

SEEN BUT NOT HEARD: FAITH PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD PARTICIPATION TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN (EVAC) LEARNING HUB, JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE ON
FAITH AND LOCAL COMMUNITIEES

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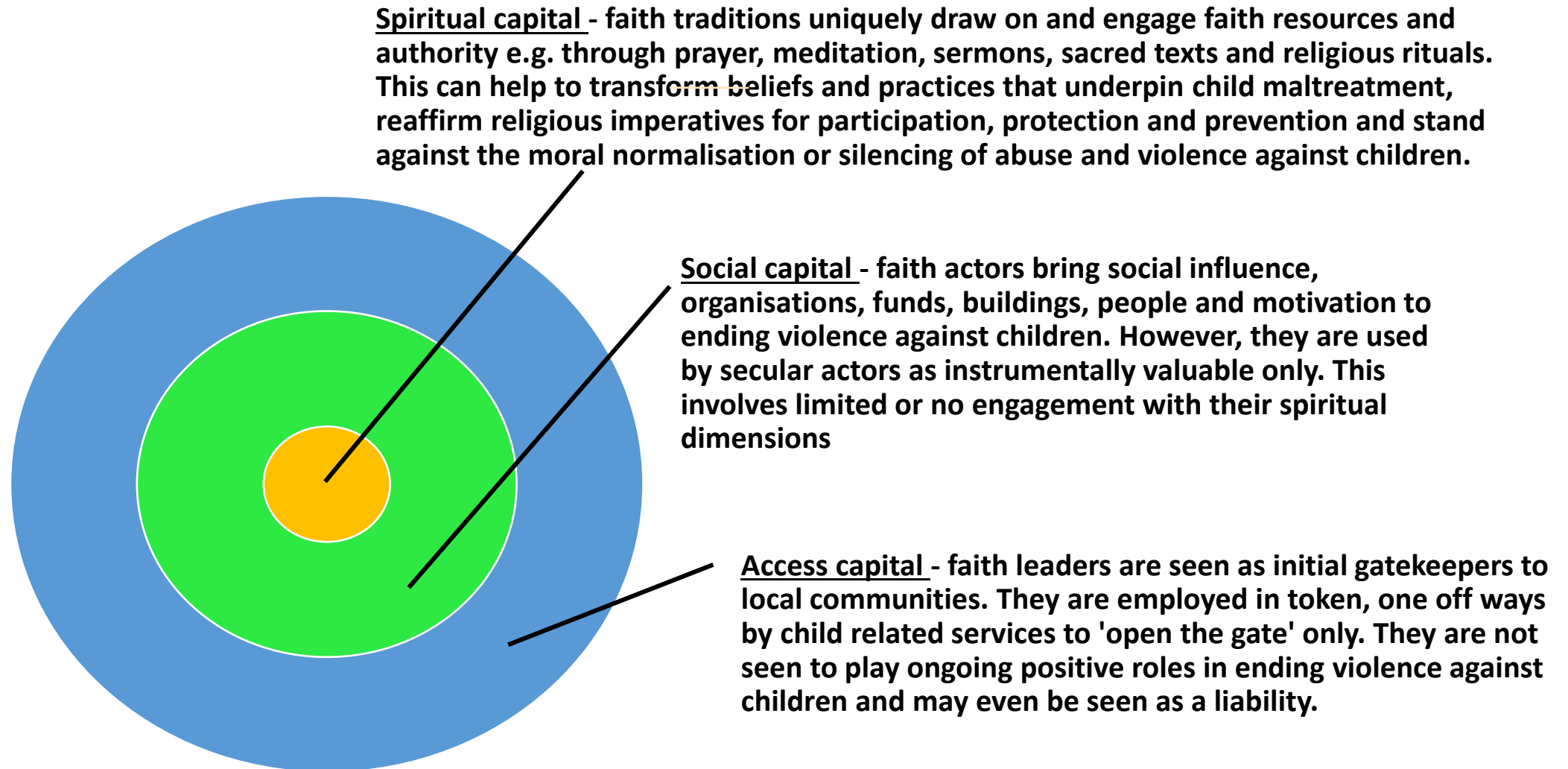
Faith & Ending Violence against Children

*“Many religious leaders have enormous reach, they see people throughout their lifespan... So, they have this enormous influence and power, and, conferred on them, whether legitimate or not, a moral authority. They have worked with **the theology of a child**, they have a unique contribution to make there” (Interviewee, United Kingdom)*

*“We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because of **underlying beliefs**...and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed” (Interviewee, Panama)*

84% of people in the world today identify with a religion

Introducing Faith's Three Circles of Capital



Ending violence against children requires changing social mindsets

JLI Scoping Study (Palm & Eyber, 2019). <https://jliflc.com/2019/06/evac-scoping-study-published/>

Child Participation was highlighted by all the faith experts interviewed in the 2019 JLI scoping study as a **critical component** of the task of ending violence against children. It was seen to play a **dual role**.

- ✓ It enables children to learn directly how to protect themselves including the use of faith-based campaigns and activities *that address children directly* as participants.
- ✓ It reshapes wider social norms and communal understandings of *the child as a social subject to be heard and engaged*, not as patriarchal property to be owned. Involving children in meaningful ways helps recognise their agency and their inherent right to participate and be heard.

ROOT CAUSE OF VAC: CHILDREN SEEN AS SILENT OBEDIENT PROPERTY THAT BELONGS TO ADULTS

Key Message: Child centred approaches are seen as essential in faith settings. Linking child participation and protection improves the child's social status, enables the voices of children to be part of the changes seen to be needed and avoids a passive victim lens to child protection.

Child participation as a means of protection for children

- **Involving children in community and family decisions** to challenge patterns of hierarchy and submission (and the 'religiously infused' myth that children must be seen and not heard)

"In Thailand, there is a school...they have a parliament and children and teachers have an equal vote... if you believe in democracy you have to let children participate and build that in them. Not only chanting "democracy... Whether right or wrong, they have to dare to make decisions". (Interviewee, Thailand)

- **Equipping children to break the silence** on their own abuse and the abuse of others safely and understand that what is happening is not OK and is not their fault (the myth that children lie, cannot be believed or do something to deserve it)

"For example an expert from India pointed out that in relation to sexual violence the girl was not encouraged to speak about it...and if they talked the victim was further victimised...they are told it was them that asked for trouble" (Interviewee, India)

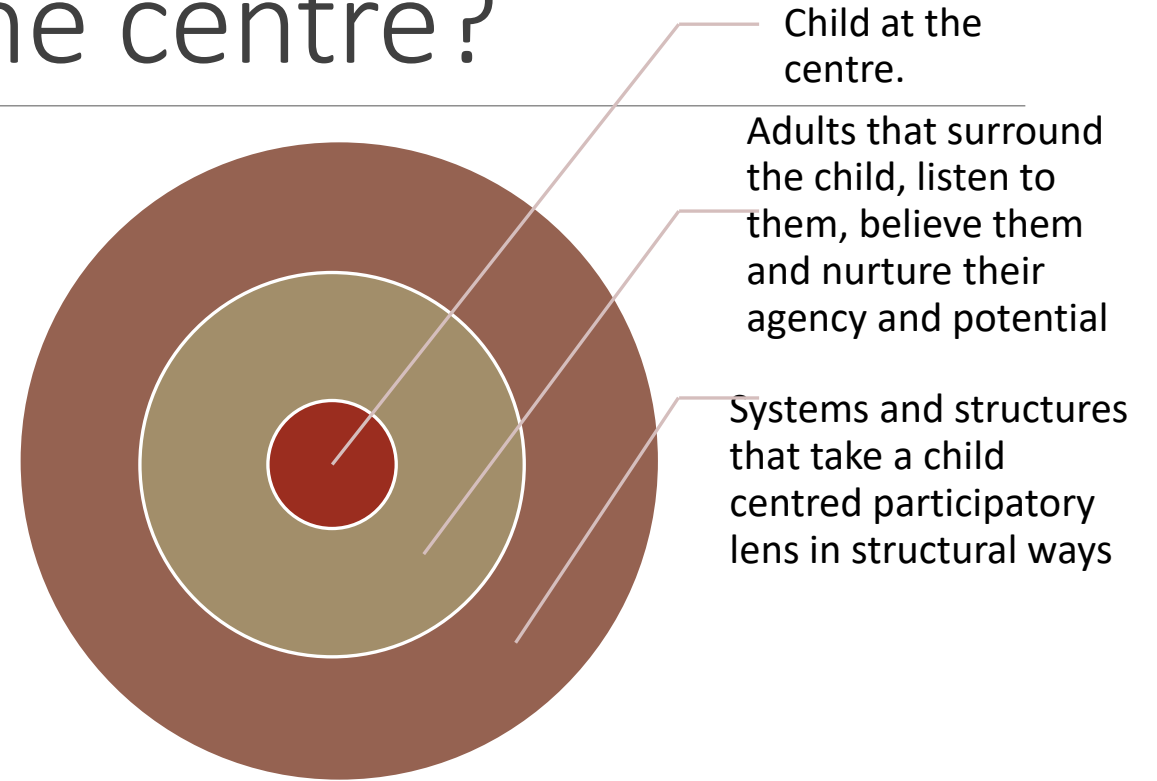
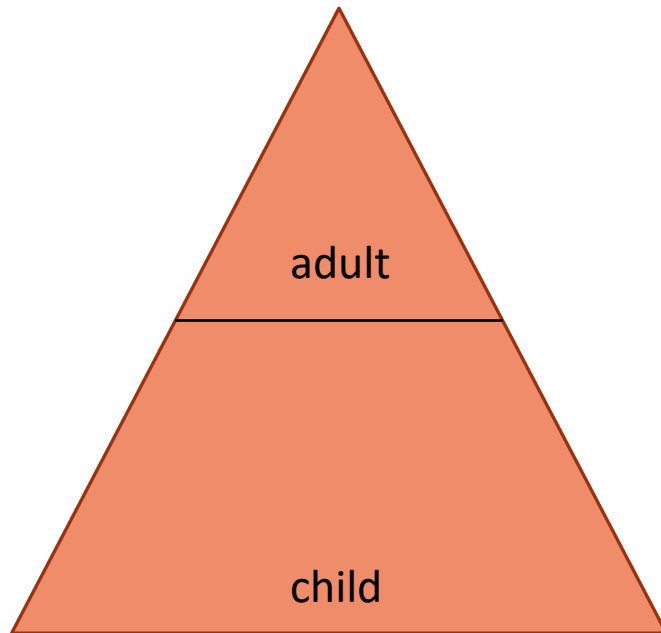
- **Equipping children as agents of change** within adult programs in non-violent and spiritual ways (the myth that children can only receive spiritual wisdom from adults and not give it)

"Some of the parents...they will give testimonies, 'I used to abuse my children a lot, not giving them food or this, but as soon as they asked us to pray more often...', you will find the parents changed. The way they are abusing their children, or not giving them food. And that is how prayer changed the household, even to stop violence in the home because children were insisting to pray. They are the ones leading prayers, just simple prayers but a big change to the household". (Interviewee, Tanzania)

Leveraging child participation as faith practitioners to help end violence

- **Build child-friendly spaces in religious programs** rather than punitive silencing hierarchies. This involves age-appropriate, play-based methodologies and nurturing resilience in vulnerable children who may have experienced adversity or trauma. Listen to children to ensure responsiveness to their needs and use participatory pedagogies that involve their voices
- **Involve children in a range of spiritual practices** – such as the reinterpretation of sacred texts about children that have been used in harmful ways on in child centred religious rituals
- **Promote child voices and healthy intergenerational spaces** for mutual respectful engagement between adults and children within and through the use of faith spaces and faith traditions

How do we see children At the bottom or in the centre?



“We set up a pattern where children are at the bottom of the pile and people think they own their children...children must be seen and not heard, and they are ours to do whatever we like with them. We say things like, “I brought you into this world I can take you out” (Interviewee, South Africa)

“(T)he real thing that we need to do is change childhood to being a place where children are nurtured and cared for and helped to grow to their full potential”. (Study Interviewee)

Moving forward

- ❖ **Further reflection is required** before child participation is fully understood and accepted by most religious groups.
- ❖ Creating meaningful child participation in religious contexts can be uncomfortable, even **revolutionary**; it implies dismantling social hierarchies and transforming existing power relations.
- ❖ Challenges can be resolved by **understanding the latest findings in research** around healthy holistic child development, and by **building upon common religious values**. This enables faith traditions to partner around the best interests of all children and to **share and adopt promising practices**.



Some Opportunities

- ❖ Building upon common religious values
- ❖ Translating global commitments into local action
- ❖ Sharing and documenting experiences and adopting promising and good practices
- ❖ Final recommendations



Faith traditions offer critical perspectives on the importance of child participation

Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Children (Arigatou International, UNICEF, SRSG VAC, 2019)



The principle of Child Participation in Faith Traditions

IN CHRISTIANITY, the Bible portrays children as full members of the community in their own right:

- Children were present in the public life of Jesus.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14)

- The lack or absence of children in public life is a key indicator of the poor health of the community and society

“Death has climbed in through our windows and entered our fortresses; it has removed the children from the streets and the young men from the public squares” (Jeremiah 9:21)

- Children are the representation of the type of leadership to come.

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the lamb will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them”. (Isaiah 11:6) (Also Isaiah 7:14, 9:6)

- Indeed, God does not see age as a barrier to using children for his purposes. Viewing children as made in God's image should shape our views of children, their role and capacity.

“The first step towards the recognition of children as subjects of rights is the recognition of children in the statistics of our churches” (Christian Bishop, Panama)

IN JUDAISM

- The importance attached in Judaism to intergenerational relationships can be a foundation for strengthening the child's right to be heard.
- Listening to and interacting with children equips them to carry forward the Jewish religious tradition.
- Ritual of Passover.



The principle of Child Participation in Faith Traditions

HINDUISM: values and practices which support concepts of child participation, civic contribution of children, and dialogue between adults and children:

- Dharma (lived ethical values)
 - Atma jnana (self-knowledge)
 - Satsang (keeping company with the enlightened)
 - Sanmarga (sharing and discovering the virtuous path with children)
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- In order for parents to help children fulfill their potential to become wise and virtuous human beings, it is vital that parents know and understand them.
 - Children will not flourish if they are not treated with respect and encouraged to express themselves.



The principle of Child Participation in Faith Traditions

BAHÁ'Í FAITH

- Respecting and listening to the thoughts, feelings and opinions of children, regardless of what stage of development.
- Bahá'í texts emphasise the “rich mind” of children, and the need to provide holistic spiritual education to ensure that children can reach their full potential in contributing to society.

BUDDHISM

- The right to be heard can be considered within the scope of other values, such as tolerance for differences of viewpoint, consultation and mediation in resolving problems.
- A specific injunction in the *Dhammapada* and *Sigalovada Sutta* texts emphasizes the importance of civility, understanding and sharing experiences of adults and children as a way of promoting love and respect.

References to children's evolving maturities can be found in **Islam**, in the requirement of consent to marriage or the age of maturity to enter into contracts, as well as in **Buddhism**, in the restrictions on age for entering the order of Buddhist monks.

Translating Global Commitments to Local Action

Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children.

“We commit to Listen to children, with empathy and respect, welcome their wisdom and gifts, and continue to work side-by-side to address violence against them.” (Commitment n. 2)

Fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children, Panamá, May 2017.

Churches' Commitments to Children (World Council of Churches): “Promote meaningful participation by children and adolescence in church activities and workshops, and advocate for the recognition of children as persons possessing agency in society at large.”



Practical examples / promising practices

[Seen But Not Heard: A 3-part Series to Lift Up Child Voices to End Violence](#) and [Faith and Children's Rights](#)

- **Equipping children to stand up and break the silence on their own abuse while also working with parents, teachers and caregivers** (Nigeria, Christian Council of Nigeria) “We believe that when children are given the voice to speak, it will bring down violence against them” Deaconess Juliet Eneh
- **Equipping children as agents of change and peace.** In Sri Lanka, World Vision has been working to address inter-communal tensions following decades of civil war, focusing on child led interfaith and intergenerational interactions (Christians, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslims).
- **Building child-friendly spaces in religious programmes:** In Brazil Jewish children participating in the Jewish youth movement Tenu’ot Noar expressed that they feel safer there than in the Synagogue. *“Because we feel more free to express our views and feelings; at the synagogue we feel more restricted as you do not really know the people there and you do not want to make a bad impression”* (Brazil, 12-16 year old children)
- **Promoting child voices and intergenerational spaces.** Islamic Relief Pakistan implements integrated approaches to child participation to assist children engaged in street work to attend school instead.
- **Involving children in spiritual practices** (Chile, Bahá’í community, Nepal)
- **Promoting child-led engagement** within interfaith platforms. In Argentina, the GNRC works to empower children and youth to speak up for and claim for their rights, as well as to give children a voice in decision making processes for the prevention of violence.



The practical application of child participation in faith communities around the world and implications on violence prevention and response, is mostly informal or undocumented. Efforts should be made to document these practices.

Final Recommendations

- ❖ Use faith resources as foundations for strengthening child participation and related concepts.
- ❖ Adapt strategies to local contexts and build trust to avoid the mistrust that some local faith communities have of «Western-influenced» actors working for child participation.
- ❖ Foster open intergenerational dialogue within families and religious communities as a first step to empowering children, ending violence and protecting them.
- ❖ Create religious spaces that are age-appropriate and child friendly.
- ❖ Nurture child resilience: Recognize the psychosocial distress that violence causes but focus on children as active survivors and partners in preventing violence against children, instead of only passive “victims”.
- ❖ Adult preparation is key to ensure meaningful child participation (build awareness, skills and capacities of both adults and children).
- ❖ Opportunities and challenges posed by social media during COVID-19. A platform for children to share their voices and take care of their wellbeing; But also safeguarding and protection concerns that faith communities need to respond to.