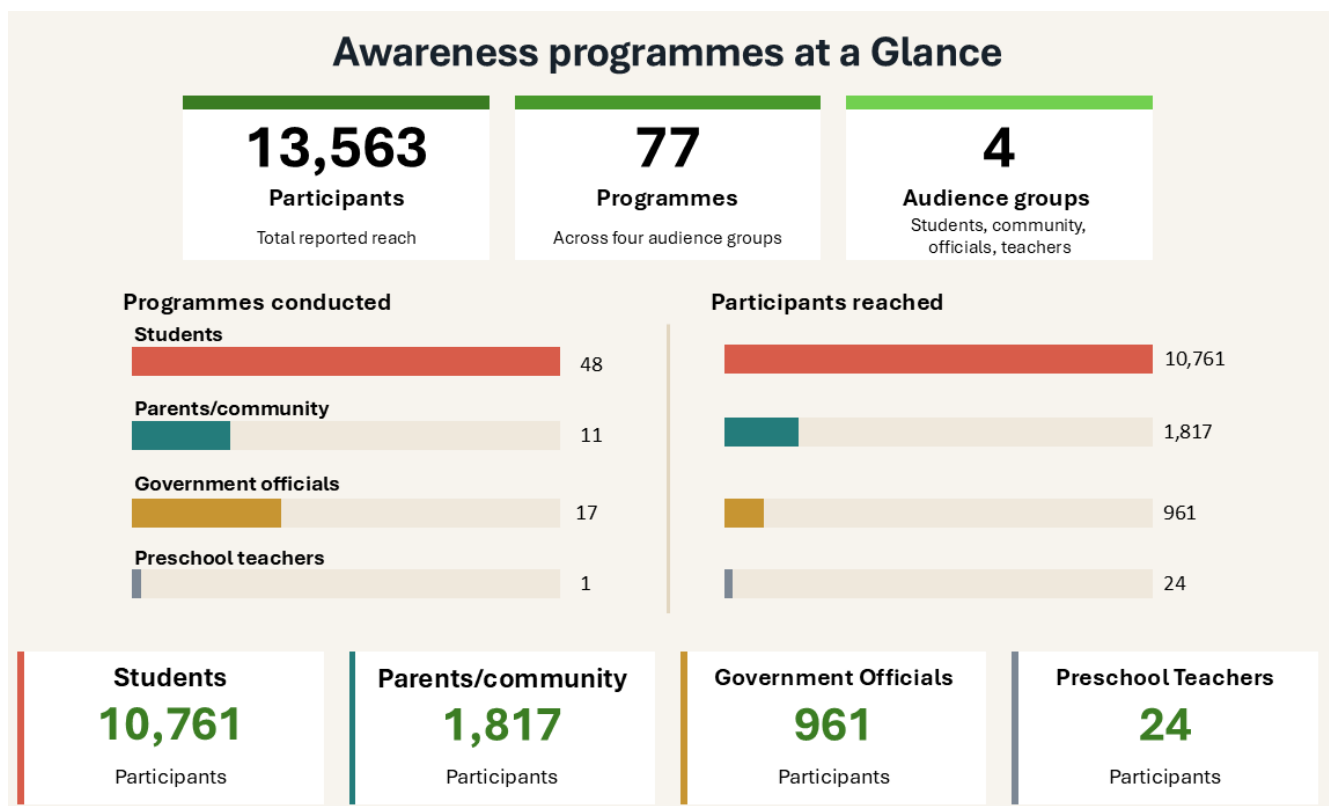
The primary focus of our awareness programmes was on preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse. Furthermore, the sessions provided knowledge about the existing reporting mechanisms available in case they or someone they know becomes a victim of abuse.

Closely monitoring media reports, we have noticed a troubling increase in children resorting to violence and getting involved in criminal activities at a young age. This concerning trend has prompted us to prioritise and intensify our efforts in raising awareness, especially in schools

situated in areas with a high prevalence of child abuse cases. Taking a proactive approach, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka has launched targeted awareness campaigns in schools, focusing on educating both students and teachers about the importance of preventing child abuse and promoting positive behaviour among children.

The demand for our awareness programmes has far exceeded our expectations, with an overwhelming number of requests from schools across the country. While we have endeavoured to accommodate as many of these requests as possible, the sheer volume has posed a logistical challenge.

As part of its awareness programmes, the organisation has been actively engaged in spreading awareness and educating various audiences through its social media platforms. These efforts are evident in the number of posts made on each platform, with 152 posts on Facebook, 132 on Instagram, 64 on LinkedIn, and 115 on Twitter. This diverse approach showcases the organisation's commitment to reaching children, youth, parents, and other stakeholders with important information and resources. These posts primarily focused on the organisation's activities, incidents of child abuse with accompanying data and details, protection measures, available resources, and remedies for victims. The platforms were used to reach and engage with a broader audience to promote education and awareness. Many individuals sought advice on protecting themselves online and sought remedies for the victims.





4.5. Protect Children Online: Legal Perspectives and Reform Solutions, A Dialogue with Legal Professionals

Members of the Gampaha Lawyers Association engaged in a one-day dialogue organised by PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka. It was organised in Gampaha as this district was identified as one of the hotspots for child sexual abuse, amongst a few other districts. The dialogue aimed to educate lawyers on how to prevent exploitation, represent victims, and advocate for better laws and systems. Key points discussed include the laws in Sri Lanka related to cybercrimes and child protection, the importance of legal reforms tailored to safeguard children online, the need for

proactive measures to protect victims and the significance of international concepts in child protection laws. The dialogue also highlighted the challenges in handling digital evidence in courts, the rise of cybercrimes impacting children and the necessity for collaborative efforts amongst legal professionals, law enforcement agencies, and civil society to combat online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The dialogues also emphasised the importance of familiarising legal professionals with new concepts in ICT law and the need for continuous engagement and for staying up to date on developments in online child protection. Promoting collaborative efforts, advocating for legal reforms and incorporating internationally recognised concepts were key takeaways from the dialogue. This association was represented by 84 senior and junior lawyers in and around the Gampaha district.



4.6. Individual support

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka is committed to empowering individuals to protect themselves and others through knowledge and skills. In addition to prevention strategies, the organisation emphasises the importance of supporting victims and survivors. This support encompasses legal assistance, physical protection, and psychosocial support. To provide swift and practical assistance, the organisation identifies cases that require urgent attention and in-depth scrutiny.

Between September and December 2023, it encountered several high-priority cases involving child exploitation. One alarming incident was when a 12-year-old child gave birth, confirming sexual abuse and exploitation. Another instance, in which a 15-year-old girl's own mother forced her into prostitution, sheds light on the intricate dynamics of family involvement in exploitation. Despite her circumstances, the girl expressed a desire to prioritise education over prostitution.

Even though she suffered from an STD, unfortunately, the mother was unwilling to care for the child.

Moreover, a 15-year-old girl who engaged with an individual online fell victim to trafficking and abuse, resulting in disruptions to her education and everyday life. This case highlights the dangers of online interactions and the susceptibility of children to exploitation in the digital sphere.

The organisation responded to these cases by intervening to safeguard the children's well-being and rights. Information gathered from these cases was shared with UNICEF to prompt the necessary action to protect these vulnerable children. Furthermore, these cases will be utilised for advocacy, policymaking, and interventions aimed at combating child exploitation.

PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka encouraged the families of these children to initiate court cases and provided legal support, representing them in court. In 2023, the organisation was able to appear at 32 court hearings on behalf of children who were sexually exploited and abused.

5. Collaborations, Consultations and Capacity Building

5.1. Strengthening Child Protection in Sri Lanka's Travel and Tourism Industry

In 2023, ECPAT Sri Lanka actively advanced the national child protection agenda within the tourism sector by contributing to the Forum on Child Protection in the Travel and Tourism Industry, a multi-stakeholder platform convened by the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA). The Forum brought together government bodies, law enforcement, NGOs, CSOs, international agencies, and private sector stakeholders to tackle child exploitation risks associated with the tourism industry. ECPAT played a key role in shaping and adopting the Forum's Terms of Reference, which formalised the initiative's structure and purpose. The organisation also provided technical input to the draft national guidelines for safeguarding children in tourism, which were reviewed at a consultative meeting in December 2023. ECPAT advocated for ethical volunteer tourism practices and supported awareness initiatives, including public reporting hotlines and social media campaigns.

The Forum's ongoing work includes developing child-friendly materials, collaborating with regional partners, and promoting a zero-tolerance approach to child trafficking as outlined in Section 360C of the Sri Lankan Penal Code. These efforts represent a significant step toward embedding child safety into Sri Lanka's tourism development strategy.

ECPAT Sri Lanka continued to build strong partnerships and contribute to national and global initiatives aimed at protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse. Our engagement throughout the year spanned multi-stakeholder meetings, strategic consultations, and targeted capacity-building workshops.

We contributed to a national Working Group hosted by the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) and Save the Children to develop a Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA). This initiative brought together key government and non-government stakeholders to collaboratively design survey methodologies and tools that would improve interventions and services for vulnerable children.

As active members of the National Action Coordination Group to End Violence Against Children (NACG EVaC), we participated in monthly and quarterly meetings and strategic forums to review past progress, renew members' commitments, and plan future advocacy and media engagement. The meetings reinforced our collaboration with long-standing child protection actors while welcoming new partners from across the country.

As the initiator, we hosted Coalition to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) meetings, where stakeholders discussed current trends, shared field-level experiences, and explored collective strategies to address emerging threats. Our participation reaffirmed our role in shaping a unified and coordinated national response.

ECPAT Sri Lanka engaged in high-level discussions with the Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children and Women to strengthen cooperation between the Sri Lanka Police and international partners, such as INTERPOL and the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). These efforts aimed to improve data-sharing, formalise partnerships, and overcome systemic barriers to international collaboration. Additional discussions focused on sexual abuse of boys, awareness programmes in high-risk districts, and legal capacity-building.

On the global stage, we contributed to developing a victim-centred capacity-building plan through a consultation led by the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC), in partnership with the Tim Tebow Foundation and Onemi Global Solutions. This initiative aims to enhance identification and support mechanisms for victims of child sexual exploitation through international expert collaboration.

Internally, we prioritised building our team's knowledge of the Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism (SECTT) and voluntourism. A series of workshops led by ECPAT International deepened staff understanding of offender behaviours, safeguarding standards, and regulatory mechanisms such as The Code. These sessions also clarified the differences between ethical volunteering and harmful voluntourism practices. Staff were further briefed on an upcoming initiative on voluntourism in Sri Lanka, which includes key informant interviews to assess local dynamics. Insights from ECPAT's international research, including Sri Lankan experiences, were presented at the UN Assembly, and the initiative aimed to develop training manuals for hospitality education institutions.

Through these strategic engagements, ECPAT Sri Lanka has contributed to stronger institutional frameworks, improved cross-sectoral cooperation, and better-informed responses to child sexual exploitation across national and international platforms.

5.2. Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children in Sri Lanka

ECPAT Sri Lanka continued to coordinate and strengthen the *Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children in Sri Lanka*, a national network of civil society organisations established in 2018 to collectively address the growing issue of child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. The Coalition was formed to create a common platform for advocacy, awareness, information sharing, research, and collective action to improve prevention and aftercare services for child survivors.

Following a series of consultations and meetings conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Coalition reconvened in 2023 with its 11th meeting held on 26 October 2023 at the PEaCE office in Colombo. The meeting focused on reviewing the situation of children in Sri Lanka, revisiting the draft Terms of Reference (ToR), strengthening collaboration among members, and expanding the Coalition network.

During the discussions, PEaCE highlighted the alarming rise in violence against children reported in Sri Lanka. Based on the organisation's media monitoring initiative, 775 incidents of violence against children had been recorded by the end of September 2023, including 295 incidents of sexual abuse, of which 250 victims were below the age of 16. The data also revealed incidents of child homicide, abduction, trafficking, physical abuse, missing children, and child suicide, demonstrating the urgent need for coordinated interventions and stronger child protection systems.

The Coalition also served as an important platform for member organisations to exchange experiences, discuss gaps in child protection responses, and explore collective advocacy initiatives. Discussions further emphasised the need for improved cooperation from law enforcement agencies, enhanced awareness programmes, stronger legal protection mechanisms, and increased community engagement to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Coalition's draft Terms of Reference outlined its broader vision of creating a society free from sexual exploitation and abuse of children through multi-sectoral collaboration, advocacy, research, policy engagement, and capacity building. The Coalition also aimed to strengthen partnerships among civil society organisations, child protection practitioners, researchers, legal professionals, and community stakeholders working to safeguard children in Sri Lanka.

5.3. Global Boys Summit

In June 2023, ECPAT Sri Lanka participated in the inaugural *Global Boys Summit* held in Casablanca, Morocco, organised by ECPAT International in collaboration with AMANE under the Global Boys Initiative. The Summit brought together more than 65 practitioners from 30 countries to collectively address the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys, an issue that remains under-recognised globally.

The Summit highlighted the unique vulnerabilities faced by boys, including harmful gender stereotypes, lack of safe spaces to disclose abuse, social stigma, limited family support systems, and the absence of gender-sensitive services. Participants exchanged experiences, challenges, and promising practices to strengthen prevention, protection, and response mechanisms for boys at risk and boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Key recommendations emerging from the Summit included the need for survivor-centred and gender-sensitive care, expanding research on the sexual exploitation of boys, mainstreaming the issue within the global child protection agenda, and building stronger international coalitions to advocate for policy and systemic reforms.

ECPAT Sri Lanka's participation in this important global platform strengthened its understanding of the emerging challenges faced by boys in Sri Lanka and enhanced its contribution to international discussions on child sexual exploitation and abuse. The Summit also created opportunities for collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective advocacy with practitioners and organisations from around the world working to ensure that boys affected by abuse are recognised, protected, and supported.



6. Looking Ahead with Commitment and Hope

As we reflect on the year 2023, PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka remains steadfast in its commitment to protecting children from all forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse. Through awareness programmes, legal support, advocacy initiatives, research, media monitoring, and national and international collaborations, the organisation has continued to strengthen child protection efforts across Sri Lanka. The increasing risks faced by children, both online and offline, highlight the urgent need for collective action, stronger systems, and sustained investment in child protection.

Despite numerous challenges, the dedication of our staff, partners, donors, volunteers, government institutions, civil society organisations, and communities has enabled us to reach thousands of children and stakeholders throughout the country. We remain encouraged by the growing partnerships and shared commitment to safeguarding children and promoting their rights. PEaCE | ECPAT Sri Lanka will continue to work tirelessly towards building a safer, more protective, and child-friendly society where every child can live with dignity, security, and hope for the future.

