

Keeping South Asia's Children Safe

The Child Rights-Security Interface

Children Count

Country	% of total population under 15, 2005
Afghanistan	47
Bangladesh	35
Bhutan	38
India	32
Maldives	41
Nepal	39
Pakistan	38
Sri Lanka	24

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, Social indicators, [Indicators on youth and elderly populations](#), 22 April 2005.

South Asia's population is young. Even conservative estimates like those on the left suggest this dramatic change. Low life expectancy, poverty, conflict, natural disaster and discriminatory traditional practices on the negative side, and simultaneously, improvements in health care and quality of life on the positive side have combined to alter the generational profile of this region. More than ever, children matter and their welfare and security should be the primary concern of the policy community.

See also: UNFPA, Home: Population Issues: Supporting Adolescents & Youth: Fast Facts (<http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/facts.htm>).

The Child Rights-Security Connection

Children's needs and vulnerabilities are the proper subject of state policy and social activism—nobody contests this. There is however a case to be made for taking a subset of these needs and vulnerabilities and adding them to the security agenda.

Two objectives are met by this. To keep children safe is to secure the well-being of tomorrow's decision-makers. A security policy agenda that also considers issues critical to the survival of children suggests an accurate forecasting of tomorrow's risks. In democratic societies where the demographic balance is tilting in favour of youth, threats faced by the fastest growing population segment are or ought to be the most pressing security concerns.

Bringing anything to the security agenda is also to lend that issue greater leverage in policy circles. Child rights activists will find that the 'security' tag goes further in policy and media circles than the 'social welfare' tag.

If this is so, how does one determine which areas of a child's life merit a security-tagged intervention? Sidestepping a potential debate, one might use a simple definition of security as 'freedom from physical harm or violence' as a filter. This yields at least four possible areas for intervention:

1. Foeticide and female infanticide
2. Child sexual abuse
3. Children and armed conflict
4. Trafficking of South Asian children

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami and Kashmir earthquake disasters, reports began coming in about the trafficking of orphans, the vulnerability of women and children to sexual exploitation in refugee camps and the recruitment of children by armed groups. This is already a late start to this debate.

Sex ratio (males per 100 females), by country, 2000	
World	102
Afghanistan	107
Bangladesh	106
Bhutan	102
India	106
Maldives	105
Nepal	105
Pakistan	106
Sri Lanka	106

Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, [World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision](#), 28 February 2001

1. Foeticide and Female Infanticide

Changing sex ratios, especially in traditional societies, have drawn attention to gender bias and the preference for a male child.

Several reasons are suggested for this preference; these include inheritance and dowry customs. This preference was expressed through female infanticide, practiced in several parts of the region. At one point, it was conventional wisdom that modernization would put an end to such practices. To the contrary, modernization has facilitated the spread of those practices that reinforce male preference—dowry, for instance, has spread to communities which did not customarily require it. Further, advances in diagnostics and the widespread availability of these new techniques have given rise to a new version of infanticide—pre-natal screening with a view to sex-selective abortion.

The result: alarmingly skewed ratios of surviving girls to boys—in India, the capital region of Delhi lags near the bottom of the table with 865 girls for every 1000 boys in the 0-6 age group. Delhi is not alone; Chandigarh (845), Punjab (793), Haryana (820) and Gujarat (878) are also near the bottom. (See 2001 census data at www.censusindia.net.)

Preponderantly male populations are associated by social historians with elevated levels of violence, and fewer females rather counter-intuitively lowers the status of women. However, all those are arguments about abstractions. The bottomline is: if a child has the right to survive regardless of race, class or ethnicity, then she has the right to survive regardless of gender.

2. Child sexual abuse

The prevalence of child sexual abuse is one of the most jarring silences in South Asian society. In the home, in public spaces and commercially--children are vulnerable everywhere to the most bestial instincts of adults who exercise power over them. Even an incomplete and arbitrary listing of statistics such as those included here provides a very sad picture.

For policy-makers and scholars in the area of security, child sexual abuse is a tricky issue because, like female genital mutilation and domestic violence, it challenges the private-public dichotomy that is one of the earliest markers of a state's internal jurisdiction. That is, historically, state intervention in private (read either household, family or interpersonal) matters was limited in most societies. However, in an age whose rhetoric idealizes citizenship and the universality of human rights, overlooking the safety of children is not an option.

To start with, what is needed is a recognition that South Asia's children are not safe. To the extent that we consider the safety of citizens the purpose of security policy, keeping children from physical harm and violence is a security concern for all of society. The nature and means of intervention by state and society towards this end should be debated and debated openly, rather than debating disciplinary and departmental turf issues.

In 2004-05, after witnessing the exploitation of children in the aftermath of the tsunami and the Kashmir earthquake, it is already very late to be starting this discussion.

Across India's metros, a 1997 RAHI study of 1000 young women revealed 76% had been abused as children.

Delhi	63% of girls surveyed by Sakshi Violence Intervention Centre said they had been abused by family members.
Bombay	58 out of 150 minor-age girls in a study conducted 1994-5 by Tata Institute of Social Sciences study had been sexually abused before they turned 10.
Bangalore	Samvada's 1996 study of high school students showed 47% were victims of abuse.

Source:
http://www.shaktiproductions.net/isa_stats.html, accessed November 14, 2005.

3. Children and Armed Conflict

South Asia is home to every kind of conflict, and children are caught in the crossfire everytime.

A great deal of attention is expended to the recruitment and deployment of child soldiers, but more than anything, this takes a polemical turn and can become a stumbling block to conflict resolution—without in fact stopping the recruitment of children—as the Sri Lankan case shows. Further the focus on recruitment obscures two other concerns—the traumatic experience of the children during the conflict and how best to demobilize, disarm and reintegrate them after the conflict is over. Finally, in South Asia as elsewhere, discussion of child soldiers focuses on recruitment by insurgent groups but overlooks state forces.

Beyond combat exposure, conflict also abbreviates childhood when children are orphaned or displaced, their studies interrupted and they have to eke a living to support their families and themselves.

The conflict resolution calculus of states and societies is based largely on costs already incurred. What will, however, be the costs of putting children at risk during protracted conflicts, is not a significant consideration. And these costs are great: brutalization and the impact of living in a polarized setting minimize the prospects of reconciliation; interrupted schooling and malnutrition due to conflict-induced shortages impoverish the human resource base; separated and bereaved families are a poor nucleus around which communities can rebuild and perhaps, worst, children desensitized to violence bode ill for democratic societies.

4. Trafficking of South Asian Children

According to a 1998 Amnesty International report, 9000 girls were trafficked on just two South Asian routes every year, from Nepal to India and from Bangladesh to Pakistan.

The trafficking of women and children is an issue that is receiving a great deal of attention in the region. Civil society organizations and states have been trying to address this issue, both in preventive and restorative mode. Perspectives and policies have changed at the apex decision-making level, although on the ground, the reality remains bleak.

What this brief suggests is to increase the level of attention it is given in policy circles, within and across South Asian states.

Recommendations

The complexity of these problems precludes the facile listing of solutions. That said, it is time to reiterate the basic recommendation of this brief: that the safety of South Asia's children from physical harm and violence be seen as a security issue. It is as vital, if not more, to the survival of our societies as the safety of industrial installations or administrative buildings.

What does this mean in terms of the four areas highlighted here?

- a) Female infanticide and foeticide have already taken an unacceptable toll of South Asian girls' lives. Concerted, immediate action is called for on this issue. There are effective models for action available in the region (for instance, in India's Tamil Nadu state) that should adapted and applied locally by state and civil society groups.
- b) Child sexual abuse is a form of structural violence. It needs to be treated on par with any large-scale public health crisis—bird flu, HIV/AIDS—or violent social conflict. Raising fundamental questions about security and jurisdiction, the point of departure will have to be at the level of dialogue.
- c) The discussion on children in armed conflict needs to be better rounded, bringing together the range of issues on which people are writing and speaking separately. Civil society organizations might be more successful than states and their antagonists in addressing long-term issues.
- d) The 'alert levels' on human trafficking need to be raised in order for more effective action to follow.
- e) The call for better documentation needs to be reiterated, and it goes out for better documentation of the problem including statistics, better documentation of practices and better availability in the public domain of this information

This brief is not intended to reinvent the wheel. What it argues—that the safety of children is one of the fundamental security issues faced by any society—is a conclusion that is self-evident when one places the individual human being at the centre of security, indeed social, analysis. Thinking about child rights makes this easy—if a society cannot keep its children safe, what is left to say about it?