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

By Nicolas Makharashvili, Director, Safe Futures Hub

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHEN "ALL CHILDREN" DOES NOT MEAN ALL CHILDREN

Global commitments to end violence against children increasingly promise universality, all children, leave no one behind, zero tolerance. Yet LGBTQI+ children and youth, those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex, remain persistently excluded from child protection systems worldwide. This paper argues that sexual violence against LGBTQI+ children is both disproportionately prevalent and systematically obscured by stigma, discriminatory laws, institutional failures, and silence. That silence is not neutral. It actively places children at risk.

WHAT WE KNOW, AND WHAT SILENCE HIDES

Where inclusive data exist, they consistently show that LGBTQI+ children face significantly higher risks of sexual violence than their non LGBTQI peers. National research in the Philippines found that one in three LGBTQI children had experienced sexual violence. In the United States, lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students report being physically forced to have sex at more than three times the rate of heterosexual students. Across multiple regions, studies of sexual and gender minorities document high lifetime exposure to sexual violence, much of it occurring in childhood or adolescence.

At the same time, LGBTQI+ children remain largely invisible in global evidence. Large-scale violence against children surveys rarely include standardised measures of sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics. Ethical and legal concerns, particularly in contexts where LGBTQI identities are criminalised, have often led to their exclusion from research. This absence of data is frequently misinterpreted as absence of harm, reinforcing policy inaction despite mounting evidence from the contexts where data have been collected.

HOW RISK IS CREATED, AND PROTECTION FAILS

The heightened risk of sexual violence faced by LGBTQI+ children is not accidental or inevitable. It is produced through a combination of social exclusion, stigma, and systemic failures that create opportunity for abuse while simultaneously silencing survivors.

- **Risk is produced by social and structural conditions, not identity**
  LGBTQI+ children are not inherently vulnerable because of who they are. Stigma, discrimination, and criminalization isolate LGBTQI youth from families, schools, and services, creating environments where abuse is more likely to occur.

- **Bias creates opportunity for abuse**
  Perpetrators may deliberately target queer children, assuming they are less likely to report sexual violence or be believed if they do. Sexual violence is often intertwined with prejudice and coercion, including practices such as so called corrective rape, where violence is used to enforce conformity to gender or sexual norms.

- **Shame and fear suppress disclosure**
  Shame, stigma, and fear of exposure or punishment silence survivors, particularly in contexts where being identified as LGBTQI can carry serious social or legal consequences.

- **Protection systems frequently compound harm**
  Across health, justice, and child protection sectors, LGBTQI survivors report discrimination, breaches of confidentiality, misgendering, and denial of care. Justice systems may dismiss reports, reinterpret assaults as consensual same sex activity, or subject survivors to harassment and secondary victimisation, reinforcing silence and protecting perpetrators rather than children.

BREAKING THE SILENCE, WHAT MUST CHANGE

Addressing sexual violence against LGBTQI+ children requires moving beyond recognition of harm toward concrete, system-wide change. The following actions are essential to translate commitments to protect all children into meaningful protection in practice.

- **Make inclusion explicit**
  Ending sexual violence against children requires clearly naming LGBTQI+ children within mainstream child protection efforts, not treating them as an afterthought or a separate agenda. Commitments to protect all children must explicitly include children of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. Ambiguity enables exclusion.

- **Build evidence without causing harm**
  Evidence must be strengthened through ethical, context-appropriate approaches grounded in do no harm principles. This includes safer survey methods, qualitative research, and learning from practice-based knowledge and lived expertise. Where direct data collection is unsafe, alternative methods must be used rather than defaulting to silence.

- **Design systems that are safe in practice, not just on paper**
  Child protection programming across schools, health services, justice systems, shelters, and humanitarian settings must be designed and delivered in ways that are safe and accessible for LGBTQI+ children. Laws and policies that criminalise or stigmatise LGBTQI identities must be reformed or mitigated, as they directly undermine child protection.

- **Centre LGBTQI voices and leadership**
  LGBTQI-led organisations and survivors must be recognised as essential partners in prevention and response. Their insights into risk, safety, and recovery are indispensable for designing effective and ethical child protection strategies.

FROM RHETORIC TO PROTECTION

Silence is not protection. It enables abuse, shields perpetrators, and leaves LGBTQI+ children without recourse. Until these children are visible in data, policy, services, and accountability mechanisms, global commitments to end violence against children will remain incomplete. Breaking the silence is not optional. It is fundamental to fulfilling the promise of protection for all children. With open dialogue comes visibility; with visibility comes data; with data comes tailored action; and with action comes change.