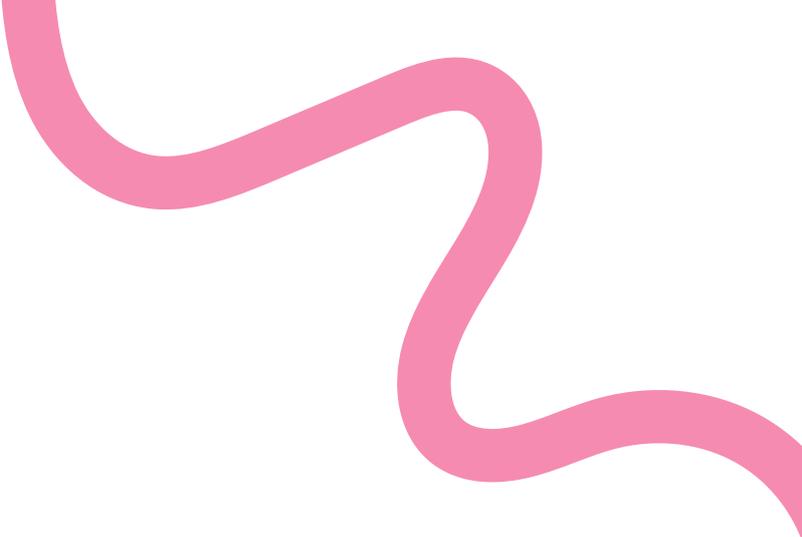




CHILDREN KNOW BETTER REPORT

NEPAL





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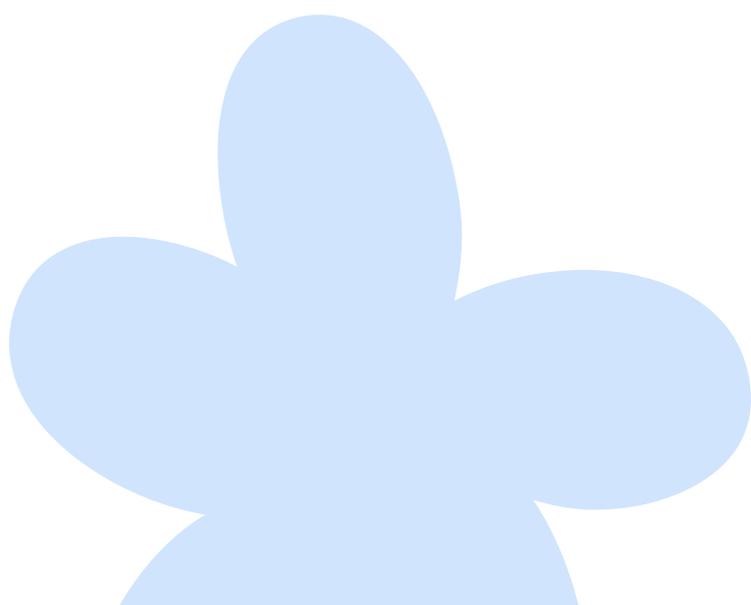
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INTRODUCTION

The *Children Know Better* project is a pioneering initiative led by ECPAT International, in partnership with Association for Community Development (ACD) in Bangladesh and Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN-Nepal) in Nepal. The project seeks to strengthen the role of children as change agents in efforts to prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation and abuse. Rooted in the principle that children have the right to be heard in matters affecting them, the project empowers children and young people not only to share their perspectives but also to shape solutions and influence decision-makers at local, national, and global levels.

The baseline studies conducted in Bangladesh and Nepal confirmed both the urgency and relevance of this initiative. In Bangladesh, while child protection structures exist, they remain fragmented and under-resourced, with many children unaware of their rights or of safe channels to seek help. In Nepal, high levels of sexual violence, abuse, and harmful practices persist, with limited reporting due to stigma and lack of child-friendly mechanisms. Children interviewed highlighted barriers such as social taboos, victim-blaming, and weak referral pathways that leave survivors without adequate support. Across both countries, children consistently expressed the desire to be part of the solution – to learn, speak out, and advocate for safer communities.

Building on these findings, the *Children Know Better* project was designed to address critical gaps by:

- ✓ **Strengthening children's agency** through training and peer-to-peer capacity-development.
- ✓ **Conducting child-led research** to generate evidence from children's own perspectives on CSEA.
- ✓ **Facilitating participatory data analysis**, ensuring children validate and interpret the evidence.
- ✓ **Engaging decision-makers** through advocacy sessions where children present their findings and recommendations.

This report presents the outcomes of the child-led participatory research and analysis processes in Nepal, highlighting how children have not only articulated their lived realities but also advanced concrete solutions for preventing and addressing CSEA. It demonstrates that when provided with the right tools, protection, support and spaces, children are **powerful advocates who know better** what needs to change to make their world safer.

METHODOLOGY

The Children Know Better project was intentionally designed to be fully participatory and child-led, with children shaping every stage of the research and advocacy process. From the outset, child advocates in Bangladesh and Nepal defined the research questions, selected the data collection methods, and agreed on the sampling approaches. In Nepal, 21 children (11 girls and 10 boys) were voluntarily recruited through a participatory process to lead the peer-to-peer research activities and child led advocacy with decision makers.

The project was implemented in Lalitpur Metropolitan City Wards No. 11, 21 and 22. To provide support, ECPAT and CWIN recruited 10 young adult peer educators (three male and seven female) all below 25 years old. This decision - to engage young people rather than older adults, was deliberate, ensuring a peer-to-peer approach that aimed at minimizing generational barriers and stereotypes which could have undermined the spirit of child leadership.

Both the child leaders and peer educators received training on safeguarding, research ethics, sexuality and relationships education, communication and child-led advocacy, equipping them with the skills and confidence to take forward the research. As a result, the child researchers engaged 169 of their peers and 25 adult decision-makers across the 3 Wards within Lalitpur Metropolitan City.

The child leaders in Nepal sought to investigate and identify the most prevalent forms of sexual exploitation and abuse of children within their communities in Lalitpur Metropolitan City, specifically sampling Wards 10, 21, and 22. They engaged their peers and community members to explore the underlying risks, causes, and impacts of sexual exploitation affecting children in their local contexts. To investigate the issue, they opted for qualitative research methods including 22 peer-to-peer focus group discussions (FGDs) with 90 girls and 79 boys from 12 to 17 years old. Children also identified the need to interview 25 adult decision makers and professionals, including law enforcement officials, government representatives, religious leaders, community leaders in order to capture a full picture of the challenges and protective mechanisms in place within their communities.



FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

CHILDREN'S AWARENESS OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Children's understanding of sexual exploitation and abuse was found to be age-dependent and generally superficial. Participants showed varying levels of awareness, but this did not equate to practical knowledge. For instance, the younger age group (12-14) was unfamiliar with the concept of "good touch and bad touch," while older participants (15+) knew the terms but lacked a deeper conceptual clarity about abuse and exploitation. Their discussions revealed that knowledge on the issue often comes from personal experience, peer-to-peer conversations, and exposure to online content (harmful or not), indicating both awareness and exposure to risk.

Many children were able to explain what sexual abuse and exploitation meant, providing examples and definitions that reflected good levels of understanding of these concepts. This was particularly clear in focus group discussions where children mentioned forms of sexual exploitation of girls in "red-light districts" (FGD 11) and cases of sexual abuse affecting boys, including cases where the abusers were boys, men, and even girls (FGD 6).

Children shared experiences that revealed a strong presence in their lives of risks of sexual harassment. In one focus group, out of seven girls, five reported being harassed by the same man who worked at a local shop. One girl explained that she "wasn't aware that it was inappropriate, but now feels able to take action", highlighting the importance of both understanding what sexual abuse is and empowering children to identify and respond to harmful sexual behaviour.

Children mentioned the issue of child-to-child sexual harassment and abuse as well, describing instances where peers engaged in harmful sexual behaviour. This highlights a pressing need to address such situations with specific approaches, ensuring that children understand boundaries and respect in peer relationships.

Sources of information about sexuality and relationships education are often informal for children participating in the research activities. They reported that much of their knowledge comes from peers or the internet, where the accuracy of information is inconsistent (FGD 7) and where it is frequent to be exposed to sexualised or inappropriate content (FGD 9), contributing to misunderstandings and in some cases to normalisation of harmful sexual behaviours.



TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED RISKS AND DIGITAL SAFETY OF CHILDREN

Children's reflections about risks facilitated by technologies revealed complex patterns within the digital environment. Technology is deeply integrated into their daily lives, but children repeatedly described the online world as a space allowing misinformation, exploitation, and exposure to sexualised or harmful content. Across several focus group discussions, children expressed uncertainty about the reliability of the internet as a source of information. They agreed that "[online] there are lots of information which they find to be conflicting", making it difficult to know what is reliable and what is not.

It is interesting to note that children clearly recognise the role of economic vulnerability in dynamics of sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as how the cases are managed. In one discussion, participants described how financial hardship could increase children's exposure to exploitation, particularly in online and digital environments. On this topic, they specifically mentioned that *"children of poor backgrounds might be more exposed because they may take up risky propositions at a very meagre amount"* (FGD 8). This reflects children's awareness of how poverty intersects with technology-facilitated risks. Another distressing story shared by participants reinforced the idea that in some cases economic advantage might guarantee impunity to the perpetrator. When a 13-year-old girl was sexually abused by another student, and later gave birth and died from complications, it was reported that the boy who allegedly sexually abused her, belonging to a powerful family, faced no consequences: *"the boy was let go with 200,000 NPR given to the girl's family... the case was dismissed"*. This example underscores how children participating in the research understand the role and weight of social and financial power in perpetuating impunity and silencing victims.

Participants also mentioned *"fake photos through AI and other such things are circulating on internet"*. As one group explained, *"there is a risk of stranger using AI to create fake porn videos, images [...] to blackmail [...]"* (FGD 8). This shows children's awareness of evolving digital threats, including the use of artificial intelligence for image manipulation and extortion. Children frequently described the digital world as unsafe, sharing experiences and stories related to cybercrime, abuse, and exploitation. One participant shared that *"a girl was raped by her peers after she indicated through social media that she was at home alone"*, underscoring the lack of awareness of children on online safety and privacy.



Technology was also presented as a tool facilitating the production and circulation of sexualised content, sometimes of children, without their consent. One participant recounted that *“senior boys have brought a smart watch and taken photos of girls’ private parts in his school”*. Situations like this one appear not to be taken seriously by adults and the authorities to which children reported them: when the child warned the boys and suggested taking action, *“ultimately, no action was taken and [it was] forgotten”*, highlighting how technology can be used to violate privacy and dignity of children without accountability guarantees and appropriate follow-ups by adults. Children also mentioned having seen videos displaying or addressing sexual abuse or exploitation of boys; however, it was not always clear whether these materials were informative, sharing information about this risk and intended as warnings, or if they were harmful materials representing actual content of sexual abuse of children. Still, some children perceived technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases that *“stay online”* as more frequent towards boys than cases happening in-person (FGD 6).

At the same time, children also viewed digital environments as spaces for learning, in general but also specifically regarding sexuality, relationships and adolescence. One participant stated that he would like to learn about these topics *“from games like GTA, Rival game, PC games, etc”*. Another confirmed he would like to learn from *“time travel games, Minecraft and many others like friends, groups, shows, movies”* (FGD 10). These examples highlight how online and gaming environments have the potential to play an important role in shaping children’s understanding of themselves and the world, and how they are perceived as great educational and entertainment tools. Recognising this influence means using these tools as channels for engaging education on sexuality and relationships, safety, and wellbeing.

Overall, children demonstrated awareness of how technology can be both empowering and harmful, reflecting the need for initiatives that enhance children’s informed approach to the digital world, support safe online practices, and promote child-centred engagement with technology. However, according to their experiences, children’s understanding of their right to privacy and how this plays a crucial role in protecting themselves is not always clear, especially in digital settings, whose risks might feel less “concrete” than those to which they’re exposed to in-person.

CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AND RISKS WITHIN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

For many children participating in the research, schools, despite being seen as places of learning, are perceived as unsafe environments as well, where sexual abuse, harassment, and discrimination can occur. Their accounts reflected both experiences of courage and accountability, as well as persistent impunity and silence, often influenced by social status and institutional power. Cases of sexual harassment and abuse were reported by several groups of children, mentioning teachers behaving inappropriately with their students. One participant described how *“there was this one teacher in our school... he used to be touchy with female students and sometimes even with male students [...]”*. The child explained that after one specific incident became known, *“everyone voiced out against the teacher and the teacher was suspended”*. Another participant reported a similar case involving a teacher and a female student *“rumoured to be in a relationship”*, which also resulted in suspension after *“a police case was filed against that teacher”* (FGD 6).



These experiences show that when incidents were made public, children and adults together managed to effectively challenge the impunity often afforded to authority figures. In these examples, actions were taken against the perpetrators, and the victims were heard.

However, measures were not taken systematically for the cases reported. In some instances, offenders in positions of power were reported to not having been affected by any response, remaining immune to action despite reports. Children described how *"the principal was reported to have touched female students inappropriately – including pulling bra straps and pinching them"*. In this situation, despite multiple complaints from students and teachers, *"no action was taken"*. Such situations illustrate how power imbalances and institutional hierarchies can prevent victims from being heard and obtaining justice.

Children had divergent views about which types of schools were more likely to experience such incidents. Some considered private schools' students more exposed to risk, believing that *"private school teachers are more worried for their jobs"* and therefore behave with more restraint. Others, on the contrary, pointed to poor conditions and lack of supervision in government schools as increasing factors of risk. One group noted that *"schools with poor conditions and environments might be more prone to such cases... lack of structure could lead to ragging, sexual harassment, flirting, and seniors bullying juniors, especially targeting girls"*. Taken together, these contrasting perspectives might suggest that what children identify as the main risk factor is not the school's public or private status, but rather the resources, monitoring, and institutional culture of each school.

Importantly, beyond specific incidents, children expressed a more general concern that schools often reinforce silence and stigma rather than working on prevention and awareness. Participants reported that *"teachers skip topics related to sexuality and reproductive health in the syllabus"*, describing such subjects as too sensitive or inappropriate. As a result, schools are not only seen as places for learning and prevention but also as environments where broader social and cultural taboos are replicated and reinforced. Children generally agreed that they would prefer teachers and experts to provide accurate information, rather than relying on friends or online sources, which they know are not always dependable.

At the same time, children expressed limited trust in teachers talking about these issues in a confident manner, respecting the child's will on how publicly (or not) to disclose. In one of the focus groups, *"out of eight participants, three of them did not feel comfortable to talk with teachers and parents... because they think that they will leak the information and share everything"*. One child explained that *"whenever they share some secrets, they are first assured these things will not be shared with others, but they never keep the promise"*. This lack of confidentiality discourages children from disclosing sensitive experiences or seeking help.





IMPACT OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION ON CHILDREN'S WELLBEING

Children's accounts confirmed that they recognise how experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation have deep and long-lasting effects on their emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. Their narratives reflect trauma, fear, confusion, and isolation, as well as the loss of trust in others. Children described how they think their peers might face intense feelings of fear, confusion, and "being frozen" in moments of sexual abuse. Several participants mentioned that children have sensations of "scare, confusion, shock" when confronted with inappropriate sexual behaviours, "not knowing what to do in response" (FGD 8).

One girl showed a nuanced and empathetic understanding of the reality of children having been subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation, explaining clearly that when a child faces such an incident, "they can become very shocked and scared... even if they want to fight back or speak out, it's very hard to do so because of how scared and overwhelmed they feel emotionally and mentally". In several cases, children also associated such experiences with mental distress and symptoms of depression, particularly when they felt unable to disclose what had happened. In the most severe cases, children referred to incidents of rape that resulted in the death of victims.

The theme of isolation and silence surrounding abuse came out recurrently in the research. One participant shared the story of her close friend whose pictures were "taken [...] while changing her dress... that guy started to harass her with that picture and made a threat to share it on social media". The girl "told her family and friends after three months", by which time "she was found mentally unstable and unwell". This delay in disclosure reveals how children often end up carrying the psychological burden alone, struggling with fear, shame, or uncertainty about how others might react.

Many participants also highlighted that fear of retaliation or disbelief prevents them from speaking up. As one explained, "children may not speak up due to fear that their family and they themselves might get harmed, especially if the abuser threatens them. After facing something bad once, they may shut down emotionally due to trauma and stress. If they confide in someone and that person dismisses them or shares it with others, trust breaks further. Not all friends are trustworthy".

Overall, the findings reveal that sexual abuse and exploitation deeply affect children's emotional stability, sense of trust, and ability to seek help. Abuse impacts not only the individual's perception of safety but also their reliance on family, friends, and peers. The fear that others might be harmed, or that a disclosure will be managed badly, creates circles of silence that deepen the sense of diffidence and distress, leaving children to cope with trauma in isolation.

FAMILY DYNAMICS, TRUST AND THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND CLOSE COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Within this context, children recognise how family can be both a potential source of protection and, at times, a place of risk or silence. Children's testimonies confirm how the attitudes and responses of parents, siblings, and other relatives significantly shape whether a child feels safe, supported, and believed.

Elder sisters often appeared as the most trusted figures for girls when they seek both emotional comfort and reliable information. Having "already gone through the same changes", sisters are seen as relatable and understanding, offering guidance. This stresses the importance of family relations and peer role models within the household, but also the need to support and equip knowledge-sharing and educational spaces among peers. Many participants associated siblings, particularly elder ones, with a "sense of connection, trust, and comfort". Such relationships can be crucial when other sources of information or support, like teachers, are perceived as judgmental or close-minded towards some topics. Thus, siblings fill the gap left by adults, both caregivers and other adults in children's protective environments, acting as informal educators and confidants in matters related to puberty, relationships, and safety.

However, children also noted how parents, especially mothers, are important figures in their learning processes, mostly about personal care, hygiene, and menstrual health. When parent-child communication exists and is perceived as open and safe, girls feel they "got good and correct information". However, children's views were mixed: while some said they would appreciate their parents taking a guiding or "teaching" role on sexuality and relationships education, others admitted they would feel "awkward", "shy", or "uncomfortable". Indeed, a repeated concern was the fear that parents (and adults more broadly) might breach confidentiality, as previously noted.

This lack of trust might have consequences: first, pushing children to look for information outside of the family or other educational environments, leaving space for unreliable information; and then, undermining disclosure and reinforcing children's sense of isolation.

While many children described their homes as safe spaces, children also reported that risks can emerge from the presence of certain relatives: "[...] it is safe in the house but not when the relatives visit with bad intentions". Such remarks suggest that harassment by relatives is not perceived as an exceptional event but as a recurring risk.

Some testimonies described severe abuse within the family itself. A 14-year-old girl shared the story of a friend whose uncles "misbehaved with her" while her mother was in hospital. When she told her, the mother "didn't take it seriously and said, 'Ignore it, it's not a big deal.'" This normalisation of harassment deeply affected the girl's feelings, sense of self-worth and understanding of boundaries, and children noted how these kinds of reactions in children's protective environment can have a strong impact on their self-esteem and understanding of risk.



Another child described a similar but more serious situation, where “a friend from a rural area was almost raped by her own father”. When the girl confided in her grandmother, she was told not to share it: moreover, the child’s mother, herself a victim of abuse, faced pressure from the grandmother not to report the incident. Only when the younger brother also attempted to assault the girl the mother took action, but even in that moment, family members tried to prevent reporting.

This case illustrates two harmful dynamics: on one side, how sexual violence and abuse, when not addressed, can be normalised and reproduced. Silence and immunity of abusers within families can perpetuate cycles of violence and trauma, showing children that violence can be repeated without fearing consequences. On the other hand, taboos around sexuality, sexual abuse and exploitation can mix with family hierarchies and reputation, making it even more complicated to disclose and to find someone willing to listen and to support, thus leaving victims isolated and unprotected

In some of these discussions, children mentioned that when parents fail to support them, they would seek help from *friends’ families*, especially from parents of friends who they believe could persuade their own families to take action. This highlights the importance of broader protective social and community networks, which can play a crucial role in breaking silence and encouraging accountability.

COMMUNITY ROLE, PUBLIC SPACES AND CHILDREN’S SENSE OF SAFETY

The broader community emerges as another decisive factor shaping children’s experiences and perceptions of risks and protection. In some instances, community members and local leaders are perceived as allies or trusted figures, in others, their responses reinforce violence or fear. Moreover, the way public spaces are organised directly influences how exposed children feel in their lives.

Some children mentioned that community leaders can be trusted in cases of abuse or harassment. One child specifically highlighted the “ward leader” as a person to whom they would report incidents, suggesting that figures of authority within the community can be perceived as positive and protective figures who can support cases. These mentions point to the role of community-based mechanisms of care and accountability, especially when those in leadership positions are approachable and credible protective actors for children.

However, this potential is largely dependent on the attitudes and behaviour of individuals. When such figures ignore or do not take seriously children’s concerns, the entire network of community protection can weaken. Indeed, in some cases, children’s narratives reveal how community’s responses, even when meant to be protective, can reproduce cycles of violence. A child described an incident in which a girl was touched inappropriately by a boy from the same village. The girl “told everybody in the village and they all beat him”. This reaction, showing support for the victim, is also subjected to community and social norms that might affect negatively the outcomes and not always address the root causes of violence.

Community responses may also influence how children interpret appropriate reactions to sexual abuse. This was confirmed by the fact that several participants said that if someone approached them in an unwanted way, they would physically attack the person. While normal and understandable, self-protective reactions using violence may place children at greater risk if they are alone or the offender is in a power position, indicating the need for guidance on safe ways to reduce risk, respond and seek help. Moreover, children learn conflict resolution mechanisms from adults, who, based on their experience, provide examples for punitive approaches but are not always offering models for prevention and formal reporting, leaving them sometimes with no clarity on how to safely respond and look for support.

Public spaces are also frequently described as unsafe by children, especially during the evening or in isolated areas. Children referred to *"alleyways in their community"* where *"people who use drugs or behave inappropriately"* often gather, making them feel uncomfortable and exposed. Empty roads, unfamiliar streets, and even public vehicles or public festivals were cited as risky places where they feared harassment or abuse. These perceptions have practical consequences: they can limit children's mobility, participation in community life, and access to leisure or education. Insecurity in public spaces translates into limitations on their rights to movement, play, and development.

Certain everyday settings were also described as sites of discomfort or risk. In one example, several children mentioned a shop where the shopkeeper *"inappropriately touched various parts of their bodies and frequently teased them"*. Spaces that should feel ordinary and safe become sources of fear because adults do not ensure safety and inappropriate behaviours are normalised or tolerated: this kind of recurring discomfort in familiar places contributes to children's perception that abuse can occur anywhere and at any time, deepening their sense of vigilance and mistrust.

In this sense, children also raised concerns about the lack of safe spaces for play and recreation. Many noted the *"lack of nearby playgrounds or free spaces"*, which forces them to walk long distances to reach suitable areas. These journeys, in turn, are perceived as risky, exposing them to potential abuse or harassment.

This observation reflects a broader and very pragmatic understanding of safety: it is not only about protection from individuals but also about how physical environments are designed. The scarcity of child-friendly infrastructure such as playgrounds, child-friendly spaces close by, supervised areas, limits their freedom and contributes to their exposure to risk. This complex picture highlights the need for community-based prevention and protection strategies that combine education, leadership accountability, more inclusive urban planning, and above all, that include children's views and opinions as key elements of policy-making whenever they are concerned.



SOCIAL NORMS AND STIGMA IMPACTING CHILDREN'S DISCLOSURE AND WELLBEING

Broader social and cultural norms also shape how children disclose or remain silent about experiences of abuse, exploitation, and sexuality more broadly. Across focus group discussions, silence, shame, and fear of judgment emerged as influences limiting children's voices and their will and possibility to seek help.

Children are rarely encouraged to talk openly about these matters, nor are they accustomed to being asked their opinions. Hence, many child leaders described initial discomfort in speaking during the first focus group discussions: the atmosphere was described by facilitators as "uncomfortable and isolating" especially at the start, when talking about topics related to sexuality, body changes, and relationships. This hesitation reflect a broader culture of silence that gradually emerged from their interventions, that does not relate to sexual exploitation and abuse exclusively, but to discussions of adolescence and emotional development in general, indicating limited opportunities for open dialogue and education.

When children discussed how they might respond to harassment or inappropriate behaviour, their answers showed a range of potential reactions going from being vocal to being hesitant, mostly depending on the context. Some stated that in public or crowded places, they would "react loudly", confront the perpetrator, or even "call the police if it felt serious". On the other hand, they noted that if they were alone, they would likely "stay quiet" or "try to go away".

Further discussions showed that most children would still choose to keep such experiences private. As one group explained, they would "mostly keep these things among themselves", perhaps telling only a close friend or family member but rarely the police. The main reason given was concern that disclosure "may dishonour their image as well as their parents' face in society".

This fear of shame reflects engrained social stigma around sexual violence and victimisation. Even if children know that abuse is wrong and not their fault, they worry about how others will perceive them and their families if cases are disclosed. This strongly discourages disclosing abuse, particularly in communities where reputation is closely tied to family honour.



The stigma around sexual abuse is also reinforced by social norms that normalise or downplay inappropriate behaviour and blame victims. Children noted that people often judge harassment as *“just a joke or playing”*, even when it causes distress. One participant summarised that *“most of the time, people try to touch them while pretending it’s a joke, but most children feel uncomfortable”*, and hesitate to complain due to fear of being judged and due to society considering these attitudes as normal or acceptable.

Girls, in particular, are often blamed for what happens to them. As one group expressed, *“people might say it is their fault or question their behaviour. This fear of being blamed stops many girls from telling anyone about the abuse”*. Such reactions not only silence survivors but also reinforce gender inequalities: girls’ disclosure becomes less and less likely to happen and keeps being seen as something exceptional, while the blame on them for what they were subjected to is rarely challenged, and even less so publicly. This contributes to keeping girls discriminated and secluded and to discouraging children from seeking justice or emotional support.

Another observation came from one group of children, where participants agreed that *“there is too much awareness for the girls because of the old thinking and the mentality of girls being inferior”*. While the exact meaning of *“awareness”* here is not entirely clear, it likely reflects how girls receive heightened attention, warnings, and restrictions in their daily lives, motivated by efforts of *“protection”*, while silenced and blamed when sexual abuse actually happens. On the other hand, boys are granted more freedom and a higher place in the social hierarchy. Children appear aware of these double standards and how control over girls’ behaviour comes from patriarchal norms that treat girls as more vulnerable and less autonomous and see them as *“weak”* when they are subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation.

This flags that children are not passive audience of adult dynamics: they observe and question the gendered expectations placed upon them. It also brings to reflexions on masculinity and expectations for boys, which will be explored in the following section.

MASCULINITY AND EXPECTATIONS FOR BOYS

While gender norms and actual figures on sexual violence frame girls as the primary victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, discussions with children revealed that boys too face significant risks: these are, however, rarely acknowledged. The silence around boys’ experiences is not simply due to lack of awareness, but to rigid expectations of masculinity that define boys as strong, self-reliant, and invulnerable.

Several facilitators and participants noted that in many groups boys were initially reluctant to speak or even laughed off the topic. One facilitator observed that the boys *“weren’t taking it seriously and weren’t sharing much”*; when a participant tried to contribute, *“other boys discouraged him from speaking”*, and even in one-on-one follow-ups, the same boy *“didn’t share”*. This suggests that silence is not only imposed externally by adults’ social norms, but also reinforced within peer groups, where vulnerability can be mocked or punished. It also reinforces the perception that discussions about sexual violence do not concern boys, even though participants themselves later confirmed that this assumption is false.





As the conversation continued, boys began to engage more openly: they stated that *“the cases of boys are usually not under discussion”*. While girls’ experiences are more visible, *“the cases of boys are rarely covered”*. This imbalance reflects and reproduces a cultural bias: the idea that boys cannot or should not be victims. One boy observed that *“people think boys are physically and mentally stronger, so they assume they don’t experience such things”*. Another added that *“in a male-dominated society, these cases rarely come to light”*.

Despite this awareness, many boys admitted they would hesitate to speak up if they were victims. *“In our society, boys are always expected to be strong and tough”*, one participant said. *“If a boy goes through sexual abuse and tries to speak up, people might make fun of him or say he wasn’t strong enough to protect himself”*. Others pointed out that *“society makes fun of boys once someone discovers it”*, and that *“people traumatise the boy, making his future very difficult”*. The expectation to remain strong and responsible, represented by convictions such as that boys have *“big responsibilities to fulfil”*, further isolates them emotionally and prevents them from accessing support systems based on the idea that their *“role”* within the society requires them to be fully autonomous.

When asked how they would respond to inappropriate touch or harassment, most boys said they would confide only in a *“dear friend or elder brother”*, someone they *“trust and feel safe with”*. Very few mentioned teachers, parents, or the police. Some boys said they *“simply hold it in because they do not know who they can tell or they are too afraid”*.

However, training and awareness programs appeared to make a difference. One boy shared that, after attending a non-governmental organisation-led session, he understood *“that we can refuse, run away, and tell a person we trust immediately”*. This demonstrates how targeted interventions can expand boys’ perception of how and when it is possible to seek help. Discussions also revealed worrying inherited perceptions about male adolescence as a time of uncontrollable impulses. When talking about adolescence and changes children go through, boys listed *“desire to bully, wanting to fight someone, doing dangerous things, drug addiction, fighting with parents, wanting to rape a girl, or self-harm”* among the *“emotional changes”* associated with their age. This normalisation of violence, both directed towards themselves and others, suggests that some boys interpret aggression, sexual dominance, and risk-taking as natural parts of this phase. It also points to a lack of clarity in telling apart natural attraction and sexual desire from harmful sexual behaviours, non-consensual sexual relations, which might also depend on the absence of models for emotional regulation and respectful relationships.



CHILD PARTICIPATION

The abovementioned findings draw a picture of children's lives largely influenced by adult-centric decisions and environments. This is despite the adoption of country's legislation and policies that foresee a wide range of child-led and child-centric platforms embedded in governance structures at local, provincial, and national levels. The literature review conducted found that the most prominent ones were also those mentioned and acknowledged by children participating in the research. These include child clubs, dialogue forums like *Baal Club* and *Baal Bhela*, issue-focused networks such as *Green Chakra*, and the national Child Friendly Local Governance Forum. Together, they create a strong ecosystem for child participation in decision-making, planning, and advocacy. Some children also mentioned the Junior Scouts as a space that allows them to discuss and share their views, as well as the activities and spaces offered by non-governmental organisations such as CWIN or Save the Children.

These platforms are meant to provide children (especially those from marginalised backgrounds) with opportunities to engage with authorities, influence local policies, and advocate on issues like education, safety, and protection. Structures like Child Rights Committees, dedicated budget allocations,

and the presence of child focal points in local governments are designed to formalise participation: many child focal points, including those participating in the research, are indeed in contact with ward officers and local institutions, and that contact is established through the child clubs. Both CWIN and the participants shared success stories of child clubs' members that later became community leaders and even of clubs that transformed into organisations conducting activities at the local level.

However, the system is not fully effective. While children are often active and vocal, their influence on actual decisions is limited, resulting in outcomes within policies and measures that do not really reflect their views and expressed needs. Participation is still largely adult-facilitated rather than child-led, making their role in decision-spaces somehow tokenistic and not always meaningful. In addition, safeguarding protocols exist but are inconsistently applied. Many platforms function more as symbolic consultations, with limited feedback or evidence of impact on policies, especially in preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse, which remains under-addressed and lacking consultation and engagement with children.

Some platforms, like *Green Chakra* and *Family for Every Child*, successfully reach excluded groups and engage on sensitive topics, but they remain small-scale and heavily dependent on civil society and external funding. Government-led mechanisms show promise but often suffer from staff turnover, limited local capacity, and weak accountability.

Overall, Nepal has strong frameworks and an inclusive vision for child participation, but implementation is fragmented, and sustainability remains a challenge without stronger government ownership and institutional commitment.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT, PROTECTION AND THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The reflections shared by children reveal a discrepancy between the existence of protective legal frameworks and their actual accessibility and enforcement. Although several children stated that they would go to the police if faced with sexual harassment or abuse, most acknowledged that they did not know how to do so. The absence of clear, child-friendly information on reporting procedures has been mentioned repeatedly. This excludes children from mechanisms that are supposed to protect them, showing how legal protection is not only a matter of existence but also of understanding and accessibility.

Some children also made it clear that they feel like a threshold of seriousness for reporting exists. They felt that only "extreme" or "very serious" incidents would justify going to the police, reflecting a tendency to minimise or normalise certain forms of sexual harassment. This likely comes from adults' attitudes that downplay children's experiences, as well as from fears of dishonour, gossip, or reputational harm for both the child and their family, as seen above. As one group expressed, "they would rather avoid talking to police as it may dishonour their image as well as their parents' face in society".

Lack of trust in law enforcement was a recurring theme. In one focus group, a girl said: "the police can't be trusted because they don't really take these cases seriously. They take a lot of time even to file the case, and most of the time the person who did such a crime gets out by paying money or using power". Her peers agreed: perceptions

of corruption and impunity ("people are corrupted and take money to hide the crimes committed by them") reinforce the idea that seeking help and justice is not only ineffective but potentially harmful. Several children mentioned that their communities often would tend to "manage it internally" through community leaders rather than turning to formal institutions. This further weakens the legitimacy of legal processes, while the preferred customary systems of resolution may not always prioritise the child's rights.

Children also expressed concerns about respect of their privacy when disclosing abuse. As one boy explained, "when the child is in depression it is hard to tell about the topic and he doesn't trust anyone easily. He is afraid to tell the police because of his privacy and not having safe security". Many children associated going to the police with exposure, shame, or even retaliation, making it clear that protection systems are not perceived as child-sensitive or survivor-centred.

Gender norms also shape how children perceive the justice system. When asked if boys and girls would seek help in the same way, participants unanimously said no. One girl explained that "if a boy goes through a similar experience, people often may not take his case seriously or believe him. It is easier for girls to get support because most of these cases are believed to happen to girls". This reflects a bias in both community and institutional responses, where protective laws and services that should be gender-neutral are applied in ways that overlook male survivors, leaving boys' experiences largely invisible to law enforcement and service providers. Children's distrust in institutions, limited awareness of procedures, fear of social repercussions, and perceptions of corruption all point to barriers that are both structural and cultural.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CHILD PARTICIPATION

- ✓ **Strengthen and make effective child participation spaces.** Children highlighted that child clubs provide valuable knowledge and peer support. These spaces should be strengthened, financially supported, and linked to decision-making processes so that children's perspectives can actually shape and influence policy efforts.
- ✓ **Institutionalise peer-support systems within schools.** Establish student-led committees or mentoring programs trained to listen and refer cases. As often mentioned by participants, children often disclose to peers first; equipping them to respond safely can create a link between first disclosure and formal help-seeking.
- ✓ **Ensure meaningful child participation in programme design and evaluation of international and national non-governmental organisations.** Children's experiences and perspectives should inform project planning, implementation, and evaluation. Effective participatory approaches strengthen trust between children and organisations and lead to more tangible results.

- ✓ **Guarantee children's participation in decision-making spaces through the strengthening of existing of child-centric platforms.** Mechanisms for meaningful child participation should be institutionalised at municipal and ward levels, and Child Rights Committees must be maintained active, well-resourced, and trained to support children effectively.

SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL NORMS

- ✓ **Strengthen parents' capacity to respond supportively when children disclose abuse.** Families must be encouraged and supported to listen without judgment and take disclosure seriously. Children stressed that when parents judge their words as "nonsense", it lowers their confidence and discourages sharing. Programs involving families and communities should focus on positive communication, empathy, and non-punitive parenting.
- ✓ **Work to shift community mindsets from victim-blaming to support.** Communities must move from blaming and shaming victims to believing, supporting, and protecting them. Awareness initiatives should target both adults and children to build mutual listening and understanding, promote solidarity, and ensure survivors are not isolated.

✓ **Acknowledge that both girls and boys are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.** Campaigns and educational programs should challenge stereotypes that only girls can be subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse and that boys must always appear strong and self-sufficient. Families should foster environments where boys can express vulnerability and emotions. To do this, it is crucial to engage men and boys in awareness and education initiatives on sexuality and relationship education to reduce stigma, harmful social norms, and gender-based discrimination.

✓ **Promote open conversations and awareness-raising activities in communities.** Children called for community trainings and awareness sessions to tackle taboos around sexuality, relationships, adolescence, and abuse. These should take place in schools, child clubs, and community forums, involving parents, teachers, and local leaders.

✓ **Foster collective accountability and responsibility.** As children put it, “every adult should feel responsible”. Ward offices and local bodies should provide information sessions, public updates, and community dialogues on child protection, ensuring that local governance stays actively engaged. In addition, increased parental monitoring and engagement is necessary: parents should be proactive in following up with authorities and demanding accountability from local service providers. Programs should train and empower them to track, question, and support initiatives promoted by local administration (in this case, especially by Lalitpur Metropolitan City, as highlighted by children).

SCHOOL SYSTEM

✓ **Establish accessible and child-friendly reporting mechanisms in schools.** Children stressed that every school should have confidential, child-friendly complaint boxes and separate, safe washrooms for girls and boys. These simple measures help children feel protected in their environment.

✓ **Strengthen staff selection and accountability procedures.** Clear and strict protocols must be in place to assess the background, conduct, and suitability of all individuals working with children. Schools should be accountable to their students: teachers and staff violating boundaries should face disciplinary actions. In addition, schools could conduct child-led assessments to identify risks, protective mechanisms, the effectiveness of policies and procedures including reporting channels in the institutions.



- ✓ **Integrate comprehensive, age-appropriate education on adolescence, sexuality and relationships education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and protection.** School curricula should include accurate information on physical and emotional changes during adolescence, consent and risks of sexual abuse and exploitation. Since children said how textbooks may be “boring” to them, materials should be complemented with interactive and creative tools, such as theatre performances, visual campaigns, verified online resources on popular social media, and digital awareness content, as suggested by participants.
- ✓ **Train teachers to respond with empathy.** Teachers can and should play a crucial role as first points of contact for children. It is necessary that they are trained on trauma-informed communication, confidentiality measures, and referral procedures.
- ✓ **Ensure schools are informed and connected to local protection systems and initiatives.** Schools should maintain direct communication with municipalities, Lalitpur Metropolitan City specifically in this context, and with local authorities in general to stay informed on available child protection programs and to actively demand accountability and support for implementation at the school level.
- ✓ **Facilitate open and progressive dialogue between students and parents.** Schools should open safe spaces for intergenerational discussion where parents, teachers, and students can explore and discuss sensitive topics. Encouraging dialogue reduces the isolation and shame often associated with these issues.

TARGETED RECOMMENDATIONS TO INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

- ✓ **Prioritise and expand programmes addressing child protection and sexual exploitation.** Children expressed strong appreciation for organisations working on these issues, highlighting the positive impact of existing interventions. Such initiatives should be amplified, sustained, and integrated into broader efforts, through inter-agencies committees, learning sessions and pilot projects. This has to be coupled with efforts to increase visibility and reach of existing programmes, since many children were unaware of organisations working on child protection and sexual exploitation.
- ✓ **Collaborate with schools, communities, families and local authorities and leaders to carry out regular and inclusive awareness activities.** Awareness sessions should be aligned and co-designed with municipalities and schools, avoiding duplication and ensuring that services complement existing efforts, aiming to ensure sense of responsibility and local ownership of child protection efforts.
- ✓ **Address risks linked to digital spaces and technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation.** Both children and parents should receive training on online grooming, technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation, cyberbullying, and digital safety in general. Programmes should include practical tools to use filters, apply mechanisms for protection by default and recognise and report online risks.



WEBSITES OPERATORS, TECH, SOCIAL MEDIA AND GAMING COMPANIES

- ✓ **Monitor and regulate advertising content.** Website and platform operators should ensure advertisements are age-appropriate and relevant as children reported frequent exposure to sexualised content while streaming videos or playing games and called for advertising controls.
- ✓ **Eliminate misleading “clickbait” content.** Children highlighted the prevalence of clickbait and inappropriate content designed to attract views. Platforms should prevent harmful material from being promoted to children.
- ✓ **Use gaming platforms as positive learning and awareness tools.** Gaming companies, such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA) and Minecraft, could integrate educational or awareness-raising elements to promote messages about changes during adolescence, safety, and respect, as participating children suggested that games and interactive tools are potential channels to learn and have a better understanding of their feelings and mood during this phase.
- ✓ **Strengthen moderation and reporting mechanisms.** Technology companies, such as social media and gaming platforms, should ensure easy, accessible, and child-friendly reporting tools. Clear follow-up processes must be put in place, so children feel heard and protected.
- ✓ **Collaborate with schools, parents, and child protection organisations.** Technology companies should partner with institutions such as schools, community organisations and non-governmental organisations to co-design and promote digital literacy and online safety campaigns, equipping children, parents and caregivers with the skills to navigate online safely. and caregivers with the skills to navigate online safely.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

- ✓ **Establish and strengthen child-friendly legal mechanisms, including private and safe spaces for children to report and participate in proceedings.** These initiatives must receive dedicated budget allocations and ensure inclusivity for both girls and boys.
- ✓ **Create fast-track reporting and case management processes.** Cases involving children should be prioritised and do not get dropped due to intimidations, delays, or lack of follow-up.

- ✓ **Implement clear, independent controls against corruption, nepotism, and political interference.** As one participant said, *“when such cases happen, there should not be any discrimination between the poor and the rich; the rich must also take accountability for the crimes they commit”*. Transparent and independent accountability mechanisms must be enforced to prevent such cases.
- ✓ **Ensure justice staff, including police, prosecutors, judges and local level justice system, receive specialised training** on child rights, including child sexual exploitation and abuse, trauma-informed approaches, and gender sensitivity.

GOVERNMENT, LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

- ✓ **Promote coordinated action across institutions and actors.** Protection requires shared effort: local governments, police, schools, parents, health professionals, and civil society must work together to create safe environments where children can grow free from fear and harm.
- ✓ **Ensure adequate remuneration** for government officials and law enforcement officers to reduce incentives for corruption and strengthen accountability towards children and communities.
- ✓ **Frame child sexual exploitation and abuse as a priority issue** for the city of Lalitpur. The mayor and local administration should lead prevention and response initiatives, ensuring visibility and commitment.

- ✓ **Integrate child-friendly urban planning,** including accessible playgrounds, safe recreational areas, and proper lighting in all neighbourhoods, especially in isolated or high-risk areas. Alongside, establish community-based support centres in locations where cases of sexual abuse are frequently reported, and increase visible police presence together with security cameras, so that children and families can access immediate assistance.
- ✓ **Ensure that reporting processes within the police are child-friendly and accessible.** The police should develop and advertise clear, child-friendly reporting mechanisms.
- ✓ **Organise regular, interactive training led by the Metropolitan City for children, parents, and professionals.** As children suggested, these sessions should use games and activities rather than one-way lectures to ensure engagement and understanding.



✓ **There is need for proper implementation and institutionalization of available laws and policies.** Section 57 of Children's Act 2075 of Nepal -Standards relating to child protection states that: 1) A school, every public body, private sector as well as social organization directly working with children shall formulate and enforce child protection standards at the institutional level, in order to prevent violence against children or child sexual abuse, ensure protection of children and immediately take action on complaints. 2) It shall be the liability of the school, chief of every public body, private sector and social organization to enforce the child protection standards formulated pursuant to sub-section (1). The Ministry of Education has also issued guidelines on a complaint response mechanism (CRM) in 2016 with an aim to systematise the practice

with standard procedures, encouraging all schools to set up such mechanisms. Lalitpur Metropolitan City has also brought Procedure for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights, 2080. This procedure clearly defines the role of Child Rights Committees and Child Clubs and with proper implementation would ensure children are protected from violence. While Nepal's Electronic Transactions Act, 2063 (2008) criminalizes general cyber-offences, it lacks specific provisions for child-specific crimes like online grooming or Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM). Similarly, the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act, 2007 of Nepal criminalizes the trafficking and transportation of children for any purpose, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, or illegal adoption, and it defines a "child" as any person below eighteen years of age.



CONCLUSION

Children in Nepal have demonstrated that they have some knowledge of the issues that affect their safety and wellbeing. Their reflections reveal how deeply social norms, gender expectations, and stigma can shape children's experiences, impede adequate prevention and limit their ability to seek support. They also show that while Nepal has strong mechanisms for child participation, these do not translate adequately into practice. Children point to gaps between what should protect them and what actually does.

This report aims to amplify children's perspectives and use their insights to inform stronger action at every level of society. We call on decision-makers, within families, communities, institutions, and government, to take children's views into account, work with them as partners, and transform these findings into concrete change.





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