



Child violence and abuse, child safety and liberation, lack of political will: A painful reality

Norless Zibele Nodangala¹ 

¹ Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Walter Sisulu University, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to address the rampant violence against children globally, highlighting the tragic consequences of abduction, abuse, and murder. The paper underscores the urgency for stronger political will and enhanced frameworks to protect children, advocating for their rights to live safely and flourish. The study adopted a doctrinal methodology, drawing on esteemed scholarly work and examining both local and international texts. This comprehensive investigation explored the catastrophic suppression of young voices and the various forms of violence inflicted upon them. The findings revealed a critical lack of political will that contributes to an unsafe environment for children, further embedding social injustices and preventing peaceful living conditions for families. The study assessed the profound impact of these violent acts on children's futures and the failure of existing frameworks designed to ensure their safety. Based on the findings, the study recommends that states strengthen their protective processes for children, emphasizing the need for political commitment to enforce and enhance these frameworks. The study advocates prioritizing children's liberation as a crucial step toward alleviating their suffering. This study adds a vital voice to the discourse on violence against children, contributing to the scholarship by highlighting the necessity for increased political will and robust protective mechanisms, thereby fostering an environment where children can live free from harm.

Keywords: Child Violence, Abuse, Liberation, Political Will, Killings, Social, Peaceful.

INTRODUCTION

The global crisis of violence against children stands as one of humanity's deepest moral failures, leaving consequences that echo across communities, generations, and entire regions. South Africa is not an exception, while the Constitution and other legislation guard against such abuses and underpin the free and just living for every child.¹ In addition, recent research reveals the staggering scale of this crisis; for instance, half of all children between the ages of 2 and 17 experience some form of violence annually, while millions of girls and boys endure sexual abuse before adulthood.² Even more distressing is the finding that more than 400 million children each year are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, a level of suffering so immense that it resembles a global pandemic of harm. These figures are not abstract

¹ Section 28 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

² "Violence against Children," accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>.

CORRESPONDENCE – Norless Zibele Nodangala Email: znodangala@wsu.ac.za

PUBLICATION HISTORY - Received : 9th January, 2026 | Accepted: 1st June, 2026 | Published: 23rd July, 2026.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE –Nodangala, Norless Zibele. "Child Violence and Abuse, Child Safety and Liberation, Lack of Political Will: A Painful Reality." *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 7, no.5 (2026): 1340- 1353 <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20267418>

COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING - © 2026 The Author(s). Published and Maintained by Noyam Journals.

This is an open access article under the CCBY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

data points; they represent real children whose lives, dignity, and futures have been irreparably damaged by trauma that should never have been allowed to happen.³

In this regard, understanding why such violence persists requires more profound reflection on the cultural and historical forces that have shaped societies over time. Scholars argue that the widespread abuse of children is not an isolated phenomenon but is embedded within enduring social structures that normalize cycles of harm. This perspective urges a shift from viewing child protection as a charitable gesture to recognizing it as a core obligation of the state, one that demands robust educational interventions and legal accountability when officials fail to safeguard children from exploitation, violence, or death, especially where those failures intersect with corruption or personal gain.⁴ Yet even as the urgency of the issue is acknowledged, global efforts to address child violence remain fragmented. Research indicates that inadequate data, uncertainty about which interventions are effective, and persistent disagreements among advocates over the most pressing priorities continue to hinder progress. In some cases, competition between networks focused on different forms of violence has weakened the development of robust global governance structures, suggesting that well-meaning actors can unintentionally hinder unified action.⁵

The realities of implementation are even starker in sub-Saharan Africa. Although nearly all countries in the region have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁶ this legal commitment has not translated into meaningful improvements in children's daily lives. Deep-seated socioeconomic challenges, including widespread poverty, shifting family structures, corruption, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and ongoing conflict, have created an environment where child protection remains aspirational rather than achievable. Adequate child protection, therefore, requires a strong political will and transformative policies that address these structural drivers of vulnerability.⁷ Legal scholars further warn that without strong, targeted legislation, children remain vulnerable to some of the most brutal forms of violence. Research tracing crimes against children from ancient to modern contexts reveals a disturbing pattern of abduction, physical torture, sexual assault, and murder, often with bodies mutilated or displayed to instil fear. While legal reforms are essential, scholars argue that legislation alone is insufficient; effective deterrence requires coordinated strategies that address trafficking networks, organ harvesting operations, and other organised criminal systems that profit from child victimisation.⁸ Some scholars argue for a broader conceptualization of what constitutes violence against children. However, instead of focusing narrowly on physical violence, their framework highlights the many ways in which structural, cultural, and intersectional forms of harm shape children's experiences.⁹ This perspective emphasizes children's agency and aligns child protection with global policy agendas, such as the UN Security Council's Youth, Peace, and Security framework, recognizing that children must be engaged as active participants in peacebuilding and violence prevention strategies.¹⁰

The heightened vulnerability of children in contexts of conflict and political violence underscores this need for a comprehensive approach. Modern warfare increasingly unfolds in civilian spaces, placing children at the centre of violence that extends far beyond traditional battlefields. Exposure to terrorism, civil conflict, and political instability creates psychological and physical harm that can shape a child's entire life trajectory.¹¹ Even where legal frameworks exist, children often continue to face discrimination and institutional barriers that hinder the realisation of their rights. Scholars argue that protecting children is not only a moral imperative but also a prerequisite for national

³ Mboza Lwandiko, "Rise of Children Violence and Sexual Abuse: A Need to Raise Voices Higher," Available at SSRN 4635567, 2023.

⁴ Riane Eisler, "Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 7.

⁵ Yusra Ribhi Shawar and Jeremy Shiffman, "A Global Priority: Addressing Violence against Children," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 99, no. 6 (2021): 414.

⁶ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a landmark international agreement that outlines the rights of children and the responsibilities of governments to protect those rights.

⁷ Munyae M Mulinge, "Implementing the 1989 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Overlooked Socioeconomic and Political Dilemmas," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 26, no. 11 (2002): 1117–30.

⁸ Malik Ema, D. R. Malik, and W. A. Malik, "Promulgate Strong Legal Framework For Child Protection Against Offences Of Torturing, Abusing, Or Killing," *International Journal* 4, no. 2 (2021): 9.

⁹ Celia Bähr and Laura K Taylor, "Recognizing the Diverse and Complex Nature of Violence in Childhood," 2021.

¹⁰ Bähr and Taylor, "Recognizing the Diverse and Complex Nature of Violence in Childhood."

¹¹ Michelle Slone and Tomer Shechner, "Adolescents Exposed to 7 Years of Political Violence: Differential Relations between Exposure and Its Impact for Jewish and Arab Israelis," *Child Indicators Research* 4, no. 3 (2011): 529–45.

development. They call for a comprehensive review of constitutional provisions, child rights legislation, and evidentiary rules, alongside enhanced collaboration between governments and civil society, as well as improved services for children in need.¹²

Foundational global research has long underscored the severity of the issue. The World Report on Violence against Children remains a cornerstone in the field, providing comprehensive evidence of the forms, prevalence, and consequences of violence worldwide. Its enduring influence demonstrates the importance of systematic documentation and global monitoring in driving reforms and shaping policy responses.¹³ Contemporary scholarship continues to expand on these commitments by examining how international law frames states' obligations to prevent and respond to violence against children. Recent analyses highlight that while legal documents and treaties articulate clear rights, the real challenge lies in translating these commitments into action and ensuring that states honour their duties to protect children from harm.¹⁴ Hence, the objective of this study is to critically examine the root causes and consequences of child violence and abuse, while evaluating the role of political will in strengthening frameworks that protect, liberate, and safeguard children from harm.

METHODOLOGY

The author adopted a doctrinal methodology, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter. This approach involved a meticulous examination of esteemed scholarly work that provided a solid theoretical foundation for the discussion. By referencing both local and international texts, the author contextualised the findings within a broader legal and academic framework. Through this method, the author successfully navigated the intricate landscape of legal principles and doctrines, offering valuable insights into the field.

DISCUSSION

The Global Crisis of Violence and Abuse Against Children

The global surge in violence and abuse against children represents one of the most severe and far-reaching human rights violations of the modern era. Each year, more than a billion children across diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds suffer some form of violence. Systematic research shows that over half of the world's children, specifically those aged 2–17, experienced violence within the last year alone, with prevalence rates of more than 50% in Asia, Africa, and North America.¹⁵ These numbers reflect not just statistical trends but a deeply rooted crisis that threatens the healthy development and well-being of countless young people. Violence against children manifests in multiple forms and cuts across cultural, social, and economic boundaries. Studies indicate that roughly three-quarters of children aged 2–4 are subjected to violent discipline at the hands of parents or caregivers, while half of adolescents aged 13–15 experience peer-related violence within school environments.¹⁶ Sexual violence adds another devastating layer, with global estimates suggesting that over 30 million children have been sexually exploited in the past three decades. In the United States alone, approximately 100,000 children are used as prostitutes each year.¹⁷ Prevalence research reveals the breadth of this maltreatment: 127 per 1,000 children experience sexual abuse, 226 per 1,000 endure physical abuse, and 363 per 1,000 face emotional abuse.¹⁸

The harms associated with childhood violence extend long beyond the immediate injuries or trauma. Exposure to violence triggers toxic stress that disrupts key biological systems, including the nervous, endocrine, respiratory, immune, and circulatory systems, ultimately increasing long-term risks

¹² Nneka Obiamaka Umejiaku, "Legal Framework On Recognition Promotion And Protection On The Rights Of The Child: An Appraisal," *African Journal of Constitutional and Administrative Law* 4 (2020).

¹³ Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, "Violence against Children," *Geneva: ATAR Roto Presse SA*, 2006, 1–6.

¹⁴ Arian Tatar Naamat and Nasraddin Ebrahim Mohammad, "The Personality of Kurdish Poet Ahmad Nalbend (A Psychological-Analytical Study)," *Civil Officium: Journal of Empirical Studies on Social Science* 5, no. 1 (2025): 87–106.

¹⁵ Susan Hillis et al., "Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates," *Pediatrics* 137, no. 3 (2016): e20154079.

¹⁶ UNICEF, "Protecting Children from Violence in the Time of COVID-19," 2020.

¹⁷ Eisler, "Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action."

¹⁸ Marije Stoltenborgh et al., "The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment across the Globe: Review of a Series of Meta-analyses," *Child Abuse Review* 24, no. 1 (2015): 37–50.

of chronic diseases, mental health disorders, reproductive problems, and susceptibility to infections such as HIV.¹⁹ The economic cost of these lifelong impacts is striking: estimates show that violence against children results in losses exceeding US\$120 billion annually in the United States and consumes up to 3.5% of GDP in parts of East Asia.²⁰ These patterns of abuse are often enabled by cultural and systemic norms that normalise violence. In many communities, physical punishment is not only accepted but morally endorsed, with 84% of adults surveyed believing that spanking is sometimes necessary.²¹ Religious and traditional practices further reinforce abuse, ranging from socially sanctioned corporal punishment to extreme practices such as female genital mutilation, which affects more than 92 million girls aged 10 and above in Africa.²² Authoritarian family structures that mirror broader social hierarchies also perpetuate cycles of violence, entrenching harmful norms across generations.

On the other hand, gender-based violence introduces an additional layer of vulnerability. Girls are disproportionately exposed to forms of abuse such as female infanticide, denial of healthcare and nutrition, child marriage, and so-called “honour killings”.²³ Child marriage alone affects millions globally, subjecting girls to lifelong health risks, trauma, and often fatal outcomes. One in three adolescent girls aged 15–19 experiences intimate partner violence, highlighting the gendered nature of violence in childhood.²⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these vulnerabilities. Lockdowns, school closures, and widespread social disruption have heightened children’s exposure to violence both online and at home. Children with prior histories of abuse have experienced worsening conditions, while many others faced victimisation for the first time. The death or incapacitation of parents due to the pandemic has further increased children’s exposure to neglect, exploitation, and trafficking.²⁵ Despite the gravity of this crisis, significant gaps persist in global data collection and intervention systems. For example, nearly half of the world’s countries lack nationally representative data on violence against children, limiting the ability to track progress or design effective prevention strategies.²⁶ Some scholars also reveal biases within the study of child maltreatment, with disproportionate emphasis on sexual abuse, heavy reliance on self-reported data, and limited studies from developing countries, issues that contribute to inconsistent or incomplete prevalence estimates.²⁷

International responses have expanded in recent years, particularly through the Sustainable Development Goals, which call for the elimination of all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation of children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes legally binding obligations for states to take protective measures; however, implementation remains uneven due to gaps in legislation, enforcement, and cultural attitudes.²⁸ The way forward requires coordinated, evidence-based strategies across multiple levels of society. Research highlights the importance of teaching positive parenting skills, strengthening children’s social-emotional development, improving access to health and protection services, enforcing protective laws, reshaping social norms, supporting families economically, and ensuring safe environments for children. Global organisations such as the WHO and UNICEF have already developed unified prevention frameworks to guide states in implementing these interventions. Educational reforms are equally essential. Scholars advocate for compulsory parenting education in higher institutions and for the inclusion of empathy- and care-based curricula across all levels of schooling, from early childhood to postgraduate education.²⁹ In this instance, legal reforms must also be strengthened, including exploring amendments to international instruments such as the Rome Statute to recognise childhood as a protected category explicitly and to hold state officials accountable for failing to safeguard children.

¹⁹ Hillis et al., “Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates.”

²⁰ Hillis et al., “Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates.”

²¹ Eisler, “Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action.”

²² Eisler, “Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action.”

²³ Eisler, “Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action.”

²⁴ Amiya Bhatia et al., “Violence against Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 99, no. 10 (2021): 730.

²⁵ Bhatia et al., “Violence against Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

²⁶ Hillis et al., “Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates.”

²⁷ Stoltenborgh et al., “The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment across the Globe: Review of a Series of Meta-analyses.”

²⁸ Eisler, “Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action.”

²⁹ Eisler, “Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action.”

Erosion of Childhood Safety, Liberty, and Human Dignity

The steady erosion of childhood safety, liberty, and human dignity through violence and abuse has become one of the most profound and enduring human rights crises of the contemporary world. This crisis is not simply a moral failure; it represents a direct threat to the foundations of human civilization itself. Evidence from diverse scholarly fields paints a devastating picture, one that humanity can no longer ignore without dire consequences. The scale of violence against children is both staggering and universal. More than half of the world's children have experienced some form of violence in the past year, often within spaces presumed to be safe homes, schools, community centres, detention facilities, and workplaces.³⁰ The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one billion children aged 2–17 were subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in 2019 alone.³¹ The crisis cuts across geography, race, class, religion, and culture, reinforcing the reality that no society is exempt.³² Tragically, the perpetrators are most often those entrusted with children's care: parents, relatives, teachers, caretakers, law enforcement officers, and even other children.³³ Child sexual abuse affects millions worldwide, with infants and toddlers among the victims, and 84% of documented images depict explicit sexual acts. In the Philippines, an estimated seven million children are sexually abused annually, 98% of them girls, many forced into prostitution or digital sexual exploitation. COVID-19 intensified these horrors, as lockdowns confined children with abusers and reduced access to protective services.³⁴

Violence against children constitutes a fundamental assault on human dignity and a blatant violation of international human rights law. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is explicit in its recognition of all forms of physical or mental violence, neglect, maltreatment, and sexual abuse as violations of children's rights.³⁵ Such abuse “injures the respect, freedom, and moral aspects of a person,” corroding the intrinsic dignity inherent in every child. Yet societies around the world continue to treat children as lesser beings’ possessions to be controlled rather than rights-bearers deserving of protection equal to that of adults.³⁶ This devaluation of childhood fuels environments in which abuse is tolerated, normalised, and even morally justified.

Child Violence: The Devastating Consequences

Childhood violence causes lifelong physical, psychological, cognitive, and social harm. Exposure to violence increases vulnerability to emotional and mental impairments, health-risk behaviours such as substance abuse, and early initiation of sexual activity.³⁷ Abuse-related trauma alters neurological development, with sexual abuse profoundly disrupting brain function and normal childhood development.³⁸ Psychological consequences are equally severe. Victims experience anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and chronic sleep disturbances. Emotionally, children internalise rejection, shame, guilt, and isolation, often leading to self-harm or suicide. The cycle of violence is tragically self-perpetuating: children exposed to violence are significantly more likely to commit sexual or physical crimes, abuse substances, or harm others later in life.³⁹

Furthermore, the persistence of violence against children, despite decades of awareness, shows that the problem is deeply systemic. Redress has been hampered by cultural norms, legal frameworks,

³⁰ Jonathan Todres, “Violence, Exploitation, and the Rights of the Child,” in *International Human Rights of Children* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 215–37.

³¹ Ngoan Ngo, “Child Sexual Abuse Is Violence against the Human Dignity of Children,” *Int J Res* 10, no. 15 (2021): 97–108.

³² Sharon Detrick et al., *Violence against Children in Conflict with the Law. A Study on Indicators and Data Collection in Belgium, England and Wales, France and the Netherlands* (Defence for Children International, 2008).

³³ David G Gil, *Violence against Children*, (Cambridge, Mass, 1970).

³⁴ Ngo, “Child Sexual Abuse Is Violence against the Human Dignity of Children.”

³⁵ However, the protection of children from all forms of violence is a fundamental right enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

³⁶ Ngo, “Child Sexual Abuse Is Violence against the Human Dignity of Children.”

³⁷ Terrie E Moffitt, “Childhood Exposure to Violence and Lifelong Health: Clinical Intervention Science and Stress-Biology Research Join Forces,” *Development and Psychopathology* 25, no. 4pt2 (2013): 1619–34.

³⁸ Damyan Edwards, “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Brain Development: A Discussion of Associated Structural Changes and Negative Psychological Outcomes,” *Child Abuse Review* 27, no. 3 (2018): 198–208.

³⁹ Ngo, “Child Sexual Abuse Is Violence against the Human Dignity of Children.”

and social structures that historically devalue children's rights.⁴⁰ These roots run deep. Historical shifts towards domination-based social structures entrenched the idea that children and women were the property of male heads of households, who exercised absolute control over their lives. Many religious and cultural doctrines further legitimised violence, including scriptural injunctions like "spare the rod and spoil the child". The endurance of these beliefs sustains cycles of violence and delays efforts at meaningful reform. Although international law, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, imposes obligations on states to protect children, enforcement remains fragmented and inadequate. Perpetrators frequently threaten victims into silence, while families hide victimisation due to shame, fear, or cultural expectations.⁴¹ In many jurisdictions, child protection laws remain vague and fail to differentiate between types of abuse or establish appropriate penalties. Public corruption further exacerbates the crisis. Government officials have been implicated in aiding child trafficking, facilitating sexual exploitation, and obstructing justice for victims.⁴² When states fail to prosecute perpetrators, they reinforce a culture of impunity that sends a chilling message: children's lives and dignity are expendable.

Societal Fear, Injustice, and the Wider Impact of Child-Targeted Violence

The crisis of child violence and abuse stands as one of the most devastating and deeply entrenched failures of modern society, a crisis so vast and persistent that it demands urgent and comprehensive intervention. Its scale is staggering. More than one billion children, or half of all children globally, experience violence every year, whether through direct physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or by witnessing harm in their homes, schools, and communities.⁴³ This is not a marginal social issue but a global pandemic of harm that transcends geography, class, and culture, leaving no society untouched. At its core, violence against children is rooted in systemic societal failures rather than isolated acts of cruelty. Scholars argue that child abuse cannot be understood solely as the product of individual pathology but must be located within broader patterns of societal neglect. This scholar further showed how political economy, moral economy, and public discourse collectively create conditions that marginalise and endanger vulnerable children.⁴⁴ This challenges the comforting belief that abuse happens in psychological or social isolation; instead, it is intertwined with structural inequalities and social values that normalise or overlook harm.

The structural dimensions of this crisis become even more visible when examining social policies. Valerie Polakow's work exposes how policies that exclude, restrict, or harm children, especially children of colour, constitute hidden yet powerful forms of violence.⁴⁵ These include inadequate childcare systems, educational inequities, disproportionate school expulsions, and punitive criminal justice responses. Violence against children thus becomes institutional, embedded within the very mechanisms meant to protect them. The long-term effects of childhood exposure to violence are severe and far-reaching. Research shows that violent trauma disrupts fundamental developmental processes and increases the likelihood of school failure, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and participation in cycles of violence.⁴⁶ Biologically, toxic stress associated with violence alters the development of the nervous, endocrine, immune, and other critical systems, leaving lasting physiological vulnerabilities.⁴⁷ Violence quite literally reshapes children's bodies and minds, impacting their entire life trajectories. Psychological abuse, often minimised or misunderstood, carries equally devastating consequences. Rinker's work highlights how emotional and psychological harm can

⁴⁰ Emily Keddell, "Recognising the Embedded Child in Child Protection: Children's Participation, Inequalities and Cultural Capital," *Children and Youth Services Review* 147 (2023): 106815.

⁴¹ UN General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," United Nations, Treaty Series 1577, no. 3 § (1989).

⁴² Motseki Morero Moses, "An Exploration of Corruption and Human Trafficking: The South African Case," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2116808.

⁴³ Susan D Hillis, James A Mercy, and Janet R Saul, "The Enduring Impact of Violence against Children," *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 22, no. 4 (2017): 393–405.

⁴⁴ Joshua L Miller, "Societal Neglect and Violence towards Children: What Do These Phenomena Tell Us about Ourselves?," *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 66, no. 2 (1996): 197–211.

⁴⁵ Valerie Polakow, *The Public Assault on America's Children: Poverty, Violence, and Juvenile Injustice*, vol. 5 (Teachers College Press, 2000).

⁴⁶ William W Harris, Alicia F Lieberman, and Steven Marans, "In the Best Interests of Society," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 48, no. 3-4 (2007): 392–411.

⁴⁷ Hillis, Mercy, and Saul, "The Enduring Impact of Violence against Children."

be as damaging as physical assault, particularly when children internalise aggression and learn to reproduce it in their own relationships.⁴⁸ Over time, this fuels intergenerational cycles of violence that become deeply embedded within families and communities.

The economic burden of child violence further underscores the urgency of intervention. For instance, in the United States alone, the costs exceed \$120 billion, while in parts of East Asia, violence accounts for up to 3.5% of GDP.⁴⁹ These financial losses encompass healthcare costs, justice system expenditures, productivity losses, and long-term social welfare needs, illustrating that inaction is far more costly than prevention. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the vulnerability of children and exposed the fragility of existing protective systems. Global data reveal significant increases in domestic violence during lockdowns, with children often becoming primary and secondary victims of emotional, physical, and sometimes lethal forms of abuse.⁵⁰ This sudden escalation illustrates how swiftly protective environments can collapse under social stress, leaving children trapped in cycles of fear and harm. The justice system's response to child violence adds yet another layer of institutional failure, often characterised by underreporting, inadequate investigations, weak enforcement mechanisms, and insufficient support services. These shortcomings reflect systemic challenges that allow the crisis to persist, despite decades of research, advocacy, and policy commitments.

The crisis of child violence and abuse stands as one of the most profound and systemic failures of contemporary society, demanding urgent, coordinated, and far-reaching intervention. Its scale is staggering: more than one billion children, half of the world's child population, experience violence each year, whether through physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or by witnessing violence in their homes, schools, and communities.⁵¹ These numbers reveal not an isolated social problem but a global pandemic of harm that transcends borders, cultures, and socioeconomic divides, undermining human development and social stability across generations. This violence is not simply the result of individual acts of cruelty but is deeply rooted in structural and societal failures. Child violence must be understood within a broader landscape of social neglect, where political economy, moral economy, and public discourse interact in ways that consistently devalue and marginalise vulnerable groups.⁵² This perspective disrupts the overly comfortable narrative that child abuse is merely a matter of individual pathology, instead positioning it as a symptom of entrenched structural inequality. The systemic nature of this crisis becomes even clearer when one recognises how public policies themselves can constitute acts of violence. Polakow's work demonstrates how policies that exclude, neglect, or harm children, whether through inequitable access to education, reduced childcare support, or disproportionate disciplinary and criminal justice responses, amount to institutional violence, particularly for children of colour.⁵³ This exposes the uncomfortable truth that the systems designed to nurture children are often complicit in reproducing harm.

The long-term developmental consequences of exposure to violence are equally devastating. Research confirms that violent trauma disrupts cognitive, emotional, and psychological development, increasing the risks of depression, anxiety, academic failure, substance abuse, and the perpetuation of violence across generations.⁵⁴ The biological effects are profound: toxic stress associated with violence alters the architecture of the developing brain and damages multiple organ systems, with impacts that may persist well into adulthood. These findings make clear that childhood violence is not only a social injustice, but it is a biological assault on human development. The psychological dimension of this harm deepens the crisis further. Furthermore, psychological abuse can be as traumatic as physical violence, reshaping family dynamics and transmitting patterns of aggression across generations.⁵⁵ This

⁴⁸ Katelyn Rinker, "Prevention of Psychological Abuse in Paediatric Populations," *Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice* 2, no. 2 (2019): 236–40.

⁴⁹ Hillis, Mercy, and Saul, "The Enduring Impact of Violence against Children."

⁵⁰ Pietro Ferrara et al., "Children Witnessing Domestic and Family Violence: A Widespread Occurrence during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 235 (2021): 305.

⁵¹ Violence against children.

⁵² Christine Barter, "Children and Young People Who Harm Others," *Child Abuse Review* 22, no. 4 (2013): 227–31.

⁵³ Polakow, *The Public Assault on America's Children: Poverty, Violence, and Juvenile Injustice*.

⁵⁴ Exposure to violence during childhood can lead to severe long-term developmental consequences, including increased risks of mental health issues, academic failure, and perpetuation of violence across generations.

⁵⁵ Rinker, "Prevention of Psychological Abuse in Paediatric Populations."

intergenerational cycle of harm means that violence becomes an inherited social condition, embedded within families and communities. For instance, childhood violence costs the United States over \$120 billion annually and accounts for up to 3.5% of GDP in certain East Asian regions.⁵⁶ These costs represent not only medical and criminal justice expenditures but also long-term losses in productivity, education, and social cohesion. From an economic standpoint alone, failure to intervene is indefensible.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and intensified these vulnerabilities. Global data reveal dramatic increases in domestic violence, with children absorbing the most significant impact both as direct victims and as witnesses to escalating household conflict.⁵⁷ In addition, reports of domestic violence surged by 20–30% in many countries, with tragic rises in severe outcomes such as femicide. This surge illustrates how quickly protective systems can collapse under social stress, leaving children dangerously exposed. Institutional responses, particularly within the justice system, reflect another layer of failure. Green's analysis shows that prevailing justice models, which focus narrowly on prosecuting offenders, fail to address children's broader needs, including prevention, trauma care, and post-abuse compensation.⁵⁸ As a result, many children are victimised twice: first by the abuse itself, and then by systems that cannot adequately protect or rehabilitate them. Public and policy responses to children who harm others reveal similar systemic misunderstandings. Barter's research highlights how moral panic and the construction of "folk devils" have shaped punitive reactions to children's harmful behaviour, obscuring the structural inequalities and trauma that often underpin such actions.⁵⁹ By treating these children as perpetrators rather than victims of broader social failures, society perpetuates cycles of harm.

Governance Failures and the Absence of Political Will

The persistent crisis of child violence and abuse in South Africa exposes a profound failure of governance and a troubling absence of genuine political will to safeguard the nation's most vulnerable citizens. Scholars have long warned that, across sub-Saharan Africa, ratifying international instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has had little impact on improving children's lived realities, essentially because poverty, corruption, and weak political commitment undermine the implementation of protective legislation.⁶⁰ What emerges is a pattern in which governments favour symbolic compliance over substantive action, widening the gulf between policy promises and the harsh realities faced by millions of children.

The institutional architecture intended to protect children is itself structurally fragile, enabling cycles of violence and abuse to persist with alarming consistency. Some research shows that efforts to prioritise violence prevention are obstructed by poor data systems, weak evidence-based planning, and, most critically, fragmented advocacy networks whose competing agendas impede the development of strong, coordinated protection mechanisms.⁶¹ This fragmentation reflects a deeper leadership deficit and an unwillingness to build coherent, integrated child protection systems capable of delivering meaningful change. In addition, Bequele emphasised that child-friendly governance is ultimately "a manifestation of the political will of governments to make the maximum effort to meet their obligations." Yet, South Africa continues to demonstrate an unsettling lack of commitment in this regard.⁶² The consequences of this political negligence are both predictable and devastating. Violence against children transcends social and economic boundaries, making decisive state intervention not only necessary but morally unavoidable. Yet, the evidence reveals that governance systems repeatedly fail to shield children from human rights abuses, effectively producing forms of structural violence enabled through institutional

⁵⁶ Hillis, Mercy, and Saul, "The Enduring Impact of Violence against Children."

⁵⁷ Ferrara et al., "Children Witnessing Domestic and Family Violence: A Widespread Occurrence during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic."

⁵⁸ The institutional failures within the justice system are highlighted by various analyses, particularly in South Africa, where the prevailing models focus narrowly on prosecuting offenders rather than addressing the broader needs of children, including prevention, trauma care, and post-abuse compensation.

⁵⁹ Barter, "Children and Young People Who Harm Others."

⁶⁰ Mulinge, "Implementing the 1989 United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Overlooked Socioeconomic and Political Dilemmas."

⁶¹ Shawar and Shiffman, "A Global Priority: Addressing Violence against Children."

⁶² Assefa Bequele, "Governance and Child Well-Being: Evidence and Lessons from Africa," in *Every Right for Every Child* (Routledge India, 2020), 43–64.

neglect.⁶³ This systemic failure has led to growing calls for legal accountability mechanisms to hold public officials responsible when they fail in their duty to protect children from abuse, exploitation, and even death. Without such accountability, government commitments remain hollow statements that offer little comfort or protection.

Strengthening Protective Frameworks and Advancing Child Liberation

The persistent crisis of child violence and abuse in South Africa exposes a profound failure of governance and a troubling absence of political will to protect the country's most vulnerable citizens. Across sub-Saharan Africa, international commitments, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, have not translated into meaningful improvements in children's daily realities, largely because structural conditions, including poverty, corruption, and weak implementation environments, continue to erode child well-being.⁶⁴ This disconnect between global promises and national action reveals a pattern of symbolic compliance.

Moreover, the governance architecture meant to protect children remains deeply fragmented and structurally weak. Inadequate data systems, poor evidence-based planning, and competing advocacy networks have prevented the formation of robust, integrated institutions capable of prioritising violence prevention.⁶⁵ These shortcomings reflect a deeper failure of political leadership to establish coherent child protection systems. As scholars argue, genuine child-friendliness is not rhetorical but demonstrated through a government's willingness to mobilise maximum effort and resources to meet its obligations. Current governance trends suggest that such commitment remains insufficient. The outcome of these structural failures is both predictable and devastating. Violence against children occurs across all social contexts, making state intervention not only necessary but a moral imperative. Yet governance failures continue to expose children to structural violence, with institutional neglect enabling widespread human rights violations.⁶⁶ Scholars have therefore argued for legal mechanisms to hold officials accountable when they fail to protect children from abuse, exploitation, or even death, recognising that without accountability, policy commitments remain hollow.⁶⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study proposes the following recommendations:

- The evidence requires a decisive, holistic transformation in how societies perceive and protect children. First, there must be a fundamental shift in understanding childhood as a protected condition with inherent dignity and equal rights. This includes dismantling cultural norms that normalise violence and reframing violence against children as a serious criminal violation, not a disciplinary choice or artistic practice.
- Legal systems must be strengthened. Scholars have proposed expanding the Rome Statute to explicitly recognise childhood as a protected category, enabling prosecution of state officials who fail to prevent or address widespread child abuse.
- The Responsibility to Protect doctrine should also apply where states are unwilling or unable to safeguard children's lives.
- Education is a powerful tool of prevention. Hence, effective intervention must include comprehensive awareness campaigns, mandatory parenting education at tertiary institutions, child sexual abuse prevention programmes, and training children to recognise and resist unsafe situations.

⁶³ Elvira Graner, "Governing Childhood in India: The up-Hill Battle to Abolish Child Marriage," 2019.

⁶⁴ Todres, "Violence, Exploitation, and the Rights of the Child."

⁶⁵ Karin Landgren, "The Protective Environment: Development Support for Child Protection," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2005): 214-48.

⁶⁶ The outcomes of structural failures are predictable and devastating, as they often lead to widespread human rights violations and expose children to structural violence. These failures are not only a result of faulty construction materials or heavy rains but also reflect broader systemic issues such as bad governance, political clientelism, and corruption. These failures can be seen in various forms, including building collapses, dam failures, and other catastrophic events that result in the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of people.

⁶⁷ Richard Reading et al., "Promotion of Children's Rights and Prevention of Child Maltreatment," *The Lancet* 373, no. 9660 (2009): 332-43.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that violence against children is not simply a social issue but a profound crisis of governance, accountability, and moral responsibility. Addressing it requires more than isolated interventions; it demands coordinated, sustained, and globally aligned action rooted in political will and an unwavering commitment to protecting the world's most vulnerable. The study further showed that the pervasive nature of violence against children demands urgent, sustained, and collective action. The persistent crisis of child violence and abuse exposes one of the deepest failures of modern society. Children are abducted, exploited, and subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual harm daily, stripping them of safety, liberty, and dignity. These violations transcend borders, cultures, and socioeconomic conditions, showing that no society is immune to the scourge of child abuse. The devastating effects extend far beyond immediate harm, impacting children's mental, emotional, and physical development and shaping a future burdened by trauma and inequality. A central factor in this ongoing crisis is the lack of political will, which allows existing protective frameworks to remain unenforced and children to continue suffering. Legal mechanisms and social policies exist in theory, yet their weak implementation perpetuates cycles of violence and neglect. Breaking this cycle requires systemic, rights-based interventions that prioritise prevention over reactive measures. Children must be empowered to participate in decisions affecting their lives, giving voice to those who have been historically silenced. Social, educational, health, and justice institutions must coordinate their efforts to protect children comprehensively. Perpetrators and complicit officials must be held accountable to end impunity and restore trust in governance. Families and communities must be supported in creating safe and nurturing environments. Public awareness campaigns are critical to challenge cultural norms that condone violence. Urgent, sustained action is necessary to safeguard children and uphold their fundamental rights. Protecting children is not merely a moral obligation; it is the foundation of a just, equitable, and peaceful society. Only through committed political leadership and societal engagement can we ensure children's liberation, safety, and flourishing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bähr, Celia, and Laura K Taylor. "Recognizing the Diverse and Complex Nature of Violence in Childhood," 2021.
- Barter, Christine. "Children and Young People Who Harm Others." *Child Abuse Review* 22, no. 4 (2013): 227–31.
- Bequele, Assefa. "Governance and Child Well-Being: Evidence and Lessons from Africa." In *Every Right for Every Child*, 43–64. Routledge India, 2020.
- Bhatia, Amiya, Camilla Fabbri, Ilan Cerna-Turoff, Ellen Turner, Michelle Lokot, Ajwang Warria, Sumnima Tuladhar, Clare Tanton, Louise Knight, and Shelley Lees. "Violence against Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 99, no. 10 (2021): 730.
- Detrick, Sharon, Gilles Abel, Maartje Berger, Aurore Delon, and Rosie Meek. *Violence against Children in Conflict with the Law. A Study on Indicators and Data Collection in Belgium, England and Wales, France and the Netherlands*. Defence for Children International, 2008.
- Edwards, Damyan. "Childhood Sexual Abuse and Brain Development: A Discussion of Associated Structural Changes and Negative Psychological Outcomes." *Child Abuse Review* 27, no. 3 (2018): 198–208.
- Eisler, Riane. "Protecting Children: From Rhetoric to Global Action." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 7.
- Ferrara, Pietro, Giulia Franceschini, Giovanni Corsello, Julije Mestrovic, Ida Giardino, Mehmet Vural, Tudor Lucian Pop, Leyla Namazova-Baranova, Eli Somekh, and Flavia Indrio. "Children Witnessing Domestic and Family Violence: A Widespread Occurrence during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic." *The Journal of Pediatrics* 235 (2021): 305.
- Gil, David G. "Violence against Children." *Cambridge, Mass*, 1970.
- Graner, Elvira. "Governing Childhood in India: The uphill battle to Abolish Child Marriage," 2019.
- Harris, William W, Alicia F Lieberman, and Steven Marans. "In the Best Interests of Society."

- Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 48, no. 3-4 (2007): 392–411.
- Hillis, Susan D, James A Mercy, and Janet R Saul. “The Enduring Impact of Violence against Children.” *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 22, no. 4 (2017): 393–405.
- Hillis, Susan, James Mercy, Adaugo Amobi, and Howard Kress. “Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates.” *Pediatrics* 137, no. 3 (2016): e20154079.
- Keddell, Emily. “Recognising the Embedded Child in Child Protection: Children’s Participation, Inequalities and Cultural Capital.” *Children and Youth Services Review* 147 (2023): 106815.
- Landgren, Karin. “The Protective Environment: Development Support for Child Protection.” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (2005): 214–48.
- Lwandiko, Mboza. “Rise of Children Violence and Sexual Abuse: A Need to Raise Voices Higher.” Available at SSRN 4635567, 2023.
- Malik Ema, D. R. Malik, and W. A. Malik. “Promulgate Strong Legal Framework For Child Protection Against Offences Of Torturing, Abusing, Or Killing.” *International Journal* 4, no. 2 (2021): 9.
- Miller, Joshua L. “Societal Neglect and Violence towards Children: What Do These Phenomena Tell Us about Ourselves?” *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 66, no. 2 (1996): 197–211.
- Moffitt, Terrie E. “Childhood Exposure to Violence and Lifelong Health: Clinical Intervention Science and Stress-Biology Research Join Forces.” *Development and Psychopathology* 25, no. 4pt2 (2013): 1619–34.
- Moses, Motseki Morero. “An Exploration of Corruption and Human Trafficking: The South African Case.” *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2116808.
- Mulinge, Munyae M. “Implementing the 1989 United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Overlooked Socioeconomic and Political Dilemmas.” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 26, no. 11 (2002): 1117–30.
- Naamat, Arian Tatar, and Nasraddin Ebrahim Mohammad. “The Personality of Kurdish Poet Ahmad Nalbend (A Psychological-Analytical Study).” *Civil Officium: Journal of Empirical Studies on Social Science* 5, no. 1 (2025): 87–106.
- Ngo, Ngoan. “Child Sexual Abuse Is Violence against the Human Dignity of Children.” *Int J Res* 10, no. 15 (2021): 97–108.
- Pinheiro, Paulo Sérgio. “Violence against Children.” *Geneva: ATAR Roto Presse SA*, 2006, 1–6.
- Polakow, Valerie. *The Public Assault on America’s Children: Poverty, Violence, and Juvenile Injustice*. Vol. 5. Teachers College Press, 2000.
- Reading, Richard, Susan Bissell, Jeffrey Goldhagen, Judith Harwin, Judith Masson, Sian Moynihan, Nigel Parton, Marta Santos Pais, June Thoburn, and Elspeth Webb. “Promotion of Children’s Rights and Prevention of Child Maltreatment.” *The Lancet* 373, no. 9660 (2009): 332–43.
- Rinker, Katelyn. “Prevention of Psychological Abuse in Paediatric Populations.” *Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice* 2, no. 2 (2019): 236–40.
- Shawar, Yusra Ribhi, and Jeremy Shiffman. “A Global Priority: Addressing Violence against Children.” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 99, no. 6 (2021): 414.
- Slone, Michelle, and Tomer Shechner. “Adolescents Exposed to 7 Years of Political Violence: Differential Relations between Exposure and Its Impact for Jewish and Arab Israelis.” *Child Indicators Research* 4, no. 3 (2011): 529–45.
- Stoltenborgh, Marije, Marian J Bakermans-Kranenburg, Lenneke R A Alink, and Marinus H Van Ijzendoorn. “The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment across the Globe: Review of a Series of Meta-analyses.” *Child Abuse Review* 24, no. 1 (2015): 37–50.
- Todres, Jonathan. “Violence, Exploitation, and the Rights of the Child.” In *International Human Rights of Children*, 215–37. Singapore: Springer, 2019.
- Umejiaku, Nneka Obiamaka. “Legal Framework On Recognition, Promotion And Protection On The Rights Of The Child: An Appraisal.” *African Journal of Constitutional and Administrative Law* 4 (2020).
- UN General Assembly. Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Treaty Series 1577,

no. 3 § (1989).

UNICEF. “Protecting Children from Violence in the Time of COVID-19,” 2020.

“Violence against Children.” Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-children>.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Norless Zibele Nodangala (LLM) (C. Laude) (PhD Candidate) is currently a Public Law Lecturer, Chairperson: Teaching and Learning: School of Law, Secretary: Advisory Board: Faculty of Law, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the Walter Sisulu University, South Africa. He is a legal professional based in South Africa, currently pursuing a PhD in Law at the University of the Free State, having earned both my Master of Laws (LLM) and Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degrees at Walter Sisulu University. In addition to his academic pursuits, he has gained practical experience in the hospitality and financial sectors. His research interests focus on human rights and social justice, with a particular emphasis on the Marikana tragedy and the role of commissions of inquiry in socio-economic transformation.