



Violence against children in **Timor-Leste**
and Consequences on Adult Health and
Exposure to Adversity



Evidence Brief: Preventing sexual violence against children
April 2022

Background

Sexual violence against children (SVAC) is endemic across all countries and affecting children of all ages. Estimates of child sexual abuse range from 14-29% in the East Asia and Pacific region, with higher prevalence for girls compared to boys.¹ A recent study, *Violence against children in Timor-Leste and Consequences on Adult Health and Exposure to Adversity* (‘the Timor-Leste study’) found that one in four women sampled reported childhood sexual abuse (25%) and 43% of men sampled reported at least one form of childhood sexual abuse.²

Until recently, very little was known about the prevalence and consequences of SVAC. However, in recent years, research has shed light on its magnitude and impacts as well as on solutions to prevent this violence occurring in the first place.

Sexual violence consists of a range of sexual acts against a child, including, but not limited to, child sexual abuse, incest, rape, sexual violence in the context of dating/intimate relationships, sexual exploitation, online sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse.³

Preventing sexual violence against children – a priority action in Timor-Leste

“Reduction in child maltreatment and promoting healthy, stable and safe childhoods is integral to reducing violence in adulthood in Timor-Leste.”⁴

A focus on interventions specifically to address SVAC, for both boys and girls, was identified as a priority area for action in the Timor-Leste study. This evidence brief, drawing on a global evidence review by Together for Girls and The Equality Institute (see box), suggests three focus areas to guide the development of SVAC prevention strategies in the Timor-Leste context.



Evidence Review:
What works to prevent sexual violence against children

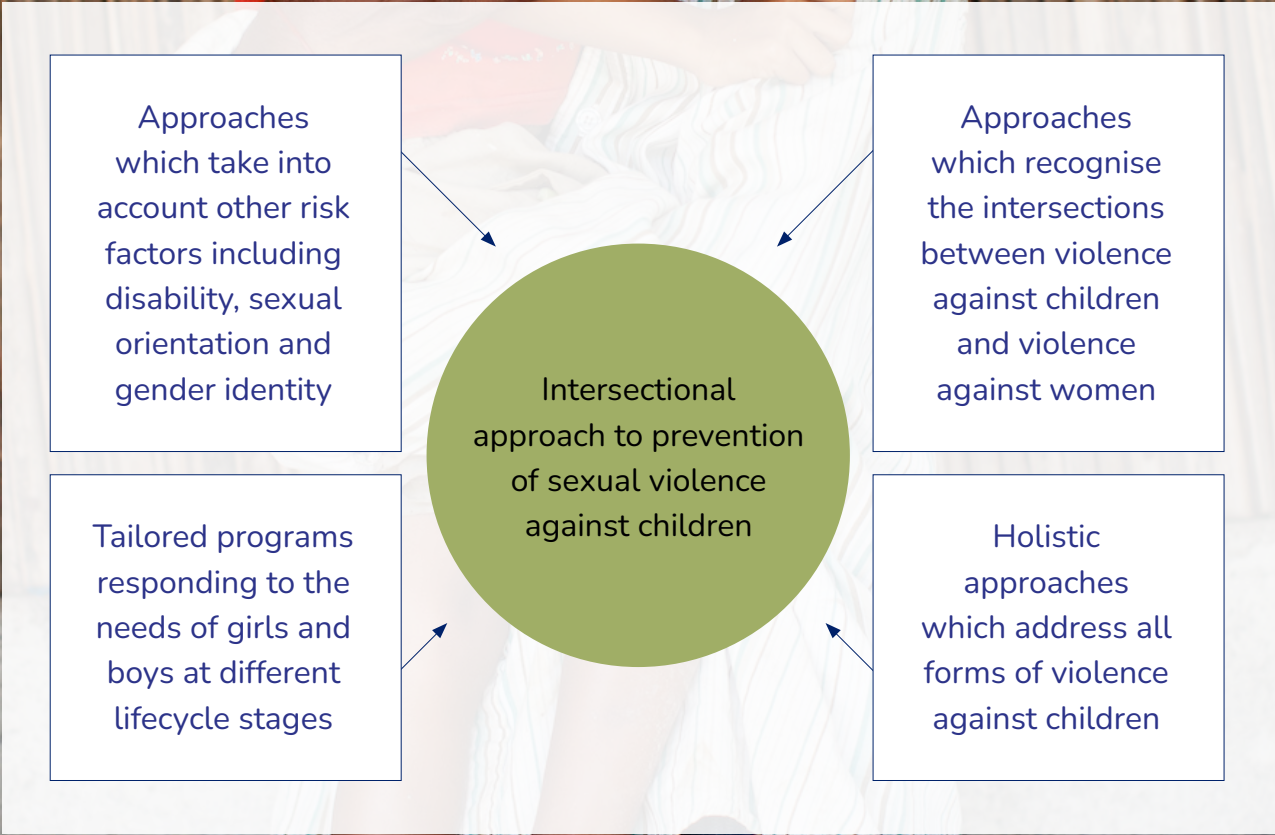
Together for Girls, in partnership with The Equality Institute and the Oak Foundation, undertook a systematic review of evidence-based solutions to prevent and respond to SVAC. Building on the INSPIRE framework, which offers seven overarching strategies to prevent all forms of violence against children, this review has categorised strategies from around the world as effective, promising, prudent, conflicting, no effect, or harmful.

See: togetherforgirls.org/svsolutions for the full report including case studies and expert advice.

1. The importance of an intersectional approach

The growing evidence base around SVAC highlights the importance of an intersectional approach, particularly to understand and address the overlapping risk factors for victimisation. This approach should consider:

- 1 The intersection between gender and age:** Interventions which focus on specific points in the life cycle are crucial to address the vulnerabilities and types of sexual violence experienced by girls and boys at different points of development. For example, the 2017 *Global Early Adolescent Study* highlighted the importance of working with adolescents to prevent sexual violence.⁵
- 2 Intersectional identity:** New evidence is starting to demonstrate that different intersecting aspects of a child's identity such as disability, sexual orientation and gender identity also increases a child's risk for victimisation.⁶
- 3 How SVAC intersects with other forms of violence against children (VAC):** Different forms of VAC can include common risk factors and drivers. This points to the importance of a holistic approach to preventing SVAC (alongside tailored approaches) which considers these intersections and maximises scarce resources and potential collaborations.
- 4 The interconnections between SVAC and violence against women (VAW):** The Timor-Leste study demonstrated that VAC and VAW are interconnected social problems in Timor-Leste. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to prevention, which works with families to promote positive parenting while addressing violence-supportive cultures and gender inequality in the home and wider community.



2. Key factors to include across all interventions

The Together for Girls evidence review, identified a number of factors that are consistently raised as important for preventing SVAC regardless of the intervention. These should inform the approach in Timor-Leste:

- 1

National response integrated into broader protection systems for children and adolescents.
- 2

Programs that are holistic and address the multiple factors that contribute to violence-supporting norms and behaviours.
- 3

Programs that are developmentally appropriate or age and gender-specific.
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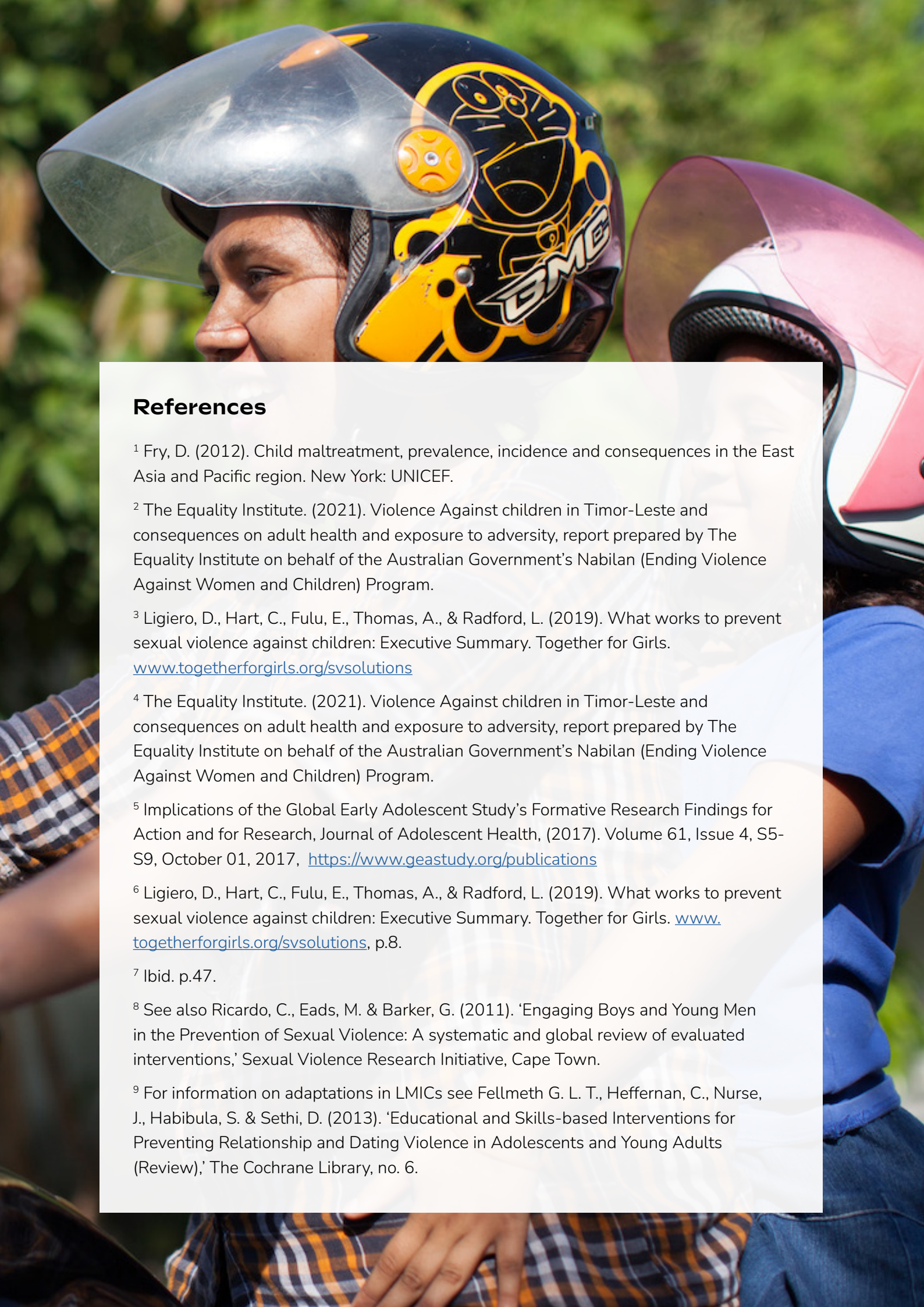
Programs targeting children that are delivered over several sessions, physically interactive, and participatory.

3. Specific prevention interventions

The Together for Girls evidence review examines more than 35 strategies for the prevention of SVAC.

The table on the next page outlines a selection of these strategies, which were categorised as effective or promising, and which could be considered for adaptation in the Timor-Leste context.

Intervention	Example(s)	Considerations for adaptation
Parenting programs to improve parent-child communication	Families Matter! Program	• Raises awareness by highlighting parents' roles in helping their children to prevent both child sexual violence and gender-based violence. • Further research needed on actual reduction in SVAC.
Working with men and boys to challenge stereotypes, toxic masculinity, and norms that justify violence	Coaching Boys into Men Men can stop rape Mentors in violence prevention	• Promising evidence from specific programs that model respectful, non-violent relationships among young boys. • More research is needed in different settings, with different age groups and to determine whether programs should target both boys and girls.⁸
Comprehensive programs that include mentoring and micro-finance training	Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents Program	• Based on a peer mentoring model, the program provides information on rights, conflict resolution, health, gender issues and financial literacy training. • Training is provided through an adolescent club, so youth not in school can access the program. • Evaluation found reductions in child marriage, early pregnancy, and forced/coerced sex.
School-based safe dating programs	Safe Dates	• Evidence supports effectiveness in reducing peer-victimisation, sexual violence, and disrupting violence supportive norms.⁹ • Intervention must be age- and gender-specific, as well as culturally and socially appropriate. • Programs should address behaviour of girls and boys at the same time.



References

¹ Fry, D. (2012). Child maltreatment, prevalence, incidence and consequences in the East Asia and Pacific region. New York: UNICEF.

² The Equality Institute. (2021). Violence Against children in Timor-Leste and consequences on adult health and exposure to adversity, report prepared by The Equality Institute on behalf of the Australian Government's Nabilan (Ending Violence Against Women and Children) Program.

³ Ligiero, D., Hart, C., Fulu, E., Thomas, A., & Radford, L. (2019). What works to prevent sexual violence against children: Executive Summary. Together for Girls. www.togetherforgirls.org/svsolutions

⁴ The Equality Institute. (2021). Violence Against children in Timor-Leste and consequences on adult health and exposure to adversity, report prepared by The Equality Institute on behalf of the Australian Government's Nabilan (Ending Violence Against Women and Children) Program.

⁵ Implications of the Global Early Adolescent Study's Formative Research Findings for Action and for Research, Journal of Adolescent Health, (2017). Volume 61, Issue 4, S5-S9, October 01, 2017, <https://www.geastudy.org/publications>

⁶ Ligiero, D., Hart, C., Fulu, E., Thomas, A., & Radford, L. (2019). What works to prevent sexual violence against children: Executive Summary. Together for Girls. www.togetherforgirls.org/svsolutions, p.8.

⁷ Ibid. p.47.

⁸ See also Ricardo, C., Eads, M. & Barker, G. (2011). 'Engaging Boys and Young Men in the Prevention of Sexual Violence: A systematic and global review of evaluated interventions,' Sexual Violence Research Initiative, Cape Town.

⁹ For information on adaptations in LMICs see Fellmeth G. L. T., Heffernan, C., Nurse, J., Habibula, S. & Sethi, D. (2013). 'Educational and Skills-based Interventions for Preventing Relationship and Dating Violence in Adolescents and Young Adults (Review),' The Cochrane Library, no. 6.