

REFLECTIONS



This is an exciting time for ChildFund. Guided by *Destination 2020*, we are strengthening our programming by consciously examining how violence in all its forms affects children. We are working with an increasing range of partners to prevent and respond to violence against children, while pursuing interventions that contribute to positive developmental outcomes for children and youth. Our increased investment in generating data is helping us to understand and analyze the factors that render children vulnerable to violence and is informing the types of interventions that we undertake to protect girls and boys.

Our learning about children's experiences of violence

Our investment in collecting information is important. It tells us the story of children's lives and pushes us, as an organization, to reflect, innovate and mobilize resources to address the risks that children face. And, as our child protection mappings, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data, and research studies reveal the violence that children and youth experience, we are tailoring our programs in response.

What is our research telling us?

- **Children and youth are at risk of and subject to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence** at all stages of childhood and early adulthood. While families are the main source of care and protection for the vast majority of children, our data remind us that violence often has a familiar face – it is all too frequently inflicted by parents and caregivers, adult relatives, teachers, neighbors, classmates, and friends, whether at home, at school, or in communities.
- **Violence affects girls and boys differently.** Although children tend to face many of the same risks in the early years, gender increasingly determines the kind of violence girls and boys – and children expressing a non-binary gender identity – experience as they transition to adolescence and adulthood.
- **Perceptions of violence are underpinned by cultural and social norms.** Our data reveal that in many societies, harsh corporal punishment by parents and teachers is still socially accepted and legal. Similarly, early marriage and FGM/C may be viewed as protective rather than harmful practices.
- **The reasons for violence are complex.** Our data indicate a number of factors that contribute to children's vulnerability to violence, including gender norms (particularly prevailing expectations about masculinity); harmful cultural practices; access to quality education, social services, and information about sexual and reproductive health; and exposure to disaster situations.
- **The reasons why children and families do not always report child protection violations are similarly complex.** Our data show that children, families, and communities often do not

know where to seek help; experience shame, stigma, and the threat of reprisal; may lack confidence in the system to respond effectively; and the cost of accessing services may be prohibitive. At the same time, overwhelming poverty and economic hardship mean that child protection may not always be considered a priority.

- **Measures to protect children from violence are essential at the community level.** In many of the countries where we work, formal child welfare and protection systems are weak, under-resourced, and of limited reach within some communities – which means that direct interventions with children, parents, families, and communities are essential. We know too that, despite the challenges of establishing and sustaining community-based child protection mechanisms, they are often a helpful first option for mediating and resolving situations when a child is identified as vulnerable to violence.

Our commitment to protecting children

ChildFund's programs are already making a tangible impact on children's lives. As we move forward, we are determined to build upon these gains, using our learning about children's experiences of violence – and how it disrupts their development and well-being – to further shape our work.

As ChildFund strives to achieve its goals for children, we will:

- 1 Consolidate and expand our learning about child protection:** We will continue to invest in data generation and explore how we can systematically reduce the risk of violence against children. In this way we aim to eliminate the violence that not only disrupts childhood but also significantly undermines the positive impact of our other child development programs.
- 2 Focus on the intersection between child development and child protection:** As we increasingly understand the effects of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence on children's development outcomes, our health, education, nutrition, and ECD programs will reflect and integrate learning from our child protection research. This intersectoral approach will give us a more complete picture of childhood and help us create complementary programs for children.
- 3 Build our partners' ability to address violence:** Understanding the forms of abuse, exploitation, neglect, and violence that children and youth are at risk of is just the first step in a longer process. Moving forward, we will focus our efforts on building the skills of our community-based partners – particularly those less accustomed to working in the area of child protection – to respond to violence against children in the communities where they work.

- 4 Foster relationships that protect children:** We recognize the positive impact that protective and nurturing relationships have on children's well-being as they grow and develop through the life stages. We will build and support these relationships – whether child-caregiver, parent-teacher, child-community, peer-peer, community leaders-partners – at all ages and stages of development, keeping them central to mitigating the risk of violence to children and restoring well-being to families.
- 5 Strengthen our partnerships with the communities where we work:** Our interventions demonstrate the potential for involving communities in the protection of children. When empowered, children, parents, teachers, government, and local partner organization staff can help to identify and respond to cases of violence, challenge harmful practices, and transform attitudes.
- 6 Support community systems of protection including community-based child protection mechanisms:** Our work demonstrates that CBCPMs can play an important role in protecting children of all ages. However, they need support. Our research has revealed that CBCPMs often do not function effectively and/or link to formal child services,ⁱ and that they may be less likely to deal with certain types of harm against older children.ⁱⁱ We will work to improve the way that CBCPMs operate, respond to children's protection needs, and make sure that their efforts are integrated within and linked to formal systems of protection.
- 7 Take a long-term, systems approach to child protection programming:** The complex and deep-rooted nature of many child protection issues means that we need to focus on long-term interventions if we want to see real systemic change. We know, for example, that changing social norms that sanction violence against children, such as violent discipline, FGM/C, or child marriage, requires action at every level of the child protection system – from families and communities, to government institutions and national policy-makers. This means moving away from short, ad hoc projects towards a broader, system-strengthening approach to child protection.
- 8 Amplify the voice of children and youth and facilitate participation:** In line with our mission and values, we will continue to encourage the involvement of children in research, program design and evaluation. Working in partnership with children and youth provides us a better understanding of their experiences and helps us tailor systems of support. Our example will help to create societies that value the opinions and decisions of children.
- 9 Advocate for and support the development of formal child protection systems:** In addition to our work at the community level, we will use our learning to open new channels of dialogue to advocate for effective formal systems of protection. At the national level, we will progressively bring children's experiences and opinions to the attention of senior policy-makers while at the sub-national level we will help to create professional networks of social workers, police, health services, and other actors working to protect children.

- 10 Ensure that our target interventions protect the most marginalized children by giving particular attention to disability, gender, and other vulnerability factors:** We know that vulnerability to specific types of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence impacts girls and boys – and children expressing a non-binary gender identity – differently and becomes more pronounced as they transition to adolescence and adulthood. Our program response must shift accordingly and adopt a gender lens across life stages. We also need to be increasingly conscious of which children are included and benefit from our interventions and how we widen the net to include all marginalized children.
- 11 Transform ourselves internally as an organization:** As we support families, communities and governments to protect children, we will also focus on our own organizational child safeguarding measures. This will ensure that we continue to work in safe and ethical ways with children and set the highest standards for all our programs.

Strengthening our child protection work is an ambitious undertaking and will take time. However, it is critical that we follow this path if we want to see our investments in other important child development spheres bear fruit. We are making steady progress. Across our country programs, innovative research studies and new ways of collecting information are helping us to understand children and young people's vulnerability to violence as well as the factors that protect them. Our interventions – from initiatives to reduce violence in schools and improve parenting practices, to anti-trafficking and youth advocacy programs – are showing us how we can most effectively partner with communities and governments to protect children.

As our programs adopt a more integrated approach to child protection, we will begin to see the real impact on children's lives. We believe that the changes we are making are a worthwhile investment so that **children can grow up safe from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence, achieve their potential and lead fulfilling lives.**

Endnotes

i. For example, our M&E data from selected communities in 17 countries found that only 38% of CBCPMs were actually functioning effectively, that is, had formal recognition, an established referral protocol, and convened meetings attended by at least one member of the formal protection system. Source: ChildFund International. (2017). Global M&E Summary Report.

ii. ChildFund Philippines. (2018). *M&E Level 2 CBCPM Checklist Data from the Philippines*.