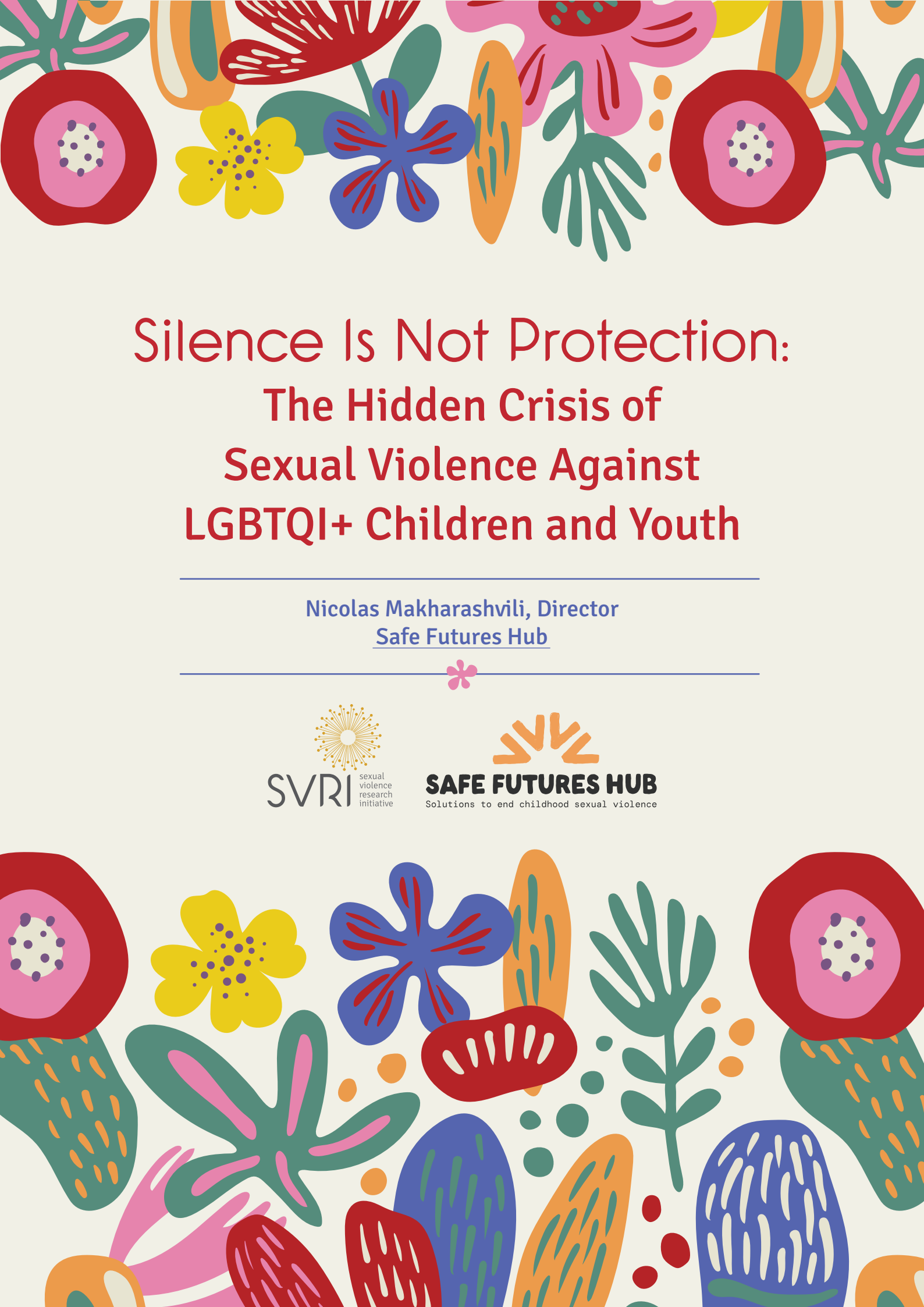
Silence Is Not Protection:
The Hidden Crisis of Sexual Violence Against LGBTQI+ Children and Youth

Nicolas Makharashvili, Director
Safe Futures Hub



At a Global Ministerial Conference on ending violence against children in Bogota in 2024, leaders pledged to ensure that "every child is protected from all forms of violence."[1] Yet one group of children remained conspicuously absent from the conversation: LGBTQI+ children and youth. Around the world, queer children and adolescents, those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex, face heightened risks of sexual abuse and exploitation, often driven by the same stigma and discrimination that silence their experiences.[2] This is a global issue, affecting rich and poor countries alike, but it is especially fraught in many low- and middle-income countries, where discussing or supporting LGBTQI+ people is socially or even legally taboo.[3]

Childhood sexual violence is a hidden crisis that cuts across all boundaries, affecting children of all genders and backgrounds.[4] But for queer youth, that violence is magnified by prejudice. Children of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities face specific and intersecting risks of sexual violence caused by societal discrimination.[2] In other words, being "different" in environments that are hostile to that difference can make a young person a target for abuse. From bullying and harassment in schools to horrific acts like so-called "corrective rape,"* LGBTQI+ children are often singled out for sexual violence because of who they are (or are perceived to be).[2]

Tragically, this trauma frequently occurs at very young ages. In one U.S. analysis of national survey data, nearly one in three lesbian and bisexual women survivors and about one in six gay male survivors reported that their first experience of contact sexual violence happened at age 10 or younger.[5] If these facts alarm you, you are not alone.

Yet in many official discussions on child protection, you wouldn't even know queer kids exist. Policymakers and international agencies routinely proclaim commitments to "leave no one behind" and to reach "every child." But when it comes to LGBTQI+ children, their rhetoric and action often fall short, or even work at cross-purposes.[2] This article explores how and why queer kids are being left out of conversations on childhood sexual violence, examines data (where it exists) on the abuses they face, and calls for urgent change. The silence around this issue is profound. And make no mistake: queer youth hear that silence and it's harming them.

QUEER YOUTH AT HIGHER RISK OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Growing evidence indicates that LGBTQI+ young people experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence in childhood and adolescence.[2] Wherever researchers have broken the silence to gather data, the findings are sobering.

For example, a national study in the Philippines found that 33.8 percent of LGBTQI children had experienced sexual violence, roughly one in three, a rate substantially higher than among their non-LGBTQI peers.[6] In Southern and Eastern Africa, over half of sexual and gender minorities surveyed had experienced violence, and nearly one-third of lesbian women in four Southern African countries reported sexual violence, suggesting many had been victimised in their youth.[2] In the United States, a CDC Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS) analysis found that 18 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) high school students reported ever being physically forced to have sex, compared to 5 percent of their heterosexual peers, more than a three-fold difference.[7]

* The term "corrective rape" is commonly used in advocacy and human rights reporting to describe sexual violence motivated by hostility toward sexual orientation or gender identity. The term is contested, and many advocates caution that it risks normalizing the logic of perpetrators.

WHY ARE THE RATES SO HIGH?

One reason is that anti-LGBTQ bias creates opportunities and motives for abuse. Perpetrators may target queer kids precisely because they are marginalised, assuming that a stigmatised or closeted child will be less likely to report abuse or be believed.[2] LGBTQI+ youth are also more likely to be isolated or unsupported, for example, being rejected at home or bullied at school, which predators exploit.[2] A UNICEF analysis notes that many LGBTQI+ adolescents "are often rejected by their families and forced into homelessness, placing them at even greater risk of various types of violence, including sexual exploitation."[3]

Bias also fuels specific forms of sexual violence. "Corrective rape", incidents where men rape lesbian or trans youth "to make them straight or 'normal'", has been documented in countries such as South Africa and across other regions, even if precise prevalence data remain limited.[2] Survivor testimonies and case documentation show that these attacks are explicitly motivated by hostility to sexual orientation or gender identity.[2]

Shame and stigma play a central role in sustaining this violence and suppressing disclosure. For many LGBTQI+ young people, sexual abuse is experienced not only as a physical and psychological violation, but also as confirmation of deeply internalised messages that their identities are immoral, deviant, or blameworthy.[8] Research on minority stress shows that stigma-related shame can significantly increase vulnerability to abuse while simultaneously reducing help-seeking and disclosure.[9] In contexts where same-sex attraction or gender nonconformity is socially condemned or criminalised, perpetrators explicitly exploit this shame, confident that victims will remain silent to avoid being outed, punished, or ostracised by family and community members.[10]

Failures within health, justice, and child-protection systems further entrench this silence and amount to a form of institutional betrayal. Studies across multiple regions document that LGBTQI+ survivors of sexual violence frequently encounter discrimination, breaches of confidentiality, pathologisation, or outright denial of care within health services, particularly where providers lack training on sexual and gender diversity.[10] Justice sector responses are often similarly inadequate: police may dismiss reports, reinterpret assaults as consensual same-sex activity, or subject survivors to harassment and secondary victimisation, especially in settings where homosexuality or gender nonconformity is criminalised.[10] Research on institutional betrayal highlights how such responses can deepen trauma, erode trust, and discourage future reporting, effectively protecting perpetrators rather than children.[11] Even where legal frameworks formally prohibit sexual violence against children, biased implementation and discretionary enforcement mean that LGBTQI+ youth are far less likely to see perpetrators held accountable or to receive survivor-centred support.[2] The cumulative effect of stigma, shame, and institutional failure sends a stark message to queer young people: seeking help may expose them to further harm rather than protection.

Crucially, being a boy is not a shield against sexual violence, especially not for gay or trans boys. While girls generally have higher reported rates of sexual abuse, studies are revealing that boys (particularly gender-nonconforming boys) also suffer significant levels of assault.[4] In many cultures, a boy who is perceived as gay or not "masculine enough" may be at risk of molestation, hazing, or rape, sometimes under the twisted guise of "teaching him to be a man."[2] The shame and stigma surrounding male-on-male sexual abuse mean these crimes are vastly under-reported.[4] For queer boys, the barriers to reporting are even higher: coming forward might mean outing oneself and potentially facing punishment in places where homosexuality is criminalized.[10]

Queer girls, trans, and gender-diverse young people face similar, and often compounded, barriers to disclosure and support. Lesbian and bisexual girls who report sexual violence frequently encounter

disbelief and victim-blaming shaped by stereotypes that frame them as sexually deviant, promiscuous, or responsible for the violence they experience.[2] Research shows that sexual violence against girls whose sexuality or gender expression deviates from dominant norms is more likely to be minimised, misclassified, or dismissed by adults in authority, including teachers, police, and health workers.[10] For trans and gender-diverse youth, disclosure can trigger heightened scrutiny, ridicule, or accusations of deception, rather than protection, reinforcing deep mistrust of institutions meant to safeguard children.[9]

Service systems are frequently ill-prepared to respond safely and appropriately to LGBTQI+ survivors of sexual violence. Studies across health and justice sectors document that providers often lack training on sexual orientation and gender identity, leading to misgendering, breaches of confidentiality, pathologisation, or outright denial of care.[10] Trans adolescents in particular report avoiding health and psychosocial services due to fears of forced disclosure, mistreatment, or being turned away altogether, even in contexts where sexual violence against children is formally prohibited.[10] These institutional failures not only impede access to care and justice but also compound trauma, reinforcing the message that LGBTQI+ youth cannot rely on systems designed to protect them.

It is important to emphasise that LGBTQI+ youth are not inherently "vulnerable" because of their identity, they are made vulnerable by society's violence and prejudice. As researchers and advocates have pointed out, LGBTQI+ young people face high levels of victimisation "on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity worldwide," and the situation is "exacerbated by legal frameworks that fail to protect them or that criminalise same-sex relationships,"[2] and health systems are inadequately equipped to provide good quality gender responsive care.[3] In short, structural homophobia and transphobia put a target on queer kids' backs.

THE DEAFENING SILENCE: HOW QUEER KIDS ARE EXCLUDED

Given these risks, one would expect child protection authorities and violence-prevention initiatives to pay special attention to LGBTQI+ youth. Instead, the topic is often tiptoed around or ignored entirely. This exclusion happens in several, mutually reinforcing ways.

MUTED DATA COLLECTION

Large-scale surveys on violence against children rarely ask about sexual orientation or gender identity. The Violence Against Children and Youth Surveys (VACS), which have generated invaluable national data in more than 20 countries, do not consistently include standardised measures of sexual orientation or gender identity across countries; where such questions appear, they are typically optional, country-specific additions rather than a routine part of the core survey.[12] Expert reviews have highlighted this limitation, noting that many VAC studies lack information on sexual orientation and gender identity, making queer children statistically invisible.[13] An important exception was the Philippines, where national research explicitly analysed LGBTQI children and uncovered the 33.8 percent sexual violence rate noted above.[6] But such examples are rare.

Globally, the lack of inclusive data makes it easy for policymakers to ignore the problem or claim "we have no evidence of that issue." As the Center for American Progress argues, failing to collect SOGIESC data "can create harms by hindering the ability of researchers, policymakers, service providers, and advocates to understand the experiences of LGBTQI+ communities, identify disparities, and generate policies that promote equity."[13]

Researching illegal acts is ethically complex, particularly in contexts where same-sex relationships or gender nonconformity are criminalised. In many countries, LGBTQI+ youth are explicitly excluded from

research on violence against children because participation could expose them, and the researchers themselves, to serious risks, including arrest, harassment, family retaliation, or other forms of harm. Ethical review boards and implementing agencies often err on the side of exclusion, concluding that the potential risks of identifying sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression outweigh the benefits of inclusion, even when safeguards are in place.

While these concerns are not unfounded, the consequence is that LGBTQI+ children are rendered statistically invisible in precisely the settings where they may face the greatest danger. Exclusion from research means exclusion from evidence, and exclusion from evidence in turn limits policy attention, funding, and tailored interventions. As a result, decision-makers can claim a lack of data to justify inaction, reinforcing a cycle in which stigma, criminalisation, and silence mutually sustain one another. Ethical caution, when applied without parallel efforts to document harm through alternative, safer methodologies, can unintentionally reproduce the very inequities that child-protection research is meant to address. There is growing recognition among researchers and human rights bodies that ethical research with LGBTQI+ youth in restrictive contexts is not impossible, but it does require careful design grounded in "do no harm" principles. This includes the use of anonymised data collection, indirect or behaviour-based measures, strong confidentiality protections, community consultation, and partnerships with trusted local organisations that understand the risks on the ground. When such approaches are not pursued, the absence of data should be understood not as evidence of absence, but as evidence of structural and ethical constraints that themselves demand attention.

ERASURE IN POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

In many national action plans or international strategies to end violence against children, LGBTQI+ children are simply not mentioned. Policymakers often stick to broad terms like "vulnerable groups" or focus on gender-based violence in a binary sense (girls vs. boys) without acknowledging sexual and gender minorities.[2] This erasure is sometimes deliberate: in global negotiations, certain governments routinely oppose any reference to sexual orientation or gender identity, even in documents on child welfare.[10] The result is that major frameworks, such as the INSPIRE strategies to end violence against children, do not explicitly address LGBTQI children's sexual-violence risks or recommend LGBTQI-specific adaptations, despite growing evidence of their specific vulnerabilities.[14]

SELF-CENSORSHIP BY CHILD PROTECTION NGOS

International NGOs that work on children's rights often find themselves in a bind when operating in countries with hostile political climates regarding LGBTQI+ rights. Many adopt a low-profile approach, fearing backlash from host governments or local communities.[15] A recent thesis on SOGIESC inclusion in child-rights organisations describes one staff conference in Zambia where, when participants tried to discuss sexual orientation and gender diversity, a local colleague threatened to call the police if the conversation continued; LGBTQ-related agenda items were swiftly dropped.[15] Within that organisation, it was "not uncommonly expressed" that issues of sexual and gender diversity were "too hard" or "too premature" to address.[15] Frontline staff in other agencies privately admit that they know queer youth are among those they serve, homeless teens, street-connected children, abuse survivors, but feel they cannot speak out or tailor services for them.[2] The tragic irony is that organisations founded to protect children have, in some cases, excised a whole category of children from their protection efforts.

"DON'T SAY GAY" IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

Another arena of silence is education and community-level awareness. In many countries, open discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools is restricted or explicitly prohibited through so-called "anti-propaganda" laws or conservative education policies. These restrictions limit teachers' and school-based professionals' ability to provide inclusive sexuality education or to respond appropriately to sexual

violence involving LGBTQI+ students. As a result, educators and frontline child-protection actors are often ill-equipped to recognise abuse, address homophobic or transphobic violence, or support queer youth who disclose harm.

This silence carries serious consequences for reporting and access to justice. LGBTQI+ adolescents who experience sexual violence may reasonably fear that disclosure will lead to blame, disbelief, or punishment rather than protection, particularly in settings where same-sex relationships are criminalised or socially condemned. Human rights documentation shows that authorities have, in some cases, responded to boys' reports of rape by reframing the abuse as consensual same-sex activity, effectively criminalising the victim instead of investigating the crime.[10] Such responses not only silence individual survivors but also send a broader message that seeking help is unsafe.

This institutional bias silences victims and distorts prevention messaging. Campaigns may talk about "safe touch" or avoiding predators but never address the specific realities of, say, a lesbian girl threatened with rape by someone "trying to correct her," or a trans child being sexually harassed in a shelter.[2] When was the last time you saw a child protection poster or training scenario that included two boys or two girls in a depiction of abuse? If queer kids cannot see themselves in the narrative of protection, how can they believe they'll be protected?

WHEN "ALL CHILDREN" DOESN'T ACTUALLY MEAN ALL CHILDREN

Perhaps the most glaring contradiction is found at the governmental level. Almost every country in the world has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obligates states to protect children from violence and "ensure the rights of each child without discrimination of any kind."[17] Yet dozens of those same governments enforce laws and policies that directly discriminate against LGBTQI+ youth or even expose them to greater harm.

UNICEF has highlighted that 78 countries have laws that can subject people to severe criminal penalties for homosexuality and has warned that "such laws not only undermine human rights, they can also fuel discrimination, stigma, and even violence," with especially severe impacts on children and adolescents.[19] Imagine being a 15-year-old boy in a country where being gay is illegal. If you are sexually abused by a man, do you dare seek help or do you stay silent, fearing you will be treated as a criminal?

The dissonance between rhetoric and reality is striking. Some governments proudly participate in global initiatives to end violence against children, launching action plans, hosting events, while simultaneously maintaining laws that ostracise or punish queer children.[3] In Uganda, for example, the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act introduced harsh penalties, including life imprisonment and, in some cases, the death penalty for certain same-sex acts; supporters claimed the law would "protect children," yet service providers report increased harassment and fear among LGBTQI youth and reduced help-seeking.[18]

UNICEF has been explicit: "Any law which heightens the risk of harm to children is counter to the principles established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child."[3] Criminalising a child's identity is itself a form of harm. It drives them underground, away from services and support, and sends a message that if they are abused, that abuse is deserved or will be ignored.

In many countries, religion and conservative cultural norms are used to justify these double standards.[2] But culture is not an excuse for exclusion and cruelty. The fundamental duty of any society is to keep its children safe. That duty is universal: it does not evaporate when a child is queer. As Save the Children Philippines has put it, "LGBTQI children have the right to fully enjoy their childhood without fear of discrimination and suffering violence."[6](p1) We should hold governments and institutions to the literal meaning of "all children." Until "all" truly includes queer kids, those lofty commitments will ring hollow.

THE COST OF SILENCE: THEY'RE LISTENING

"The silence is deafening" is more than a metaphor for LGBTQI+ youth; it is their daily reality. They hear the silence every time their abuse is glossed over or their identity left unacknowledged. And that silence communicates something powerful: you don't matter.

The impact on queer children's mental health and well-being is devastating. Living with the constant stress of hiding one's identity or enduring abuse in secret leads to what experts call minority stress, a chronic, cumulative form of trauma linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality.[9] A global evidence review on violence against LGBTQI+ people notes that minority stress, compounded by lifelong experiences of violence and exclusion, contributes to severe mental health challenges across the life course.[2] In Uganda, for example, one study found that almost all lesbian, bisexual, and queer women surveyed had experienced mental health problems, often attributed to "lifelong experiences of violence and related challenges, including childhood neglect and abuse."[2]

For LGBTQI+ youth, the feeling of being unseen and unheard by those in authority, parents, teachers, officials, and humanitarian workers can lead to profound isolation. Some become depressed, even suicidal. "Parents need to be aware that mental health problems and suicide risks are much higher among LGBTQI [youth] because they lead a life of fear," warned Save the Children Philippines CEO Alberto Muyot, speaking about LGBTQI children's experiences of violence.[6](p3) International surveys consistently find elevated suicide attempt rates among queer adolescents, often linked to bullying, sexual assault, and family rejection.[2] These are preventable tragedies, if only someone would listen and offer support.

It is important to stress that LGBTQI+ children are not "weak" or "broken." With acceptance and protection, they can thrive as much as any other child.[2] What breaks them is our collective silence and inaction. Every time a public official talks about protecting children but pointedly ignores the gay or trans kid getting beaten up in a shelter or abused at home, that child receives the message loud and clear. As Social Development Direct notes, "By definition, hate-motivated violence has an impact on the entire LGBTI community, sending a message that they are not accepted."[2] For queer youth, that lack of acceptance from adults, especially from those entrusted to defend children, can be as damaging as the violence itself.

Yet even in silence, young people are alert. Many LGBTQI+ teens are extraordinarily resourceful. They notice the rare moments when someone does speak up for them. They share information in online communities and whisper networks, advising each other which clinics are safe, which teachers are allies, which NGOs won't turn them away.[2] They are not truly voiceless, but they should not have to fend for themselves in shadows. They deserve to hear adults, especially leaders and child-protection practitioners, say: "What's happening to you is wrong, and we will help you."

BREAKING THE SILENCE: A CALL TO ACTION

It is time for the global child protection community, from policymakers and donors to NGOs and researchers, to reckon with the uncomfortable truth that we have been leaving LGBTQI+ children behind.[2] Breaking the silence is not easy, especially in hostile climates, but it is both necessary and possible. Crucially, it must not happen in a silo; LGBTQI+ children's safety must be woven into mainstream child protection, not relegated to side projects or "special topics."

AFFIRM THAT "ALL CHILDREN" REALLY MEANS ALL CHILDREN

Any commitment to protect "all children" must explicitly include children of every sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and sex characteristic. Ambiguity is not neutral. When commitments rely on implication rather than clarity, children who are already marginalised are the first to be excluded in practice.

International agencies and governments should state plainly that LGBTQI+ children fall within child-protection mandates. UNICEF has urged governments to protect all children from discrimination, including those who identify as LGBT, and to safeguard them from violence or reprisal.[19] Even in restrictive political or legal contexts, it is possible to affirm inclusion without exposing children or programmes to harm. For example, agencies can refer to "children of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities" within broader non-discrimination clauses, a formulation used in UNICEF guidance.[3]

This is not about adding a niche agenda to an already crowded field. It is about honouring the core principles of child rights: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and participation.[17] When LGBTQI+ children are omitted from explicit recognition, these principles are applied selectively rather than universally.

Affirmation also matters because silence is interpreted. LGBTQI+ children need to hear that they are seen and valued by the systems meant to protect them. At the same time, perpetrators need to know that violence against queer children will not be ignored or excused. When abuse goes uninvestigated or unpunished because of stigma, fear, or discriminatory laws, a climate of impunity is created. That impunity signals that some children are less worthy of protection than others.

Ending violence against children, therefore, requires more than inclusive rhetoric. It requires credible accountability: timely investigation of allegations, survivor-centred justice processes, and clear consequences for perpetrators, regardless of a child's actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. Without explicit inclusion and enforcement, commitments to protect "all children" remain aspirational rather than real.

COLLECT INCLUSIVE DATA: CAREFULLY, AND WITH "DO NO HARM" AT THE CENTRE

We need better evidence on LGBTQI+ children's experiences of sexual violence, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. At the same time, data collection must be grounded in safety, ethics, and "do no harm" principles. Improving evidence does not mean outing minors or exposing them to risk. It means using methods that are appropriate to context, age, and legal realities.

Where it is safe and ethical to do so, this includes the use of confidential, age-appropriate questions on attraction, gender identity, gender expression, and experiences of victimisation in adolescent surveys. At a minimum, careful recording of the gender of victims and perpetrators can allow same-sex patterns of abuse to be identified, even where sexual orientation or gender identity cannot be asked directly.[12] Quantitative data should be complemented by qualitative approaches developed in partnership with LGBTQI+ and survivor-led groups. Such approaches can surface forms of violence, coercion, and silencing that are often missed by surveys, while allowing young people greater control over what they disclose and how.[2]

In contexts where it is unsafe to ask directly about identity, researchers can still document patterns of harm through anonymised testimonies, case studies, and indirect or behaviour-based measures, developed in close consultation with ethics review boards and trusted local partners to ensure robust "do no harm" protections.[3] The Philippines provides a rare example of what becomes possible when LGBTQI-inclusive

questions are added to national research: it allowed advocates to demonstrate statistically that queer students were at substantially higher risk of violence in schools and to press for policy and programmatic change.[6]

Crucially, evidence generation must not be limited to documenting harm alone. Learning from practice-based knowledge and lived expertise is equally important. In many settings, LGBTQI+ children share insights about safety, protection, and service design not through formal research instruments, but within trusted, ongoing support spaces. Practice-based examples show that in facilitated peer or lunchtime support groups, LGBTQI+ children have highlighted concrete safety needs, such as access to gender-neutral washrooms and changing facilities, protection from harassment in schools, and adults who will intervene when violence occurs.[20]

These spaces can, at times, be safer and more informative than formal data collection. They are built on trust and relationships, may not require disclosure of identity or traumatic details, and can generate actionable learning about what protection actually looks like from children's perspectives. Practice-based knowledge of this kind is essential for designing effective prevention and response strategies, particularly in environments where traditional research methods are constrained.

Existing guidance offers practical direction on how to collect inclusive data responsibly. Resources such as the Center for American Progress report on data collection with LGBTQI+ and other sexual and gender-diverse communities outline approaches to question design, confidentiality, and risk mitigation.[13] Donors and global agencies should actively encourage and fund ethical SOGIESC-inclusive data collection, alongside systematic learning from practice and lived expertise, as part of a comprehensive child-protection evidence agenda.[3]

INTEGRATE LGBTQI+ PROTECTION INTO MAINSTREAM CHILD-PROTECTION PROGRAMMING

Perhaps most importantly, LGBTQI+ inclusion cannot be treated as a separate, siloed issue. It needs to be built into the design, delivery, and evaluation of mainstream child-protection programmes. That means asking, in every setting: How will this programme reach and protect queer kids too? For example:

- **In schools,** anti-bullying and anti-violence policies should explicitly prohibit homophobic and transphobic harassment, and teachers should be trained on how to respond to violence against LGBTQI+ students.[16]
- **In child and family services,** staff should be trained to recognise signs of abuse linked to sexual orientation or gender identity, and referral pathways should include any safe, local LGBTQ support providers, even if they operate informally.[3]
- **In helplines, shelters, and psychosocial support,** materials and outreach should signal that queer youth are welcome and will not be shamed. This can be as simple as including examples with same-sex scenarios in training manuals or showing diverse families in outreach materials.[2]
- **In humanitarian settings,** where child-protection actors are stretched thin, integrating LGBTQI+ concerns still matters. Evidence from crises in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine shows that LGBTQI+ people face heightened risks in conflict and displacement, yet are often excluded from services.[2] Humanitarian child-protection teams can quietly but actively consult with local LGBTQI+ organisations to identify risks facing adolescents and ensure they are not turned away from safe spaces or services.
- **In research,** data tools, ethics, and shared measures should routinely account for sexual orientation and gender identity where safe and appropriate. LGBTQI+ children's safety should be treated as a standard consideration in every VAC prevention or response programme, not as an optional or specialist add-on.

REFORM HARMFUL LAWS AND POLICIES

Laws that criminalise or stigmatise LGBTQI+ people must be challenged and changed, especially where they endanger children. Evidence from multiple contexts shows that criminalisation increases harassment, violence, and barriers to services for LGBTQI+ youth, while also undermining states' obligations to protect children from violence and discrimination.[10] UNICEF has called for governments to review and repeal laws that put LGBTQI+ children at risk, including those that criminalize same-sex relationships or restrict expression based on sexual orientation or gender identity.[19]

In the short term, where full law reform is not yet possible, there are still steps governments and institutions can take. These include issuing child-protection directives that explicitly cover all children regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics; adopting school policies that bar bullying and harassment based on perceived orientation or gender expression; and ensuring that health and social workers are not obligated to report consensual same-sex behaviour to authorities.[3] In jurisdictions where mandatory reporting laws extend even to consensual, similar-age sexual engagement, such protections will ultimately require legal reform to avoid criminalising children in the course of seeking care or support.

International donors can support this work by funding strategic litigation, community-led advocacy, and legal-aid services, and by making clear that serious child-protection funding should not coexist with state-sponsored persecution of LGBTQI+ youth.[3]

ELEVATE LGBTQI+ VOICES AND ORGANISATIONS

Perhaps the most powerful actors in this space are LGBTQI+ people themselves, including those who survived violence as children. We need to create safe channels for them to be heard in policy discussions. That can mean:

- **Supporting youth-led consultations with LGBTQI+ adolescents** to understand their experiences of violence and what safe support looks like from their perspective.
- **Funding and partnering with local LGBTQI+ organisations** that are already offering informal support to queer youth, such as drop-in centres, peer support groups, or emergency housing.[2]
- **Ensuring that LGBTQI+ groups are represented in national and global forums** on violence against children, not only in "LGBT panels" but as cross-cutting voices in mainstream discussions. As the evidence review emphasises, "LGBTQI+ organisations hold the critical knowledge and experience to drive this work in collaboration with actors across multiple sectors in society."[2] International child-protection NGOs and donors should treat them as key partners, not marginal actors.

BUILD SOLIDARITY ACROSS THE CHILD-RIGHTS FIELD

Finally, those who work in child protection must have the courage to stand together on this issue. It is understandable that an NGO in a repressive context may fear speaking out alone. But through coalitions and behind-the-scenes coordination, advocates can create a united front.
Senior leaders can help reframe LGBTQI+ inclusion not as "special rights," but as basic child protection and non-discrimination. Sharing examples of where agencies have successfully integrated queer children into programming, without losing government partnerships, can encourage others to follow suit.[20]

We are not starting from scratch. Human rights bodies from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights have affirmed that LGBTQI children deserve protection from violence and discrimination on an equal basis with other children.[17,10] There is solid international backing to do what is right.

THEY'VE HEARD OUR SILENCE, IT'S TIME THEY HEAR OUR VOICES

A child who is raped or molested has endured a horrific violation. Whether that child is straight or queer should make no difference in the urgency of our response; every survivor deserves justice and support, and every child deserves protection from harm. Yet for too long, LGBTQI+ children have been excluded in subtle and not-so-subtle ways from the global fight against childhood sexual violence. This exclusion is rooted in prejudice and politics, and it is perpetuating harm.

We, as policymakers, researchers, and child advocates, must raise our voices in return. We need to talk about queer kids. We need to talk about the fact that a child's identity can put them in the crosshairs of abuse. We need to talk about the fact that a child who faces sexual violence may also face ostracism or criminalisation if they tell. We need to talk about healing and inclusion for those kids, about ensuring that "zero tolerance for violence" truly extends to all youth.

Talking is just the first step, but it is an essential one. With open dialogue comes visibility; with visibility comes data; with data comes tailored action; and with action comes change.[13] By breaking the silence, we chip away at the shame and isolation that abusers and discriminatory laws rely on. We give courage to others to step forward, and we hold institutions accountable to all children.

The path will not be easy in many countries, but there are ways, culturally appropriate ways, quiet ways, bold ways, to begin making space for LGBTQI+ children in our protective efforts.[2] Every child, regardless of who they are or who they love, deserves a childhood free from sexual violence. It is long past time we said that plainly, backed it up with evidence and resources, and lived up to it in practice.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Elizabeth Dartnall, Executive Director of the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI), and Arti Mohan, Lead Technical Specialist of the Safe Futures Hub, for reviewing a draft and providing helpful feedback and edits.

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Makharashvili, N. (2026). Silence Is Not Protection: The Hidden Crisis of Sexual Violence Against LGBTQI+ Children and Youth. Safe Futures Hub, Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI).

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svri@svri.org www.svri.org @TheSVRI @thesvri.bsky.social thesvri
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