



Country Report

Towards Safer Schools for Children: Malaysia

Preventing Violence Against Children in Schools
in South and Southeast Asia



Coalition for
Good Schools





About Coalition for Good Schools

The Coalition for Good Schools is a collection of leading Global South practitioners committed to preventing violence against children (VAC) in and through schools across Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Coalition elevates insights and evidence-based interventions in order to provide critical tools, data and best practices for sustainable, local solutions. This ten-country document review series has been initiated by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools, coordinated by Samya Development Resources Private Limited (SAMYA).

The Asia Hub commissioned 10 country reports on the state of VAC in and around schools in the broader region, in collaboration with core partners in each context. Each report provides an overview of how violence manifests in educational settings, explores contributing social, cultural and economic factors for VAC in each context, and provides a brief review of the policy landscape, national leadership and strategy for ending violence. While school violence is the primary focus, violence in other physical and online settings is explored. These reports are thus developed for all those working on the issue of VAC, particularly for those who see schools as an ideal entry point for its prevention.

These 10 reports are developed to stand alone, and are summarized in a scene-setting "Synthesis Report" which can be found on our website at www.coalitionforgoodschools.org.

Acknowledgements

This series of reports, produced by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools presents background information, infographics and key resources that aim to foster change and development in both schools' settings and communities in the field of prevention of Violence Against Children across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. This would not be possible without the diverse inputs of practitioners and researchers throughout each context. The Asia Hub is grateful to the following people for their contributions:

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Country Profile

MALAYSIA

Population



34

Million (2024)¹

Leading ethnic groups



57.9%

Malay

22.6%

Chinese

12.2%

Bumiputera

6.6%

Indians

Languages



Malay

Age Structure



29.6%

0-14 years

16.63%

15-24 years

65.4%

25-64 years

5%

64 and above

GDP per capita



13.315 USD

(Dec. 2024)²

Poverty Rate



8.4%

(2020)³

Literacy rate



94.97%

Key Findings

- ❖ 54% of Malaysian parents use corporal punishment and 60% believed it was necessary.
- ❖ Corporal punishment remains common in schools and is often practiced by teachers.
- ❖ 64% of children surveyed acknowledge participating or in acts of bullying.
- ❖ Malaysia ranks third among Southeast Asian countries in terms of both ownership and dissemination of online child sexual abuse material.

¹ Department of Statistics Malaysia (DSOM)

² <https://tradingeconomics.com/malaysia/gd>

³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/overview>

Overall snapshot of violence against children in Malaysia

In Malaysia, between 2020 and 2022, the Social Welfare Department (JKM), under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFC), recorded 18,750 cases of child abuse, encompassing physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as neglect, abandonment and the absence of parents. Nationwide, 1,055 child abuse cases were recorded for the first six months of 2022, from January to June. Alarms have been raised by data gathered by the Department of Social Welfare, Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) and health agencies that showed a consistent rise in the overall number of child abuse cases reported between 2001 and 2015.

A separate cross-sectional study involving 3,509 ten to 12-year-old children selected using a random sampling of public primary schools in Selangor estimated the prevalence of parental physical and emotional maltreatment, parental neglect and teacher-inflicted physical maltreatment (Ahmed et al., 2015). Over half of the children (53.3%) reported experiencing physical abuse by parents. Moreover, 29% of children claimed physical abuse at the hands of their teachers, while almost 1 in 5 reported emotional abuse. Except for emotional abuse, boys were more likely to experience all forms of maltreatment than girls (Ahmed et al., 2015). According to Nikku and Azman (2017), neglect is found to be the most prevalent type of child maltreatment in Malaysia, followed by physical and sexual assault.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education has documented the prevalence of school bullying: 64% of children acknowledge directly participating or possibly participating in acts of bullying; 83% of victims said they were most often bullied in school, with half of those experiencing it in their classrooms.⁴ Between 2012 and 2015, the Ministry of Education recorded school bullying up to 14,000 incidents (UNICEF, 2018).⁵ Cyberbullying is not new in Malaysia, given the rampant use of digital devices and social media platforms. In 2012, 33% of children under the age of 8 to 17 years were already subjected to online bullying with some form of defamation, online harassment and impersonation (Teimouri et al., 2014).⁶ In 2019, 28% of young people in Malaysia were victims of online bullying (UNICEF and #children4change, 2019)⁷, showing that this form of violence is on the rise.

Prevalence of different forms of VAC

1. Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment remains lawful under articles 89 and 350 of Penal Code 1936. The Child Care Centre Act 1984 was also silent on the issue, including in schools, regulated by the Education Regulations (Student Discipline) 2006 under the Education Act 1996. Article 350 of the Penal Code 1936 confirms that the caning of a scholar by a headteacher does not amount to criminal force.

According to a study with families with children ages 1-5 years (n= 11,388),⁸ 54% of Malaysian parents use corporal punishment and 60% believed it was necessary. The likelihood of using corporal punishment was twice as high among those who supported it. Nonetheless, the most popular forms of discipline were non-violent techniques like “giving the child something else to do” (78.7%) and “explaining why the behaviour was wrong” (94.1%); 42.1% combined these

⁴ <https://worldofbuzz.com/study-8-out-of-10-malaysian-children-encountered-bullying-in-school-everyday/>

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/stories/standing-together-curb-bullying>

⁶ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1291259.pdf>

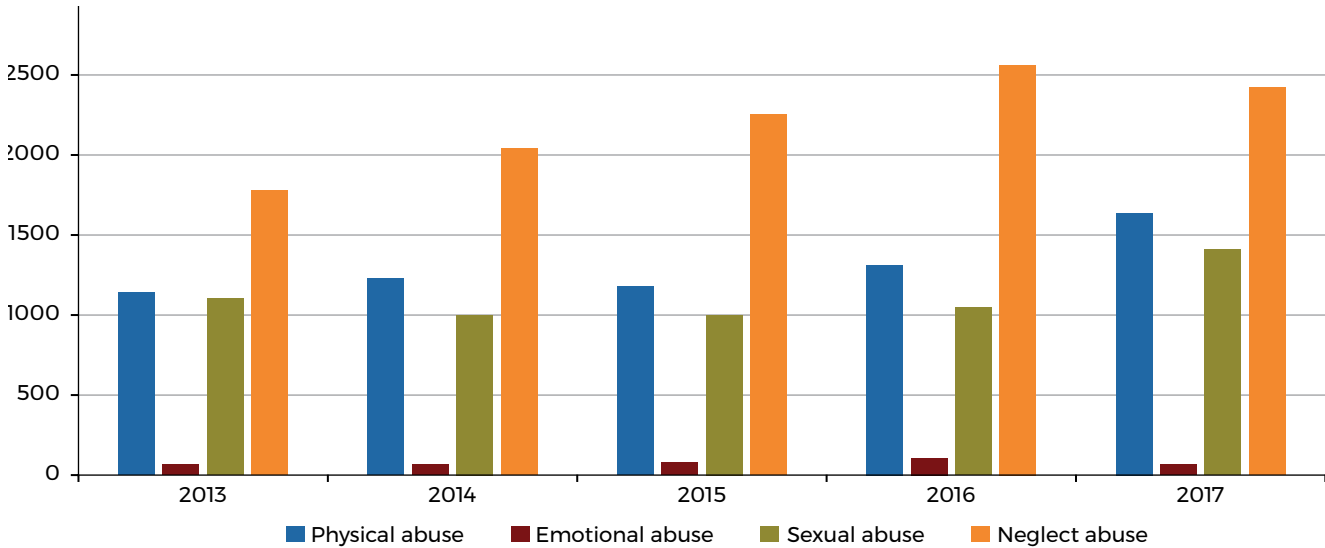
⁷ <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/malaysias-approach-towards-cyber-bullying-the-existing-framework.pdf>

⁸ Ganapathy, S.S., Sooryanarayana, R., Mohammad, N.M., & Manaf, R.A. (2022). Practice of Disciplinary Methods and Factors Associated With Belief for Physical Punishment Among Malaysian Parents: Findings from NHMS 2016. *Global Paediatric Health*, 9, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2333794X221113820>

techniques with psychological aggressiveness and physical punishment. A mother’s age, degree of education of her parents and income of the home were all associated with support for and use of physical punishment. 619 parents in Malaysia participated in a YouGov survey⁹, regarding their support or opposition to physical punishment. 73% of respondents said corporal punishment was always essential; 63% said it was required for theft and 54% said it was required for bullying. Of the parents who use corporal punishment at home, 47% thought teachers should administer it, while 20% disagreed. Because 85% of the parents had received physical punishment as children, it was evident that parents were more likely to use corporal punishment on their children.

According to another study, more than 70% of children have experienced violent discipline at home in Malaysia and over 50% of parents or caregivers said that they believed that physical punishment is a necessary form of discipline to raise their children.¹⁰ In Year 5, a cross-sectional survey was carried out among children (N = 3509) in Selangor, the most populous state in Malaysia. Children reported being physically abused by their parents in 48.9% of cases and by their teachers in 25.8% of cases. It may be because experiencing corporal punishment at home can lead to behavioural issues and hostility at school that children who experience physical abuse at home are twice as likely to be physically abused by teachers. In another 2018 study, 47% of parents accepted physical punishment by teachers in the school and only 20% of parents were against it.¹¹ There

Figure 1: Prevalence of Violence in Malaysia



Source: Department of Social Welfare

is also considerable increase in likelihood for children in rural areas to have been subjected to physical abuse by teachers. For children in rural areas of Malaysia, there is a considerable increase in the likelihood that they had been subjected to physical abuse by teachers in the past.¹² A 2020 study by the Paediatrics Department of Hospital Serdang titled “Suspected child abuse and neglect cases in a single tertiary hospital in Malaysia – a five-year retrospective study” showed that physical abuse was the most common (55%, or 216 cases), followed by sexual abuse (33% or 130) and neglect (10% or 41). Perpetrators are usually family members, such as biological parents or extended family members. The study shows that the most common perpetrators were biological parents (30%) and babysitters (26%).

⁹ Anderson, K., & Barrett, J. (2020) Situation Analysis of Adolescents in Malaysia. UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/1521/file/Situation%20Analysis%20of%20Adolescents%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.unicef.org/reports/familiar-face>

¹¹ <http://www.unicef.org/eap/reports/accelerating-action-end-violence-against-children-east-asia-and-pacific>

¹² <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/reports-on-every-state-and-territory/malaysia/>

2. Peer violence and bullying

In Malaysia, studies have found that multiple forms of school bullying have become a serious issue. However, there have been some notable shifts recently, with teachers making more efforts to protect children while at school.¹³ According to the Malaysia Crime Prevention Foundation, bullying affects 84% of children under 18 in some way or form. Bullying took many forms, including cyberbullying and, in some cases, physical violence that led to severe injuries and even death. The Children4Change survey (2019), conducted by the Kindness Project – a collaborative effort by the Ministry of Education, WOMEN: Girls, and UNICEF – also made a few other worrying discoveries regarding bullying in Malaysia. The study found that 70% of children had witnessed a peer being bullied just because of the way they looked, dressed or walked; 50% identified the classroom as where bullying usually happens, while 64% of the children surveyed acknowledged participating or possibly participating in acts of bullying.

3. Sexual violence and harassment

The UNICEF report “Situation Analysis - Adolescents in Malaysia” found that at least 22,134 children had been sexually abused between 2010 and 2017.¹⁴ A total of 1,145 incidents of sexual harassment and other forms of abuse were recorded at schools. Of the offenders, 472 were identified as peers and 320 as teachers. The report also noted that 81.4% of sexual harassment violations went unreported.¹⁵ According to data from the Social Welfare Department, the number of kids who require protection after being sexually abused has been rising every year. In 2015 and 2016, the reported number was 46; in 2017, it rose significantly to 148; in 2018, it was 113; and in 2019, it was 146¹⁶. The Royal Malaysia Police documented 1,721 instances of sexual crime against minors in just the first half of 2020 (Kaur, 2020). In addition, 2,040 cases of child abuse were reported to the Ministry of Women and Community Development in the first four months of 2021, with 30% of the victims being victims of physical and sexual abuse (Hasan, 2021). The All-Women’s Action Society reported that most sexual abuse took place in primary or secondary schools and other schoolchildren were reported to be the largest group of perpetrators.¹⁷

Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA) is another area of concern. Malaysia ranks third among Southeast Asian countries in terms of both ownership and dissemination of online child sexual abuse material (Ushama & Jalil, 2020). According to Disrupting Harm data¹⁸, in the past year, 4% of internet-using children aged 12–17 in Malaysia (38 children) reported that they had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse. However, according to a UNICEF study from 2019, two-thirds of the participants—children from Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand—had unpleasant experiences online, ranging from attempts at sexual exploitation to cyberbullying.¹⁹ It has also been shown that children between the ages of 10 and 18 account for 80% of Malaysian rape victims who met their predators online.²⁰ On social media, both boys and girls report seeing explicit messages and pictures (Bulger & Burton, 2020).

4. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is widely prevalent in Malaysia. In 2012, 33% of children under the age of 8 to 17

¹³ <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/gangster-to-kindest-curbing-school-violence/>

¹⁴ <http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/1521/file/Situation>

¹⁵ <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/48530/1145-cases-of-sexual-abuse-reported-in-schools-survey>

¹⁶ Jabatan Kebajikan Malaysia

¹⁷ <http://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/12/01/how-safe-are-our-schools-study-notes-over-1000-testimonies-so-far->

¹⁸ ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Global Partnership to End VAC

¹⁹ UNICEF.2019. How can understanding children’s online behaviour inform protection strategies in East Asia? <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/16.EAP.pdf>

²⁰ Ecpat Briefing Paper.2019. Sexual Exploitation of Children in Malaysia. Thailand: Bangkok

years said that they had been subject to some form of online bullying, such as defamation, online harassment, or impersonation. About 300 incidents of online harassment were recorded by Online Security Malaysia in 2012, 512 in 2013, 550 in 2014, 442 in 2015 and 529 in 2016 (The Star Online, 2017). There have been 1,524 documented instances of cyberbullying over the previous five years, according to MCMC (2016), which verified that the number was rising annually. Considering that more than five million children are enrolled in schools nationwide, this figure may not seem like much, but the number of incidents reported to the government is just the tip of the iceberg. According to a survey report released by UNICEF and the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on VAC, 28% out of 6953 young people in Malaysia have reported being a victim of online bullying (#children4change, 2019).

Drivers of VAC in Malaysia

1. Normative factors

Preventing VAC requires a significant shift in societal standards and attitudes and transforming deeply rooted social, cultural norms and practices. Specifically, the notion that some types of violence are acceptable and occasionally justified must be addressed. Male peers pressuring younger boys into gang violence as a “rite of passage,” considering child marriage or wife battering as usual, or teachers hitting children because violent punishment is viewed as justified, as well as children not reporting violence out of fear of shame and stigma are just a few examples.

In Malaysia, sexual matters are also not publicly discussed, as discussions about sex and related topics are taboo in some Malaysian cultures (Yusof et al., 2015). As a result, those not well-exposed to accurate knowledge regarding sex are more prone to misunderstand the situation and accept falsehoods as fact. Negative attitudes towards victims of sexual abuse are partly a result of reliance on these cultural taboos and beliefs. For example, a common belief is that victims are to blame for their mistreatment and that sexual abuse is not a significant issue (Salina Nen, 2010).

2. Sexuality

There is a paucity of information regarding LGBTQIA+ youth in Malaysia. However, these children would face difficulties and barriers due to Malaysia's laws, policies and social milieu.²¹ In addition to limiting LGBTQIA+ children's access to resources and information, the criminalisation of same-sex relationships probably contributes to stigmatisation and intolerance. For offences involving impersonation, those who express themselves in a non-conforming gender can also be punished under the penal code (UNESCO, 2015). In 2020, three organisations released a joint monitoring report that students encountered a range of challenges, discrimination and violence in educational settings, including elementary, secondary and university education, based on how they express their gender, their actual and or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. Multiple actors, such as classmates, instructors, administrators and others, are involved in acts of discrimination and violence, which may not be restricted to the school grounds.

3. Poverty

While Malaysia is an upper middle-income country²², an estimated 5.6% of Malaysian households still live under the poverty line, which can significantly impact children's education. Malaysia

²¹ UNESCO, From Insult to Inclusion: Asia Pacific Report on school bullying, violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, 2015, p. 19.

²² <https://www.unicef.org/malaysia/media/1526/file/Situation>

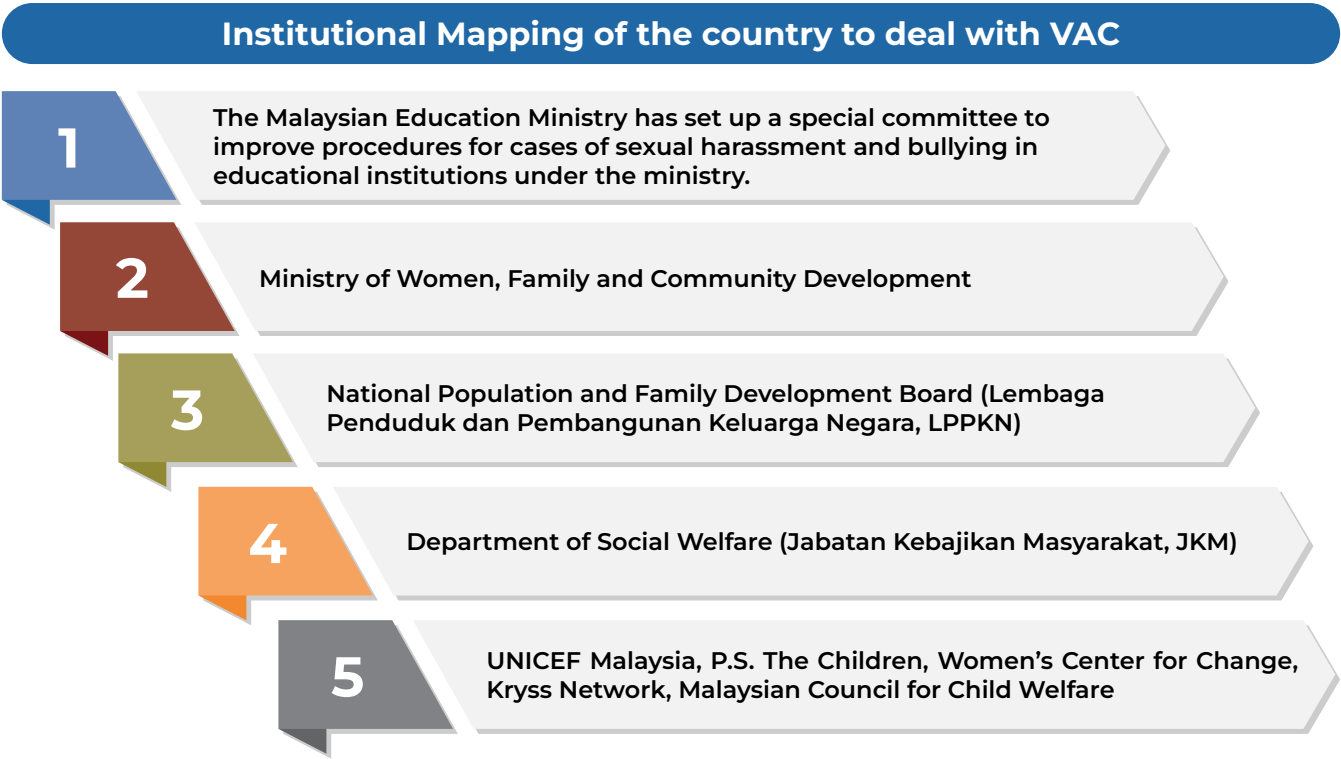
scored 80 out of 100 on the Out of the Shadows Index²³, a measure for livelihoods, with less than 1% of households living in extreme poverty. Social norms and values, as well as a culture of shame and silence surrounding the subject of sex, are particular and contextual factors that increase children’s susceptibility to sexual exploitation in Malaysia. These factors can impede the provision of adequate and practical sexual education and enable sexual abuse to go unreported (Out of Shadows Report, 2019).

4. Conflict

Malaysia is home to nearly 2.5 million legal and illegal migrants, predominantly from conflicts in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. For many of these families who have lived in Malaysia since the 1960s and 1970s, they continue to be considered as refugees.²⁴Tens of thousands of these refugee children are not allowed to go to school because they do not have the proper documentation. However, efforts to change this are underway and a school dedicated to such children are being built.²⁵

Prevention and Response to VAC

Based on the Out of the Shadows Index 2022 (OOSI), which measures how 60 countries are preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA), Malaysia ranked 23rd out of 60. The two different pillars (prevention and response) were measured whereby Malaysia scored 51.8 out of 100 (prevention) and 61.9 out of 100 (response), respectively, which looked at legislation, policies and programs and how effective the prevention measures were. Malaysia’s Ministry of Education developed the Safe School Program in 2002.²⁶Child Activity Centres (PAKK)



²³ The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2019). Out of the Shadows: Shining light on the response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.
²⁴ <http://www.dw.com/en/malaysian-school-targets-undocumented-children/a-15637233>
²⁵ ibdi
²⁶ <https://web-archive.oecd.org/pdfViewer?path=/2012-06-15/152574-34739197.pdf> Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Portal Aduan Buli. Cited 2023 Oct 16.

and Child Protection Teams (PPKK) were formed to register and monitor the government's thirty-six children's homes and institutions. To ensure that schools are bully-free and safe environments for students, the Malaysian Education Ministry (MOE) and Ministry of Home Affairs launched a bullying complaint channel in the MOE portal in August 2022 for parents/students to report bullying that occurs among students in schools.²⁷

Policy and strategy for the way forward

Malaysia has taken few steps to protect children from violence in schools. These steps are rooted in the Child Act 2001, the legal and policy framework for the functioning of the child protection system to respond to child victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation. This framework has recently been consolidated with the introduction of a National Policy for Children and a National Child Protection Policy.²⁸ In 2002, the Malaysian Ministry of Education developed its Safe School Program to decrease violence, vandalism, theft, gang affiliation and misconduct within schools. The Malaysian Ministry of Education also collaborated with UNICEF to work with schools across Malaysia to participate in the "Kindness for Every Child" school program to motivate children to learn about their rights and mobilise them to use kindness in their actions. In further collaboration with UNICEF, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission has promoted the government's national policy, which aims to ensure that the internet is an environment that is safe for all children.²⁹

Despite existing legislation and efforts to combat CSA and OCSEA, challenges to address these heinous crimes persist. According to the Disrupting Harm Report (2022), a range of promising initiatives driven by government, civil society and industry are underway in Malaysia; however, weak interagency coordination and cooperation and limitations related to budgetary resources exist. Although existing legislation, policies and standards in Malaysia include provisions relevant to OCSEA, including strong provisions regarding child-friendly investigations and prosecutions, support to implement such standards across the country and further legislative reform are needed for a comprehensive response to OCSEA.

Despite positive moves, a UNCRC report on Malaysia suggested that more coordination is needed to ensure that the government and local communities are all working to uphold children's rights. It is strongly recommended that Malaysia take more significant measures to stop violence against vulnerable children, specifically in the home. It also recommended that more efforts should be made to ensure that all students have equal access to high-quality education at all levels. Furthermore, it is uncommon for children to participate in the political and social systems created expressly to shield them from child sexual exploitation.³⁰ In Malaysia, the mechanism of compensating children who have been sexually exploited is likewise not well-established.³¹ It will be challenging to advocate for improved laws protecting children from CSA and OSCEA in the absence of a potent political framework devoted to child rights and issues. Active child participation in national decision-making is needed to move issues that affect children in an accountable manner.

²⁷<https://aduanbuli.moe.gov.my/>

²⁸<https://www.iccwtnispncanarc.org/upload/pdf/7583983452Child%20protection%20system%20in%20Malaysia.pdf>

²⁹<http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/press-releases/working-together-better-online-child-protection>

³⁰ ECPAT Country Overview. A Report on the scale, scope and context of the sexual exploitation of children in Malaysia. <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/ECPAT-Country-Overview-Research-Report-Malaysia-2019.pdf>

³¹ ECPAT Country Overview. 2019. A Report on the scale, scope and context of the sexual exploitation of children in Malaysia

Suggestions on the Way Forward

As the understanding of safety in educational environments continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of schools as spaces where non-violent and just societies can be co-created. The findings presented here aim to inform a growing network of national and regional practitioners, policymakers, civil society groups, researchers and funders committed to preventing all forms of violence within Malaysia's schools.

While the Coalition for Good Schools encourages stakeholders to review the full recommendations outlined in the regional synthesis report, insights from the Asia Hub highlight key areas for action:

- **Education delivery system as an entry-point:** *The education system offers a strategic avenue for the prevention of violence against children. Effective multi-sectoral government action at the national level is crucial for catalysing these interventions.*
- **Children's experience and agency:** *Prioritising children's lived experiences within schools and fostering their agency should be central in education policies and interventions.*
- **Whole-school approach:** *Implementing a comprehensive, whole-school strategy that nurtures a positive school culture and upholds the inherent dignity of every child can produce long-term outcomes. Meaningful engagement with teachers, school staff, and the local community is essential for the success of such initiatives.*
- **Knowledge generation and dissemination:** *Ongoing documentation, sharing, and expansion of knowledge and evidence is vital for deepening understanding of effective interventions, strengthening local efforts and supporting scale through the education sector.*

There are proven solutions to end violence, and with collective effort, violence can be prevented within our lifetime. Beyond the Kindness for Every Child campaign and Safe School Program, Protect and Save the Children (P.S. The Children) works closely with schools and communities through outreach programs in schools. The Kryss Network's "Suara Pelajar, Suara Utama" Campaign aims to make schools safer and more inclusive by highlighting the importance of students' voices in creating a secure learning environment. These efforts reflect a growing movement dedicated to violence prevention in Malaysia.

Effective foundational interventions should incorporate several core elements:

- **Recognising schools' role in nurturing and developing children's potential.**
- **Promoting justice, equality, and empathy as foundational school values.**
- **Affirming children's rights and agency within the educational context.**
- **Supporting progressive pedagogies that encourage positive change.**
- **Honouring the dignity of every child, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, caste, creed, or other categorisations.**

Prevention programmes must also adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the overlapping and reinforcing characteristics that shape children's unique experiences of violence. This approach recognises that certain groups of children may face increased risks and that the severity and frequency of violence can vary considerably.

While sometimes sites of violence, schools also hold significant potential as primary sites for learning and implementing strategies to prevent it. School-based initiatives can yield multiple positive outcomes, serving as catalysts for broader change.

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