PERCEPTIONS OF FRONTLINE WELFARE WORKERS ON THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE PACIFIC

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In early 2019, ECPAT International conducted a detailed survey that targeted Pacific region welfare workers directly managing a range of cases with children. Frontline staff in Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa and Kiribati were identified by local experts and supported to complete an online survey. The main objective was to collect new data that helps describe a nuanced picture of how sexual exploitation of children (SEC) is occurring within Pacific communities and how it is presenting to those working on the welfare frontline.

Introduction

This paper details the results of a survey with 84 frontline welfare workers in seven Pacific countries. The results offer a snapshot of the context of sexual exploitation of children (SEC) in the Pacific and key issues affecting children's vulnerability, ability to access support services, and frontline worker's ability to provide support to them. All participants worked as welfare service providers directly managing cases that included children. The online survey consisted of approximately 60 multiple-choice questions and a small number of short open-answer questions. Many participants shared additional observations and illustrative anecdotes throughout the survey that further shed light on the challenges and potential opportunities for action and progress in this area. It should be noted that the data is not statistically representative of the experiences of all frontline workers in the region, and cases described are merely recalled estimates rather than detailed administrative counts. However, the estimates, perceptions and experiences reported here offer valuable insight into an under-researched and under-reported area of child protection. Quotes and comments are also included throughout the paper to further illuminate the data.

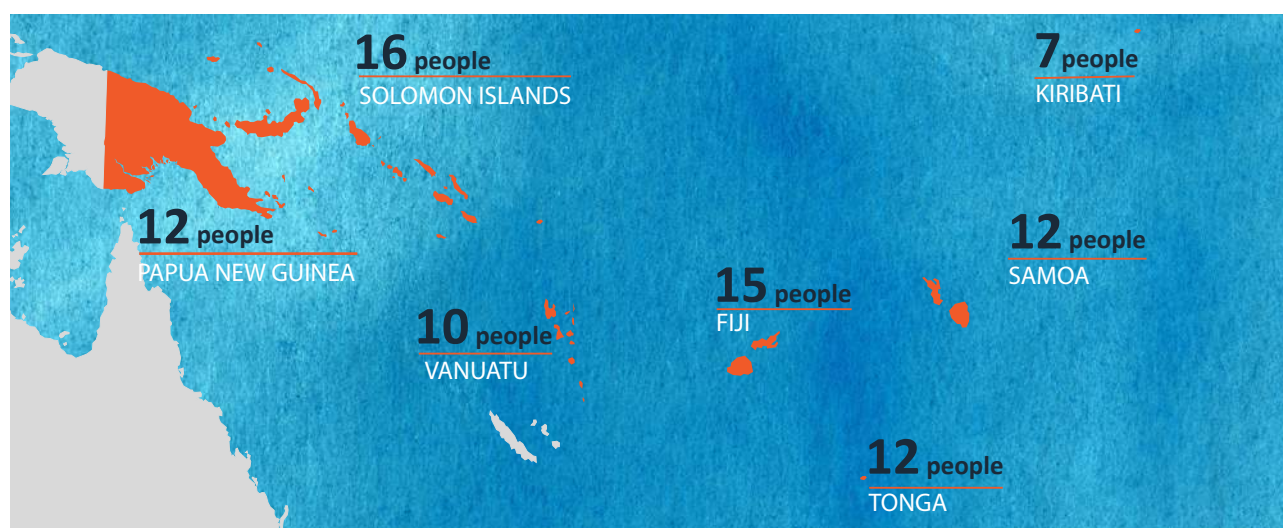Specifically, the survey aimed to gather data from frontline workers that indicated:

- The extent of SEC in the Pacific region;
- The level of awareness of SEC amongst service providers; and
- The impact of cultural and social norms on SEC.

Several reoccurring themes in participants' responses aligned with the evidence of known trends in SEC and known barriers to holistic and collaborative responses to this issue. Children's increased vulnerability due to growing access to technology and limited awareness of criminal offenses regarding the online sexual exploitation of children featured commonly in participants' observations.

The invaluable role of current efforts to equip parents and families with the knowledge and tools to foster protective environments for girls as well as boys, was one of the most prominent themes in the survey responses. Additionally, cultural taboos around discussing sex and the stigma that victims encounter were consistently listed as primary factors that make it difficult for children to seek help and access services. Participants also frequently described how gaps in funding have restricted their organisations' ability to conduct critical community outreach activities, particularly in rural areas and remote islands. Many participants emphasized the need for urgent training to develop the capacity of themselves and colleagues to more effectively manage SEC cases with greater sensitivity and to better support vulnerable children.

Despite the numerous obstacles that frontline workers indicated in this project, the findings also revealed the incredible dedication of many of the participants and their organizations. Even in the context of extremely limited resources, participants often expressed a strong desire to learn more about SEC, how to more effectively address it in their communities, and to help others to do the same. There are many champions working on the frontlines to raise the public awareness of SEC, and child protection generally. ECPAT International hopes the survey findings summarised in this paper may be used to generate momentum and highlight the urgent need for fundraising, further research, dedicated programming, awareness campaigns and legislative reforms addressing the sexual exploitation of children.

16 people
SOLOMON ISLANDS

7 people
KIRIBATI

12 people
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

12 people
SAMOA

10 people
VANUATU

15 people
FIJI

12 people
TONGA

Frontline workers provide important services for vulnerable children and child victims

Adequate support for vulnerable children and child victims of sexual exploitation requires cooperation and coordination from decision-makers and service providers across sectors and institutions, ranging from law enforcement and government-run child welfare agencies to hospitals and other sources of physical and mental healthcare and non-governmental organizations providing services to vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities. Frontline welfare workers affiliated with faith communities and grassroots community groups are also key actors in efforts in the prevention and response to SEC.

All of the 84 frontline workers surveyed provided services in one of seven Pacific island countries: Tonga (n=12), Vanuatu (n=10), Samoa (n=12), Kiribati (n=7), Papua New Guinea (n=12), Fiji (n=15), and Solomon Islands (n=16). While all of the frontline workers surveyed from these countries directly managed cases with children, participants worked in a range of capacities spanning across the social welfare spectrum, providing a variety of core services to children. This project sought to provide some insight into potential gaps where more support may be needed as well as opportunities to build upon existing child-oriented services and programs to more specifically address SEC.

Participants were asked to select a single category that best described their organization (see figure 1). These categories were not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, an organization can be described as both a non-governmental organization and a faith-based organization at the same time. However, the distribution of participants across categories based on their preferred selection does help to depict the range of organizations represented in the survey. Most participants identified their organization as either government-run (n=30) or as a non-governmental organization (n=30). Many participants also

worked in faith-based organizations (n=15), followed by community-based organizations (n=6) and other types of organizations (n=3), which included private practices.


Figure 1. Types of participants' organisations.
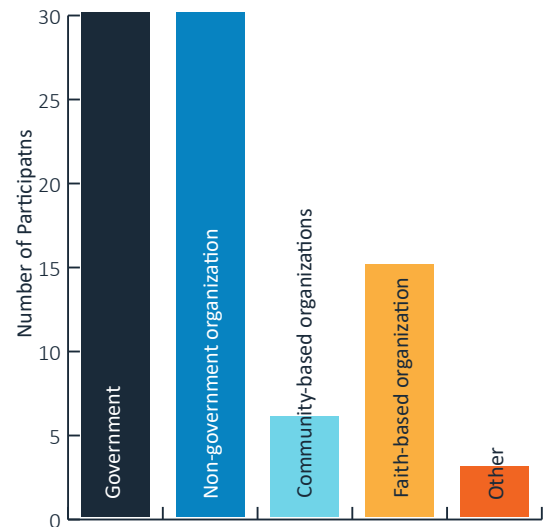
Participants included law enforcement officers from family and child protection units and justice officials as well as social welfare and youth affairs departmental staff. Medical professionals from hospitals, clinics and other organizations were also surveyed. Counsellors and psychologists from various women and children centres participated in the survey, in addition to counsellors from large non-governmental organizations and other organizations supporting LGBT youth, children with disabilities and orphans. Participants from faith-based organizations included pastors, ministers and youth leaders and providers from faith-based child and family support groups.

Figure 2 indicates that approximately three quarters of participants worked in organizations providing more than one service to children (n=64). The most frequently reported services were counselling/psychosocial support (n=59) and awareness raising/training activities (n=57). Education support (n=39), legal support, providing basic supplies and reintegration services were also frequently reported (n=39, n=34, n=35, and n=32 respectively). The least commonly provided services among participants were residential care and economic assistance (n=21 and n=20 respectively).

Figure 2. Types of services provided by participants' organisations.
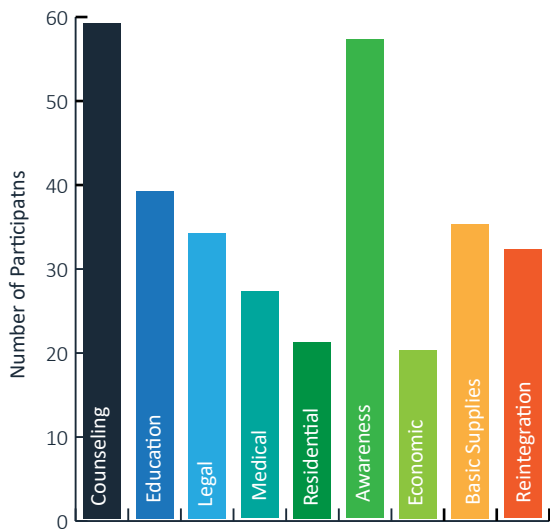
Consideration of these findings may suggest areas where further inquiries could be made into whether or not adequate and appropriate services are being provided for child victims of sexual exploitation and where further support may be needed. For example, there may be a greater need for short-term residential care to help children transition from abusive circumstances back into the community given that the majority of reported SEC cases in this survey involved family members as offenders. When that is the case, residential care may play an important role in protecting children from further victimization while prosecution occurs. One participant described that "*most children were victims of rape by relatives and people known as friends of the victim's family. We keep victims and counsel them for 3 to 5 days and release them back to their families.*" (*Participant ID: 65*) Mapping short- and longer-term residential care capacity is needed to ensure children have access to adequate protection from sexual exploitation.

The degree to which the services that organizations provide to children are tailored and resourced to meet the needs of child victims of sexual exploitation should also be explored. For example, while most of the participants described their organizations as offering counselling/psychosocial support, over half described the quality of psychological services for child victims of sexual exploitation in their country as poor (n=48), often citing limited specialized training and funding. In another example, one law enforcement officer described that in their country: "*crime prevention is starting a program for schools (target different age groups of kids) to try to gain children's trust to talk to the Police and build a police and children/student network.*" (*Participant ID: 13*) If and how these school-based programs integrate information about SEC should be further explored given the potential for increased reporting of SEC cases when children feel safe talking to law enforcement. How these types of efforts can also be linked to other justice sector reforms to make reporting and investigation processes more child-friendly is another area for further research.

Overall, these findings and observations demonstrate that efforts to enhance awareness of SEC as a key issue and to promote action and services to address it should target multiple sectors and stakeholders. They also help illustrate the importance of cultivating networks and relationships between frontline workers and their organizations to develop effective referral systems so that victims and vulnerable children will be more likely to receive all of the support they need.

Defining sexual exploitation of children

Participants were presented with four scenarios depicting situations in which at least one offender victimized a child through different modes of sexual exploitation. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the child was a victim and that the offender had committed a SEC-related offense. All cases involved exploitation in different forms. These questions were designed to elicit insights about how participants assessed different forms and situations of sexual exploitation.

Participants overwhelmingly correctly identified the children as victims and the adults as offenders across the four scenarios. However, on one question there were some divergences. The question related to a scenario in which an adult paid his 16-year-old female relative to undress while he filmed it and later posted it online. In this scenario, an unrelated individual, Mamo, who does not know the child or the other adult, watches the interaction online from home 30 miles away. Nearly all of the participants agreed that the child was a victim of sexual exploitation and that the adult who paid and filmed her had committed a SEC-related crime. However, seven participants only slightly agreed that Mamo had committed a SEC-related crime and 17 disagreed.

Some of these participants commented that while they believed that what Mamo was doing was wrong, they did not believe (or were unsure) that his actions constituted a crime since he had not come into direct contact with the child. For example, one participant stated "*it depends on legislation in that country regarding pictures*

online." (*Participant ID: 13*) Another frontline worker remarked, "*from my understanding, Mamo is just freely searching online and personally the online [environment] is free to everyone.*" (*Participant ID: 5*) These, and other similar comments, revealed that there is a need for clarity on what constitutes online child sexual exploitation and potentially the need for comprehensive National legislation in some Pacific countries. Awareness campaigns should emphasize that every item of child sexual abuse material/child sexual exploitation material (CSAM/CSEM) is photographic and/or video evidence of a serious crime – it is not 'only' a picture. Each time that an image is viewed, sent or received, the child is re-victimized.

Particularly in the context of expanding access to the internet and technology and the growing ease with which offenders are able to anonymously victimize children, it is critical that frontline workers have received thorough training on the numerous forms of online child sexual exploitation and that the laws in their countries support their work to increase protections for children.

Advocates could use these findings to support their work with government stakeholders to promote the adoption of strong legislation to protect children from this form of sexual exploitation. Specifically, legislation should align with Article 20 of the Lanzarote Convention which provides a comprehensive list of offenses concerning CSAM/CSEM. The Convention obligates parties to adopt measures criminalizing the acts of producing, distributing and transmitting CSAM/CSEM. However, it also goes further, obligating parties to criminalize the mere possession and viewing of these materials. This comprehensive legal approach to establishing measures to protect children from all elements of online child sexual exploitation would serve as an ideal model for Pacific countries.

Varying caseloads and the importance of specialized SEC staff and programming

The intention of a series of questions estimating caseload was to understand the nature of the different cases that survey participants worked with. There was a huge variety in the number of cases estimated in response to these questions. Additionally, while many participants reported that they directly managed a total of between 10-100 cases over the last 12 months (which seems like a realistic individual caseload for frontline workers), several participants estimated that they had managed more than 400 cases. Some of these higher estimates may actually reflect the participants' estimates of the number of cases overseen by their organization (e.g. total number of child cases at a hospital) rather than the number of cases the participant managed directly as an individual. In light of some of the more extreme upper estimates, we've excluded responses reporting a total number of directly managed cases over 400 for the purposes of this section (n=6). Furthermore, we stress that these. These results should be read merely as an estimated indication of caseload, not as a reliable count.
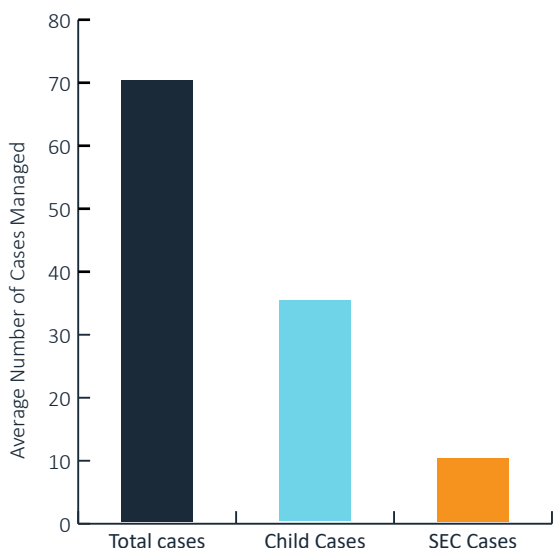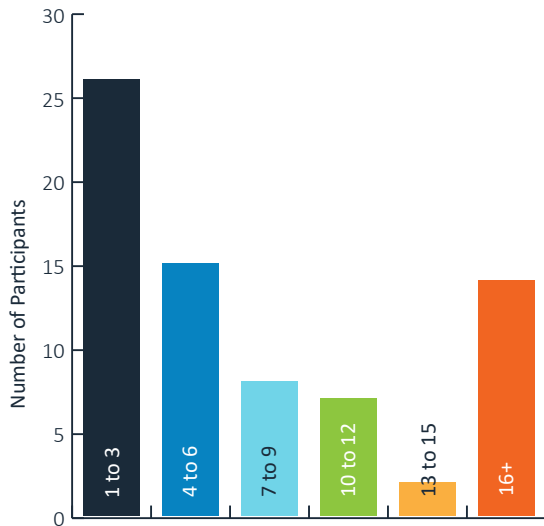
Figure 3 indicates that the combined participants estimated a total 5,849 cases over the last 12 months – an average of nearly 70 welfare cases per person, with an average of 35 of those total cases involving children (remembering that we only interviewed those who work with at least some children in their caseload, excluding workers with only adult cases from completing the survey).

Among the 72 participants who reported managing some SEC cases within their load, in the last 12 months they averaged 10 SEC cases each (total 756 cases). According to this estimate, on average, child cases represented approximately half of the total cases, with SEC cases representing an average of nearly 30% of participants' child cases. SEC cases accounted for 7% of the total caseload. This is higher than expected and may reflect a bias in survey facilitators perhaps identifying frontline workers who were likely to have managed SEC cases. Another possible reason for these high estimates may be that some participants did not distinguish between cases of sexual abuse and exploitation (this distinction can be very blurry). A third explanation may simply be that these estimates reflect a high prevalence of SEC cases compared to the relatively low number of welfare professionals and other staff providing services in these countries.

When examining caseloads on an individual basis, SEC cases represented a large proportion of some individual participants' caseload – likely SEC specialists. For most others, SEC cases represented a much smaller, but still notable segment of their caseload. Some of this wide variation may be an indication of difficulties that children encounter accessing limited specialist support services, perhaps due to the stigma attached to being a victim or because they live in more remote areas. One surveyed frontline worker described that they were aware of more instances of sexual exploitation than their caseload reflected, but that *"they [victims] don't get help from us or anyone else."* (*Participant ID: 67*) Only 12 participants had not managed any SEC cases amongst the children they saw in the past 12 months. Figure 4 indicates that forty-one participants reported having directly managed between 1-6 SEC cases, with 17 participants managing between 7-15 cases, and 14 participants estimating managing more than 15 SEC cases in the past 12 months.

Figure 3. Participants' estimated average caseload.

Figure 4. Reported number of SEC cases of participants.

Number of Participants (y-axis, 0 to 30)

Categories: 1 to 3, 4 to 6, 7 to 9, 10 to 12, 13 to 15, 16+

An important area for further research and advocacy would be to establish a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the frontline workers who are likely to function as first responders or primary service providers in cases of SEC in their contexts. For example, in countries with specialized child protection police units, law enforcement may assume a more active role in managing SEC cases and referring them to specialist service providers. In other contexts, with more limited resources, it may be medical professionals in public hospitals who assume a lead role in supporting victims. Mapping which organizations and departments have staff with specialized training may help to inform more effective outreach, referral systems and distribution of resources to support and build up SEC expertise among frontline workers.

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Boys and girls are victims of sexual exploitation

In total, an estimated 961 child victims of sexual exploitation were reported in the survey, 310 boys and 651 girls (note this is higher than the number of 756 total cases as some cases involved multiple victims).[1] Figure 5 illustrates that teenage girls between the ages of 14-18 were the most commonly reported child victims. While girls made up the majority of child victims in each category, boys still represented approximately a third of the total reported victims (32%). Participants reported both girls and boys having been victimized in each age category. In the youngest age category (0-5), the disparity between the number of boy victims and girl victims is the smallest. The data indicated that the proportion of cases for both girls and boys increased in the teenage categories. One participant describing their cases involving boys and girls who were sexually exploited observed, "*I find that a lot of sexual favours are exchanged for alcohol, smokes and drugs amongst children, and some are single moms.*" (*Participant ID: 82*) This observation supports known trends indicating that some teenage children may actively engage in their own sexual exploitation. This may be an area for targeted research and interventions related to this form of SEC in the region.

Figure 5. Estimated age and gender of child victims of SEC.
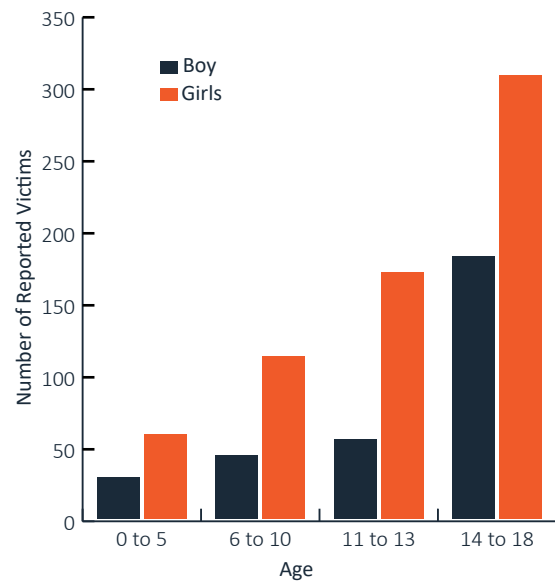
Several participants emphasized the increased vulnerabilities that gay, bisexual and transgender children face due to the increased stigma they encounter. One participant shared, "*these issues happen in [Country] the cases you work with where young boys are threatened to carry out sexual favours in order not to be beaten up or blackmailed so that these sexual activities are not exposed.*" (*Participant ID: 80*). While girls should remain the focus of efforts to address SEC, vulnerable boys should also be specifically targeted for interventions and support. As another frontline worker observed, a core element of these efforts should be advocacy for "*laws to be amended to decriminalize sexual and gender diversity*" (*Participant ID: 79*) and to recognize that boys can also be victims.

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1   This estimate excludes one extreme estimate that exceeded 300 child victims in cases directly managed by the participant in the last 12 months.

Exploiters are often family members and those within the child's circle of trust

research is needed to investigate the vulnerabilities boys may experience regarding sexual exploitation by women and how those vulnerabilities may correspond with certain periods of work-related migration in the region.

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Perpetrators	"Perpetrator" tends to be the most frequently used term to refer to individuals having committed and/or been convicted of committing sexual offences against children.
Facilitators	The individuals/entities whose conduct facilitates or aids and abets the commission of the sexual offence against the child (sometimes referred to as "intermediaries").
Both "perpetrators" and "facilitators" are offenders	

It is well-documented that children are most often sexually exploited by male adults that they know and trust. To gain further insight into the types of relationships that were typical of offenders and child victims, participants were asked to estimate the number of male and female *perpetrators* and *facilitators* in the SEC cases they managed and to describe the most common relationship between offenders and victims based on their cases in the last 12 months (e.g. parent/step-parent, community member). These results are illustrated in Figure 6 below.

Findings supported established trends in SEC. Seventy-two participants reported that they had directly managed SEC cases.[2] Perpetrators in these cases were overwhelmingly male, with participants estimating a total 788 reported male perpetrators compared to just 58 female perpetrators. A few participants described cases in which women had sexually exploited young boys. One frontline worker from a domestic violence shelter shared that, "*some women we received were reported to have had sexual affairs with young boys.*" (*Participant ID: 65*)

Another participant suggested that some women may have sexually exploited boys when their husbands migrated for seasonal work. More

Figure 6. Estimated number and type of offenders by gender.
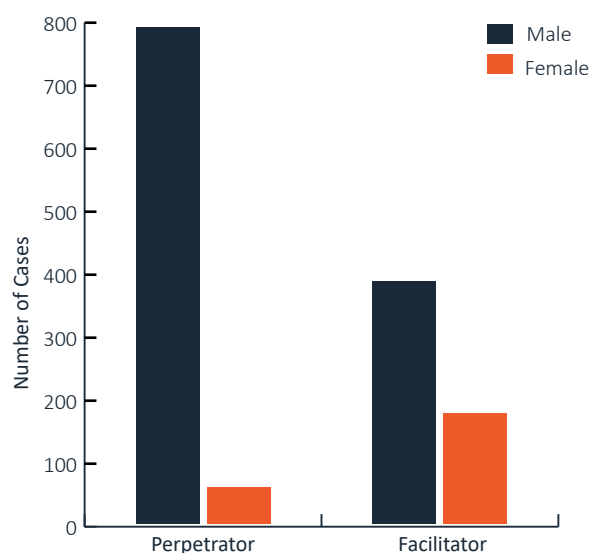
Most of the female offenders reported in this survey had acted as facilitators (rather than perpetrators), which also aligns with trends in SEC. Given an estimated 385 male and 175 female facilitators reported by participants, facilitators were still mostly male but there was a smaller gender disparity in reports of this type of offender.

To expand on the current understanding of the context in which children are sexually exploited, the survey sought to illustrate the typical relationships between offenders and child victims. Participants were asked to describe the most commonly observed relationship between perpetrators, facilitators and child victims (illustrated in figure 7 below). Participants most often reported that perpetrators were commonly other relatives, which included grandparents, uncles/aunts, cousins, and siblings (n=26), followed by parents/step-parents and community members (n=17 and n=16 respectively). These findings reaffirm that children are most often sexually exploited by people who they know either in their family or who may otherwise be within their circle of trust. One participant explained that "*perpetrators of those SEC cases were those of whom those children have trusted most. They were breadwinners of the whole family as well as*

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2   Similarly, to the previous section, one case was excluded due to an extreme estimate exceeding 300 perpetrators in directly managed cases in the last 12 months.

tuition fees providers...one of them was a father, and the other two were uncles." (*Participant ID: 1*). Similarly, participants described the facilitators in their cases as most often parents/step-parents (n=12), other relatives (n=12), and community members (n=11).

Figure 7. Estimated most common relationship between offenders and victims.
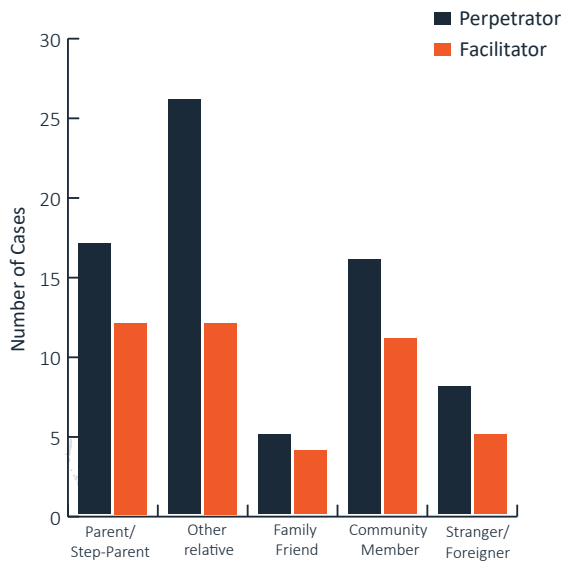
Several participants observed that in their country context, the facts that children are most often victimized by their families and that many people in communities know each other both increases children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and makes it incredibly difficult for children to report what happened to them due to fear of repercussions and judgement. As one participant explained, "*in [Country] context, most of the people know each other... so it's easier for them to communicate and facilitate such activities [such as the] exploitation of children in exchange for goods and for their own benefits.*" (*Participant ID: 32*). Another frontline worker reiterated that in terms of supporting child victims, "*the biggest challenge faced is family*". (*Participant ID: 43*) Several participants observed that families often pressure their children to remain silent about their exploitation and in many cases, children do not know where to turn for safety and support. This is even more so the case in rural areas where services may be non-existent and sometimes even if a child wanted to report, there "*still would not be police in the area*" to report to. (*Participant ID: 1*)

These findings underscore the immense challenges children may face because of the nature of their relationship to their offenders, the strong stigma attached to being a victim of sexual exploitation, and the fear of further judgement and alienation from their communities. Conversely, these results also indicate a strong potential for family- and community-based awareness and outreach efforts to equip families with strategies to help keep their children safe. Support services that may allow for victims to maintain some degree of privacy or anonymity (e.g. hotlines) and can be implemented in areas with low levels of existing law enforcement and services should be explored as well.

Children are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation in travel and tourism

While the findings in this study emphasize the need for research and interventions largely centred around families, research has also demonstrated that as the travel, tourism and certain trade industries continue to expand, opportunities for child sex offenders to exploit children have also increased. Only eight participants indicated that the most common type of perpetrator in their cases was a person unknown to the victim/a foreigner. However, the anecdotes that participants shared resemble other anecdotal trends in this form of SEC in the region. Describing a case that exemplified one way that family members facilitate children's sexual exploitation in tourism, one participant remarked, "*brother of father took the three sisters to the cruise ship and offered them for sex in exchange for money.*" (*Participant ID: 84*)

Two other frontline workers shared observations about foreign companies exploiting local children. One commented, "*foreign companies like loggers have been known to be perpetrators of SEC and families have enabled some of these practices for money.*" (*Participant ID: 24*) The second observed, "*people working in all sectors are aware of sexual exploitation activities taking place, especially in remote rural areas where logging camps are set up by foreign companies.*" (*Participant ID: 25*) In addition to supporting evidence of these trends in SEC, these examples underscore the fact that families and communities may actively participate in this exploitation and that children in remote and rural areas in the region may be especially at risk. These results and observations suggest a need for further research to provide a more comprehensive picture of this issue in the Pacific in addition to enhanced protections and services for children in areas frequented by tourists or that are remote (and thus often under-serviced by law enforcement and welfare) yet exposed to outsiders and other travellers.

Children experience multiple levels of vulnerability to sexual exploitation

Based on their knowledge and experience, participants indicated whether they believed a list of environmental factors increased children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation in their country. Figure 8 shows that 'extreme poverty' (n=70) and 'living and/or working on the street' (n=69) were most consistently selected as factors perceived to increase children's vulnerability to a large degree. This is consistent with established trends in understanding SEC vulnerability. One frontline worker explained that sometimes, "*for the survival of the family, some mothers allow such cases to happen and do not report to police.*" (*Participant ID: 67*) Here again, children in remote communities were described as being particularly vulnerable. One participant observed: "*[SEC] is sometimes almost accepted in some ways in certain communities (more often in the outer provinces) perhaps due to poverty*". (*Participant ID: 20*)

Participants also frequently selected 'being left behind by a parent/guardian who had migrated for work' (n=62), 'family violence' (n=60), 'dropping out of school' (n=60) and 'increased general access to technology and the Internet' (n=61) as factors that increased vulnerability. Numerous participants also stressed that, regardless of the reason for parents or other guardians being away from home, their absence was a major factor that increased children's vulnerability. As one frontline worker

put simply, "*children are more vulnerable when they are without their parents and guardians.*" (*Participant ID: 67*) Another frontline worker described that many of the victims in their cases had "*been neglected by parents and families, forcing them to engage in wrong activities including SEC to survive.*" (*Participant ID: 61*)

These observations correspond with SEC trends documented elsewhere, further supporting the need to invest in strategies to engage parents and families and to assist children who need safe alternatives for economic and material support. One frontline worker described that often when initially approached about these issues, "*parents do not want to go deeper in the situation or problem...they were 'playing around the bush' in collaborating on the matter, but in the end, they do know their part and really help in the way/ steps needed from them.*" (*Participant ID: 7*) The experience this participant shared also aligns with other documented examples of programs that have been successful in promoting more active and informed parenting strategies to promote safer families and communities for children. This is an encouraging finding and could be used to stimulate increased investments in the evaluation and dissemination of promising practices in this area.

Some participants perceived the impact of 'conflicts between modern and traditional norms' (n=32), 'cultural practices' (e.g. early and forced marriages) (n=42) and 'belonging to an ethnic minority group' (n=30) on children's vulnerability as substantial. This may reflect differences in how these factors manifest themselves across island countries and community contexts. For example, one frontline worker expressed that "*in Papua New Guinea traditionally, children are important but*

Figure 8. Participants' perceptions of environmental factors impacting children's vulnerability to SEC.
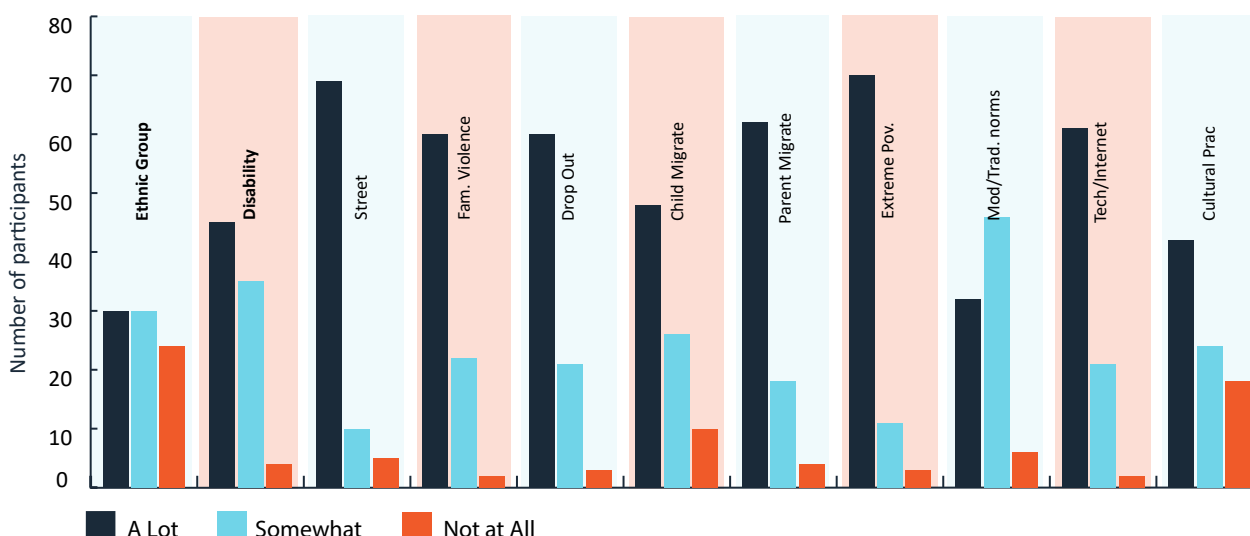
today children are suffering due to the demands of modern lifestyles in towns and cities." (*Participant ID: 63*) A participant from the Solomon Islands noted that legally girls are permitted to marry at age 15 under the Islanders Marriage Act (1945 as revised in 1996), leaving them vulnerable to early and forced marriages. *(Participant ID: 31)* Another frontline worker from Solomon Islands described how "*victims are often left with "half-caste" babies who are then not eligible for custom inheritances of land because of their heritage. The victims who are often sold by their families are also shunned.*" (*Participant ID: 25*) Another participant from Tonga estimated that "*child marriage due to pregnancy is high in Tonga- 50 to 60 marriages a year.*" (*Participant ID: 77*)

Figure 9. Participants' perceptions of cultural factors impacting children's vulnerability to SEC.
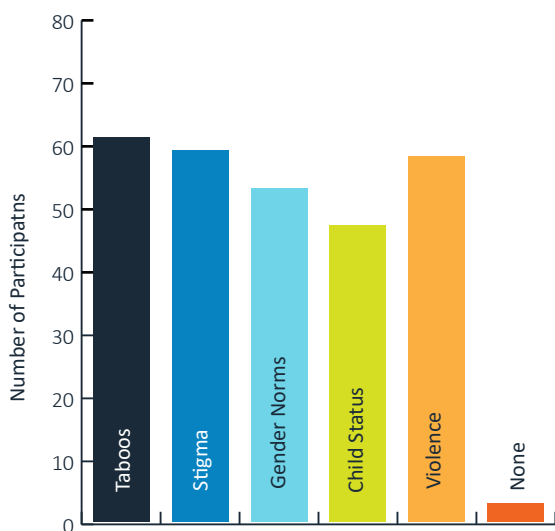
Participants also described how social and cultural factors affected children's vulnerability to SEC (figure 9). In general, all of the listed factors were indicated by most participants as informing children's vulnerability. However, the effect of taboos about sex and sexuality (n=61) and the stigma that victims face (n=59) were most strongly indicated as having an impact on vulnerability. Figure 10 shows that the same two factors were also the most frequently selected as affecting children's ability to seek help (n=70 and n=69 respectively). These findings align with both trends in SEC and many participants' observations throughout the survey. As one frontline worker summarized, "*sexual abuse is still considered as a taboo and victims as well as their families are still victimised and stigmatised. There is shame and*

guilt associated with abuse/exploitation, which prevents the victim and their families from coming forward. There is a delay in the reporting and conviction processes - this increases the chances of the survivor/their families being stigmatised within

Figure 10. Participants' perceptions of cultural factors impacting children's ability to seek help for SEC.
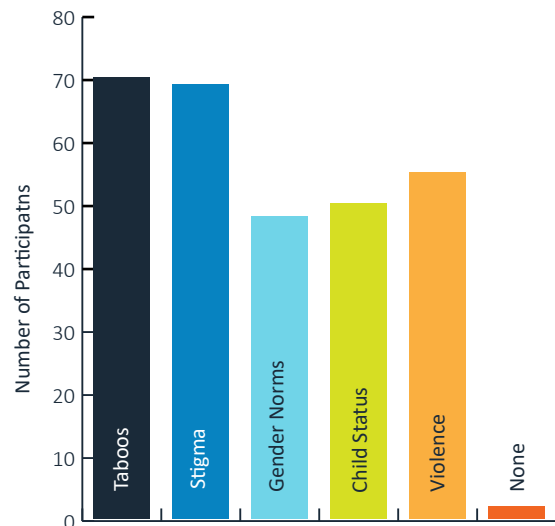
their communities." (*Participant ID: 36*) Many of these key factors that participants perceived as having a large impact on children's vulnerability are complex, intertwined and rooted in wider socio-economic conditions, shortcomings in the justice sector, religious beliefs and culture. Mitigating their effects on children's vulnerability will require multi-faceted strategies at the family, community and institutional levels. For example, reducing cultural taboos around sex and the stigma associated with sexual exploitation will require efforts at the family and community levels, but will also require reforms in the justice system to make reporting and the processes that follow more victim-friendly.

All of these results, experiences and observations point to the need for comprehensive research in each of these countries to expand the knowledge-based regarding how these and other specific factors affect children's vulnerability differently in each country. Despite some contextual similarities throughout the Pacific region, there is also extraordinary diversity. Effectively addressing SEC requires prevention and response approaches for a range of populations, that considers genders, age and multiple other group characteristics.

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Strong demand for law enforcement training, justice reform, and government support

SEC reports appear to often lead to response

Figure 11 shows that of the 72 participants who reported they handled at least some SEC cases, 56 reported that at least one of their cases resulted in an official complaint made to law enforcement (66% of total participants and 77% of participants with SEC cases). Participants estimated a total of at least 705 formal police complaints, which is a higher than expected proportion of the total SEC cases that participants had estimated (n=756). Of these official complaints, at least 552 resulted in investigations, and at least 309 of those led to convictions.

Figure 11. Estimated SEC cases reported, investigated and convicted.
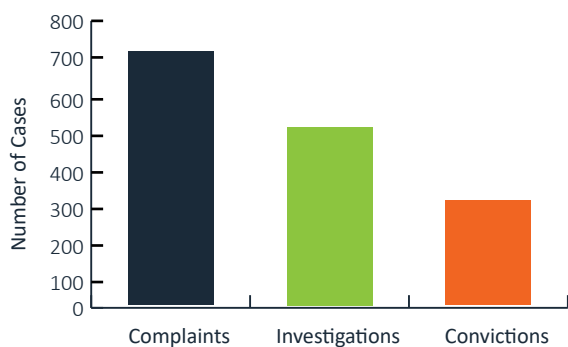

According to these estimates, approximately 78% of filed SEC complaints resulted in investigations, and 56% of investigations led to convictions. Some participants noted that some convictions of complaints filed were still pending investigations and others noted that they had lost track of the case after the complaint had been filed so it is possible that the actual number of convictions is higher. The high rate of reported complaints successfully moving through the justice system may be related to the relatively high number of law enforcement officials who were included as participants in the survey, some of whom work in child or family specific units and would be likely to receive and manage SEC-related complaints. Again it should be noted that these are merely estimates, not counts of official cases.

In general, participants who reported at least one or more complaint, tended to also report at least one investigation and conviction, although this was not always the case. The relatively high rate of complaints filed, investigations and convictions compared to the number of SEC cases that participants reported appears to suggest some hopeful signs in this area. This is a positive finding that advocates could use to encourage reporting as these results may indicate that reporting does often lead to a response in the form of investigations and, in many cases, convictions as well.

Need for law enforcement training and sensitivity

It is also important to note that the number of reported cases represents only a fraction of the number of SEC incidents that we expect are occurring, the majority of which continue to never even come to the attention of either welfare workers or law enforcement. Despite the relatively high proportion of SEC complaints reported to police in this survey, figure 12 shows that 69 participants still rated law enforcement awareness as poor or fair. Based on these results and participant's observations, it appears that even though reported cases may lead to an investigation, the actual manner in which the case is handled and the child is supported throughout the process needs improvement. In addition to the culture of silence and stigma, and pressure from families not to report, many frontline workers listed limited law enforcement capacity and also a critical need for sensitivity training as major factors likely to limit reporting among child victims as well as eventual convictions in reported cases.

Figure 12. Perception of law enforcement awareness and response to SEC.
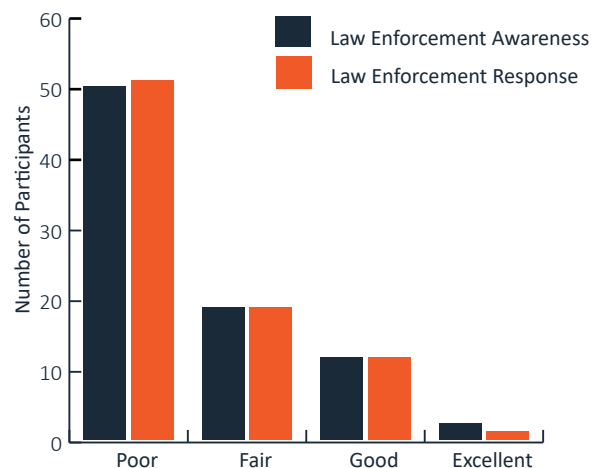
In lower resource contexts, this capacity gap is likely exacerbated as specialized law enforcement units dedicated to child protection don't exist. For example, one participant explained that the police try their best with the resources they have, but that in their country, "*there are almost no services apart from the police and public hospitals, which are under-resourced.*" (*Participant ID: 70*) These limitations continue to affect the chances of a child's case to lead to a conviction even when the child does report. Another participant in another country described that without law enforcement resources dedicated to addressing SEC, their non-government organization was "*doing all the hard work of the case process,*" because law enforcement did not have the capacity to assume that role, but that they are also in need of additional resources. (*Participant ID: 57*)

Several other participants from countries that did not have specialized police units to address SEC and other child protection issues emphasized the urgency of establishing and resourcing these types of units. One participant explained that "*response to SEC cases is good but there is not enough man power and no specific unit to manage the cases professionally - manage juvenile cases. We have a lot of other cases to deal with so there should be, in law enforcement, one specific unit to deal with these types of cases.*" (*Participant ID: 15*) However, similar challenges were reported even when there was a specific unit to manage SEC cases. One participant described that there was still a "*lack of man power to deal with all of the cases received in our unit*" because that unit was responsible for all of the family protection-related cases. (*Participant ID: 13*)

Many participants described the police as severely lacking in sensitivity training related to SEC and the negative impact on child victims and reporting. As one participant expressed, "*for young girls who are already victims, the system and processes that they have to go through…it feels more like an interrogation than an interview.*" (*Participant ID: 34*) This observation is in line with known trends that have demonstrated the need and importance of police training on how to specifically manage cases with child victims in ways that make them feel safe and avoid re-traumatizing them. This issue appeared to be particularly salient in cases involving LGBT children. One frontline worker commented that "*police are not sensitive or supportive to cases brought to their attention and victims find it very hard to step forward because of their sexual orientation and sexual diversity.*" (*Participant ID: 84*)

Strong need for child-friendly justice systems

Many participants expressed the need for law enforcement officers and courts to adopt measures to create child-friendly spaces where victims will feel safe. As one law enforcement officer observed, "*just the thought of the police or a police station is already scary to a child*". (*Participant ID: 12*) They also described that "*currently the kids are brought into our unit which has all the domestic violence pictures on our walls and overall it is not child-friendly.*" (*Participant ID: 12*) These remarks emphasize important issues that have also been highlighted elsewhere. It is important that law enforcement departments and courts consider the perspective and experiences of child victims. This observation can be used to advocate for action on this issue. A practical step as simple as removing any posters related to violent crimes from the spaces where children will enter could be an example of a small but important step towards facilitating children's access to justice.

Several participants also expressed that long delays between the initial report and the trial, often dissuaded victims from continuing to cooperate in the investigation process. Many participants noted that in their experience, some children who had reported eventually withdrew their complaints because of this delay. As noted by another frontline worker, the time between reporting, the investigation and the trial can be a very vulnerable period for a child victim as news of the case may spread to their broader community, especially if they are not able to receive adequate support. These findings could be used to encourage child rights champions in law enforcement and the broader justice sector to further explore other best practices regarding processing SEC cases more quickly and adopting careful measures to protect their identities before and during trials. Given the critical role of law enforcement and the broader justice sector in addressing SEC, increasing the quantity and quality of trained police personnel and implementing child-friendly procedures throughout the legal process will be necessary steps in building trust between law enforcement, service providers, communities and victims of sexual exploitation.

Funding shortfalls limit availability and quality of support services and activities

Low availability and quality of services

Among survey participants, figure 13 below indicates that social and cultural factors such as gender, stigma and taboos around sex were perceived to influence the provision of support to victims. Interestingly, ten participants responded that none of the listed factors affected the availability of support and 29 responded that none of the listed factors affected their organization's ability to provide effective support. These findings likely reflect the participants' consistent observations that rather than cultural factors, procedural and environmental factors such as funding and support from the government and law enforcement more significantly impact the availability and quality of the support they provide for child victims and children at risk. As one frontline worker explained, "*basically funding and lack of resource and government support are common issues that affect the level of support we give to the victims.*" (*Participant ID: 61*)

Figure 14 (next page) indicates participants' perceptions of the overall availability and quality of services for child victims of sexual exploitation in their countries confirmed the trend of limited resourcing and availability. Psychological and reintegration services received the least favourable

ratings. Sixty-nine participants rated the availability of reintegration services as poor or fair and 68 participants rated the quality of reintegration services as poor or fair. The availability of psychological services was rated poor or fair by 70 participants and the quality of those services was rated poor or fair by 65 participants. This is particularly interesting given that the majority of participants worked in organizations providing counselling services. Several participants described that while some counselling and psychological support was available, there is significant need for more psychologists with specialised qualifications.

Observations regarding the need for more specialised professionals were also made in reference to social welfare officers, law enforcement and other providers. One frontline worker from an organization offering residential services for victims explained their need for government support in training, "*for our home, our staff need a lot of training because most of our staff are not certified. So [it would be help] if government officials who are certified in this area can come in and conduct a lot of training with us. We can do the job but a lot of training is needed.*" (*Participant ID: 35*) The availability and quality of medical and legal services were rated somewhat more positively, but responses still indicated significant need in these areas as well. One participant summarized, "*there is a great need for funding to support further work to support victims of sexual exploitation. Training of the service providers on how to deal with such cases is one of the priorities.*" (*Participant ID: 50*)

Survey participants lamented that limited resources had also affected their ability to support

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Figure 13. Participants' perceptions of social and cultural influences on providing support to child victims.
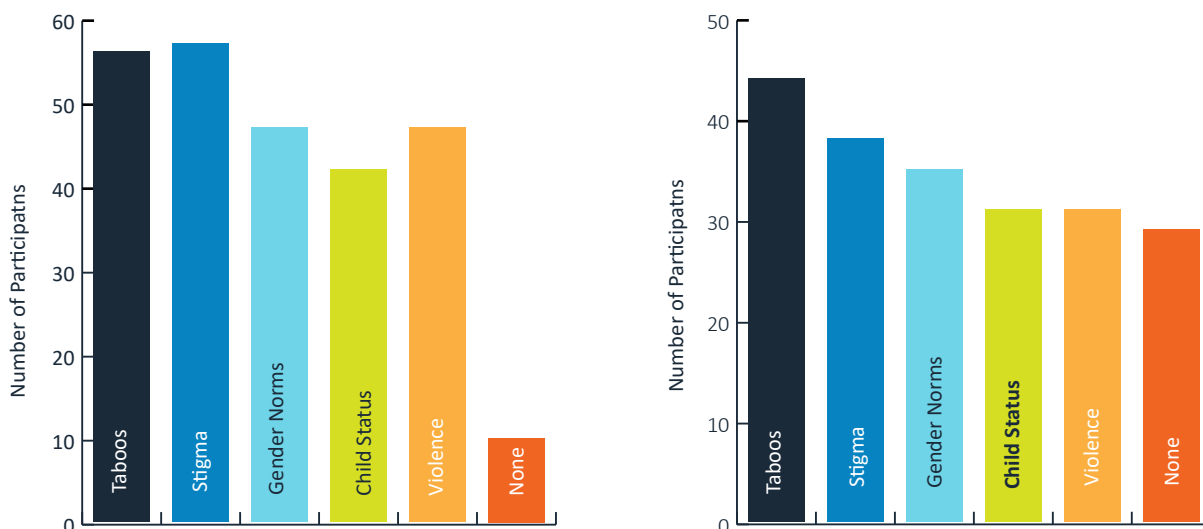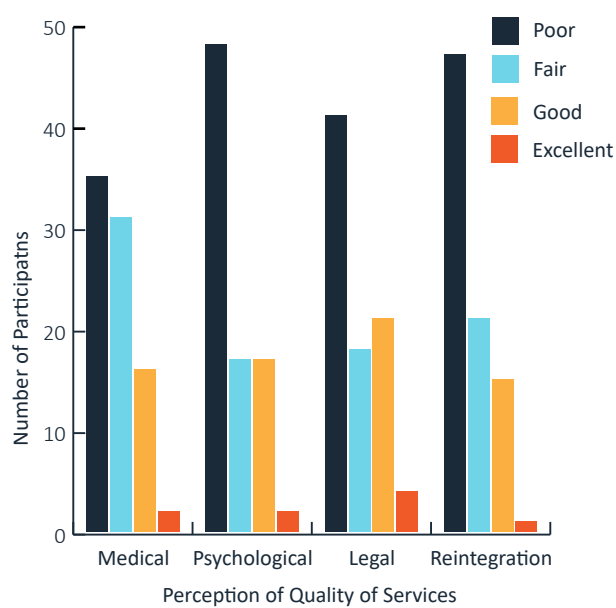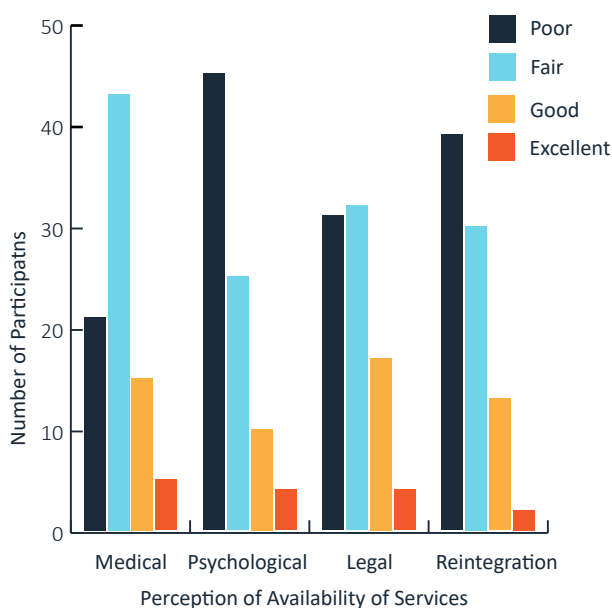
Perception of Availability of Services

Perception of Quality of Services

victims because they did not have the resources to engage in effective collaboration with other stakeholders from different sectors working together to address SEC (see figure 15). Over a third of participants reported that collaboration among different types of stakeholders was non-existent. Thirty-nine participants responded that collaboration was either poor or fair.
As most participants described, funding and capacity continue to be key challenges to fruitful collaborations between providers, government agencies and other stakeholders. As some participants stated, increasing stakeholder collaboration will be essential in efforts to reduce the stigma that victims and vulnerable children face and to strengthen laws and policies to protect them.

Strong need for government support to improve services

Throughout the survey, limited government funding and training were consistently described by participants as major obstacles to providing adequate services to child victims and engaging in other key activities to address SEC. Some participants noted that these shortfalls in government funding and support were particularly frustrating in contexts where the country consists of multiple islands as these gaps severely limited their ability to provide services and conduct activities in outer islands. Figure 16 shows that funding was most frequently rated as poor (n=58),

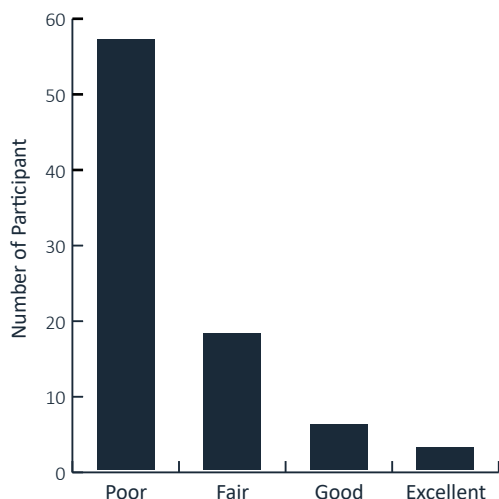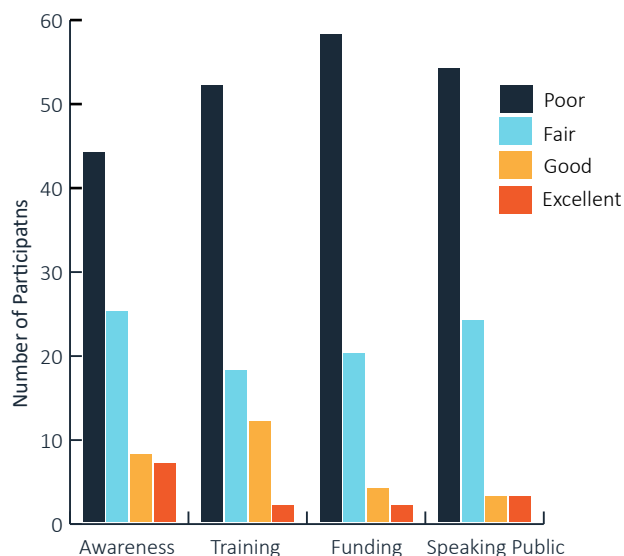Figure 15. Participants' perceptions of sector collaboration.

Figure 16. Participants' perceptions of government support of efforts to address SEC.

followed closely by a need for governments to speak publicly about addressing SEC (n=54). Fifty-two participants described government support for SEC-related training as poor, compared to support for SEC-related awareness efforts, which were described as poor by 44 participants.

The urgent need for the scaling up of police training specifically was again a recurring theme throughout participant comments. As one participant described, "*we need the government to be sensitive and supportive, especially police, and provide funds and resources to help our organisation in the work we do. Also, for changes to the law to remove obstacles and reduce stigmatization.*" *(Participant ID: 82)* These findings underscore the need for collaborative strategies to position SEC as a priority area for government funding and action. One participant emphasized that support for child victims *"can be better with training, funding and awareness programs for everyone." (Participant ID: 73)*

Buy-in from decision-makers and community leaders key to empowering public to address SEC

Participants' observations about the types of resource constraints frontline workers face and the need for increased government support, appear to indicate that the scope and impact of their advocacy and awareness raising activities are also limited in this context. One participant explained that awareness campaigns and other efforts need to be implemented consistently in order to affect change in attitudes and behaviours, suggesting that "*more public awareness and training on SEC should be provided by the government to communities regularly.*" *(Participant ID: 29)*
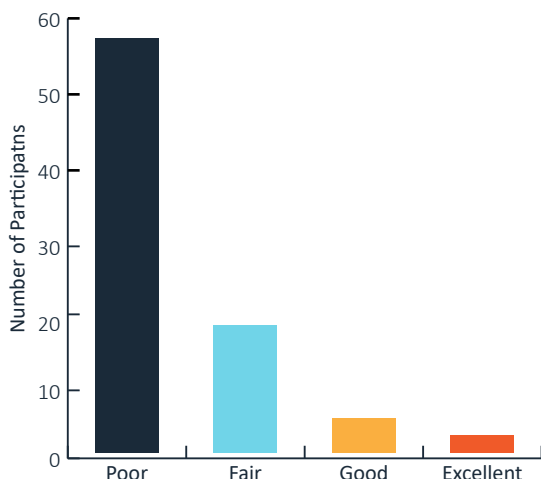
Figure 17 shows that the majority of participants described public awareness of SEC as poor (n=57), in addition to another 18 participants who rated public awareness as fair. Only 9 participants described public awareness as either good or excellent.

In their comments, several participants suggested that while some communities are aware that children are being sexually exploited, the stigma and taboos surrounding this issue hinders meaningful discussion and action to address SEC. Participants observed that promoting discussion around reproductive and sexual health will need to be a part of the strategy to change these cultural norms. As other frontline workers highlighted, educators and leaders in faith-based communities can have an important impact in this area with adequate support and training.

Awareness efforts should also focus on providing communities, especially vulnerable children and victims, with information about the services that may be available and how to safely access them. One participant observed that "*people know it exists but there's very limited reporting or following up of it.*" (*Participant ID: 24*) Another mentioned that sometimes "*there's sometimes a language barrier*", highlighting the need for materials for public dissemination to be available in the local dialects and languages of the target audiences, particularly for victims. (*Participant ID: 8*)

One participant commented that in their experience, it was only once an adult realized that someone close to them had been a victim that began to pay more attention to this issue and try to learn more about SEC. (*Participant ID: 35*) This finding suggests that efforts to raise public awareness should emphasize that SEC is a key issue already affecting children and families and the need for urgent action. The results of this survey support the existing evidence that calls for creative, cross-sector solutions to address this complex issue. The findings from this report could present an opportunity to jump-start new efforts and reenergize existing campaigns to generate buy-in from communities, service providers and key decision-makers and other government authorities to work together to address SEC and support victims.

Figure 17. Perceptions of public awareness of SEC.

Recommendations

❶ *Prioritize SEC- and other child protection- related research and programming in governing budget allocations.*

❷ *Fund and establish evidence-based and culturally specific awareness raising campaigns around SEC, key vulnerability factors, and available support services in local languages.*

❸ *Fund and support research that examines the types of specific vulnerabilities that boys face.*

❹ *Conduct training activities with parents and community leaders to equip them with the knowledge, skills and strategies to foster a protective home environment.*

❺ *Challenge the culture of silence and taboo around sex to facilitate reporting and help-seeking, particularly in tight-knit communities. Faith and other community leaders can be excellent advocates with the right training and information.*

❻ *Increase the legal minimum age of marriage for boys and girls to 18 years and enhance other key legal protections for children against sexual exploitation (e.g. online child sexual exploitation).*

❼ *Develop and implement justice sector reforms to decrease the time period between investigations and trials to increase the number of convictions and implement child-friendly procedures.*

❽ *Establish and adequately fund specialized child and family protection police units and conduct force-wide sensitization trainings on SEC and other child protection issues.*

❾ *Strengthen linkages and collaboration between government agencies, service providers and other frontline workers.*

❿ *Establish and fund multi-sectoral coordinating bodies to facilitate the collaboration between traditional and non-traditional stakeholders in efforts to address SEC.*

Reading List

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