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Australia New Zealand



A Good Shepherd Practitioner Understanding of Girls Rights' Attainment

A Review of Rights Realisation
by Girls in Asia Pacific



Acknowledgements

The authors thank the practitioners of Good Shepherd Asia Pacific who shared their insights and practice wisdom with us which have helped to shape this report. At a time of crisis and upheaval your commitment to the girls, women and families we support is admirable.

The authors acknowledge the Province of Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand and the Good Shepherd International Foundation for the support and encouragement given to them in carrying out this research.

The authors commend the Good Shepherd International Justice Peace Office for its persistent advocacy on issues faced by the girl child through the Good Shepherd Position Papers on the Girl Child, from which this analysis draws its inspiration.

Co-sponsor

This research is co-sponsored by Good Shepherd International Foundation (GSIF), a non-profit organization founded in 2008 by the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, to support the Good Shepherd's mission across the world. GSIF is committed to offering assistance and support to the programs of the Good Shepherd sisters for girls, women and children in vulnerable conditions in 37 countries of Asia, Africa and Middle East, and Latin America, protecting and promoting the rights of people living in poverty, affected by human trafficking, migration, gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination and human rights violations.

Statement of Recognition

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia.

Published by

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
Level 1, 485 La Trobe Street
Melbourne Victoria 3000
www.goodshep.org.au

Suggested Citation: Gardener, L., & Symons, T. (2021). A Good Shepherd Practitioner Understanding of Girls Rights' Attainment: A review of rights realisation by girls in the Asia Pacific. Good Shepherd International Foundation & Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, Melbourne.

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ISBN: 978-0-6487763-4-5

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Every girl is a
powerful agent
of change in
her own right.



1. Summary

Across the Asia Pacific region, the futures of millions of girls are imperilled as the result of unequal rights realisation. This is only being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the girl child is not a homogeneous group, many face similar challenges. They are disproportionately disadvantaged in health, education, work and family life, especially in the region's poorest countries. When factors like poverty, disability or ethnicity intersect and where gender stereotyping and unequal power relations dominate, girls' disadvantage is amplified.

This report examines how Good Shepherd practitioners understand and apply a human rights-based approach for girls in key dimensions of their programs. It is not intended to be an exhaustive assessment of girls' rights and wellbeing, but rather a review of how Good Shepherd practitioners' knowledge enables them to work with and promote rights attainment for the girl child.

The report seeks to examine how Good Shepherd's experience aligns with the global dialogue and with what girls themselves are telling the global community. By drawing upon the experiences of Good Shepherd practitioners and exploring their views on how girls who access services realise their rights, Good Shepherd is looking to ensure a rights-based approach in continuing to meet the needs of girls who access services in Asia Pacific. However, the scope of this project does not extend to an evaluation of the interventions currently offered by Good Shepherd programs for the girl child.

Good Shepherd acknowledges that the best advocates for girls are girls themselves. Every girl is a powerful agent of change in her own right. As an organisation that works with girls, it is duty-bound to work with and for girls to raise their voices and achieve their ambitions. However, it is also compelled to equip practitioners to understand the policy context and ensure a human rights-based approach is at the heart of service delivery.

For practitioners, integrating gender equality into their work can present complex challenges. Traditional gender norms are still prevalent across the Asia Pacific, including in workplaces and in the home. Across Good Shepherd services, even in the education sector, which has a particular role in shaping and transforming social norms for just and equitable societies, persistent negative norms hamper efforts to realise gender equality for girls.

From an early age, girls are subject to gendered stereotypes which can shape and limit their ideas, ambitions and self-confidence. At the heart of Good Shepherd's mission is the urgent need to challenge and transform social and gender norms that hold girls back from achieving their rights.

Good Shepherd practitioners across the Asia Pacific during the data collection process for this project raised concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on threatening progress made for girls' rights attainment.

Practitioners shared insights that COVID-19 continues to negatively impact girl's health and wellbeing and – in addition to facing loss of learning because of prolonged school closures and limited access to remote learning opportunities – many are at risk of not returning to schools once they reopen. Practitioners also spoke about the increase in incidences of violence against girls during COVID-19, jeopardizing their health, safety and overall well-being.



Practitioners highlighted the need to promote equal opportunities for girls to access quality education, skills training and health care in the region. They spoke about the need for more recognition of the linkages between gender socialisation in childhood and multiple and low-status roles in womanhood. They conveyed the importance of recognising and dealing with stigma, stereotypes and discriminatory societal norms to effectively prevent human rights violations against girls from happening in the first place.

The report is structured in three sections. The first situates the currency of this report by introducing Good Shepherd Asia Pacific, the project that led to the report, and documenting the situation of the girl child in the region including the impacts of COVID-19.

The following section provides practitioner insights into what is important to girls now and into their future, what is holding girls back from achieving the full realisation of their human rights, and what solutions practitioners suggest for improving the situations for girls in achieving greater human rights attainment. In addition to exploring practitioner insights, the section also examines how they align with the international human rights framework and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The report concludes by briefly discussing how Good Shepherd practitioners view and understand how girls' access – or do not access – their rights, and provides recommendations for how Good Shepherd Asia Pacific can progress its rights-based agenda into the future. While the report is intended to illuminate practitioner knowledge and capture best practice programming, the next step is for Good Shepherd Asia Pacific to listen to girls themselves and reflect on how their programming and advocacy aligns with their needs.



"If you do not speak out, if you do not sound the alarm when it is needed, you will be justly convicted by your silence."

Saint Mary Euphrasia

Good Shepherd recognises that millions of girls are disproportionately disadvantaged in health, education, work and family life, especially in the region's poorest countries.



2. Good Shepherd in Asia Pacific

Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (OLCGS) is an international congregation, with an apostolic and contemplative lifestyle. OLCGS expresses our charism together with partners-in-mission¹ in 72 countries and has a long history of addressing the systemic disadvantage of girls. OLCGS believes that the root causes of disadvantage for the girl child include systemic injustice, structural gender inequality, gender-based violence and dominant systems of patriarchal power. Good Shepherd in the Asia Pacific (Good Shepherd) includes Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Cambodia, Central East India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Southwest India, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. This grouping stems from historical programming practices. Good Shepherd is focused on ensuring the participation of girls, their families, and communities through a range of programs that empower and promote safety and protection. For effective and sustainable systemic change, Good Shepherd encourages and supports advocacy initiatives at local, national and international levels.

Good Shepherd recognises that millions of girls are disproportionately disadvantaged in health, education, work and family life, especially in the region's poorest countries. When factors like poverty, disability or ethnicity intersect and where gender stereotyping and unequal power relations dominate, girls' disadvantage is amplified.

Good Shepherd also notes that the girl child is not a homogeneous group. Girls have varied interests and are differentially impacted by forces of age, ability, class, culture, ethnicity, gender and religious background. Socio-economic status, literacy, sexuality, and family structure can also impact girls' access to services, resources, power and influences opportunities, responsibilities and life experience.

Girls within Good Shepherd social services programs in Asia Pacific are citizens, residents, refugees and asylum seekers, and migrants (documented and undocumented), including girls trafficked for labour or commercial sexual exploitation; this includes an alarming increase of online recruitment methods resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The target group is dependent on the thematic focus of the programs, capacity and capability of the Good Shepherd sisters and partners-in-mission to deliver the interventions required. These range from community-based programs to residential care programs for at-risk cases. Good Shepherd takes a rights-based approach to all programs and operates from the framework that every person, including girls, have human rights and are therefore rights-holders. Additionally, governments and state actors have the corresponding accountability to fulfil those rights as duty-bearers. Hence, interventions work to close the capacity gaps between rights-holders and duty-bearers through an ecological model that includes addressing immediate trauma and empowering the girl, her family and the surrounding community of care to advocate for systemic change through the enactment and implementation of laws and policies enabling girls to realise their rights.

In some countries², Good Shepherd also has formal educational programs, including early childhood development, primary schools, secondary schools, vocational schools and colleges. Whilst early years programs usually include both boys and girls, the majority of educational programs cater to girls. The schools provide a safe space for girls (and boys where applicable) to receive quality education founded on the four guiding principles³ of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

This report is focused on the Asia Pacific region, and while some issues are specific to the region, much of what is discussed below is also reflected in the global discourse.

1 Partners-in-mission are staff, volunteers, benefactors, board members, associates, companions etc. who choose to accept co-responsibility by working collaboratively to forward the mission (as defined in the OLCGS document "Zeal Calls Us to Respond" June 2019).

2 Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

3 Four guiding principles of the CRC are non-discrimination/equality (Article 2), best interest of the child (Article 3), survival and development (Article 6) and participation / inclusion (Article 12).

“Be thoughtfully aware of
the needs of each person.”

Saint Mary Euphrasia



3. Introduction

Since 2004 the Asia Pacific Circle of Leaders⁴ have consciously adopted strategies for all Good Shepherd programs in the region to collaborate. The 2020 Good Shepherd Asia Pacific Regional Assembly was a pivotal moment for Good Shepherd sisters and partners-in-mission in identifying opportunities for deeper collaboration in significant and meaningful ways.

This project is a direct outcome of a webinar on the Good Shepherd Position Paper on the girl child (OLCGS, 2018). It was an opportunity to understand practitioner views of key issues faced by girls (defined as young female children aged 18 years and under) who are interacting with Good Shepherd services. This project sought to ascertain how practitioners working with the girl child understand the root causes holding girls back from achieving fullness of life and attainment of human rights. The scoping study addressed the following research questions:

- What is important to girls now and into their future?
- What is holding girls back from achieving the full realisation of their human rights?
- What solutions would improve the situations for girls in achieving greater human rights attainment?

In seeking to answer these questions, an online survey was conducted exclusively for practitioners who work with girls across Good Shepherd services in the Asia Pacific region. The survey was live from 20 January to

9 February 2021 and attracted 40 responses from sisters and partners-in-mission working in 15 countries⁵. The survey provided multiple-choice responses as well as opportunities to provide open-ended commentary. As surveys are limited when it comes to providing nuanced data, particularly when working across several language groups, two focus group discussions (FGD) were held virtually on 9 March 2021.

FGD participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- practitioners with significant experience on the subject matter;
- practitioners in countries that provide significant programs to girls; and
- practitioners that represented the diverse programs that Good Shepherd provides across the Asia Pacific region.

Participants for the FGDs (referred to as practitioners) were selected from survey respondents. A total of 11 practitioners participated, representing Good Shepherd social services and schools from eight countries⁶.

4 The Asia Pacific Circle (APC) of Leaders comprise all the Province Leaders of the nine Good Shepherd Units in the region, namely Australia-New Zealand, Central East India Nepal, East Asia, Indonesia, North East Asia, Philippines-Japan, Singapore-Malaysia, South West India, Sri Lanka-Pakistan.

5 Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam and Macau.

6 India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

3.1 Good Shepherd practitioners and the rights of the girl child

For practitioners, integrating gender equality into their work and lives can present complex challenges. Traditional gender norms are still prevalent across all aspects of society, including workplaces and in the home (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Across Good Shepherd services, even in the education sector, which has a particular role in shaping and transforming social norms for just and equitable societies, persistent negative norms hamper efforts to realise gender equality for girls.

This analysis is not intended to be an exhaustive assessment of girls' rights and wellbeing, but rather a review of how Good Shepherd practitioners understand rights for girls in key dimensions of their lives. It is an exercise to understand how the experiences of Good Shepherd practitioners align with the global dialogue and with what girls themselves are saying about their rights attainment. By drawing upon the experiences of Good Shepherd practitioners and exploring their views on how girls who access their services realise their rights, Good Shepherd is looking to understand and ensure that we continue to meet the needs of girls who access services across the region in an appropriate and evolving manner.

Good Shepherd acknowledges that best practice involves listening to girls – the best people to talk about their rights attainment are the girls themselves. Yet while acknowledging the importance of participation, Good Shepherd also acknowledges the accountability and leadership of people who hold power. Girls have their own voice and agency that is most effective in combination with the support of people who hold power and make decisions. The global community is acutely aware of the challenges faced by girls – they have told us multiple times.⁷ Solutions must be about action rather than tokenistic participation. It should also be noted that many of the girls who come to Good Shepherd services have experienced trauma and there is a duty of care to not re-traumatise them, thus for the purpose of this project the authors did not seek their direct participation. This report is intended to ensure that the practices and services Good Shepherd provides are best placed to respond to the rights attainment of girls.

While the report samples are not statistically significant, and the data is not weighted, emphasis has been given to qualitative evidence from the practitioners.

For more detail on the analysis process see the methodology section (Appendix A).

3.2 An outline of the human rights framework as it applies to girls

One of the core principles of human rights is that everyone is equal in dignity and entitled to all human rights without any distinction (Article 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). The two mutually reinforcing conventions on women's and children's rights that form the foundation for protecting and promoting girls' rights in law are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The CRC applies to anyone younger than 18 and requires States to "take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of the children". A [2017 Plan International](#) report examining the provisions of the text for girls' rights points out that the CRC was designed to be gender neutral. This has led "to the interpretation that it is biased predominantly towards boys, while disregarding the distinct discrimination faced by girls" (p.13). The same report highlights that CEDAW, while theoretically applying to women of all ages, seldom feature girls as rights-bearing individuals.

Another important source of human rights norms comes from political consensus agreements, such as the Platform for Action of the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing. This was the first time the girl child occupied her own place on an international agenda. [Section L](#) of the Beijing Platform for Action outlined nine strategic objectives for the girl child. These included eliminating all forms of discrimination against girls in education, health care and cultural practices; protecting girls from exploitation and violence; and encouraging all forms of girls' participation in social, economic and political life. Requiring statutory support, 189 governments committed themselves to taking concrete steps "to end all discrimination against girls and to prepare girls to participate actively and equally with boys at all levels of social, political, economic and cultural leadership" (Croll, 2006, p. 1286).

More recently, 193 United Nations Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provides emphasis for States to improve rights for girls. Crucially, SDG 5 requires governments worldwide to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" by 2030 ([UNGA, 2015](#)).

⁷ For example, see Plan International (2020) [A Better Normal: Girls Call For A Revolutionary Reset](#).

All United Nations Member States have ratified at least one human rights treaty, obliging them to respect, protect and fulfil all human rights, as they are universal, interdependent, and interrelated. Yet States can choose not to be bound by a particular provision, these caveats are called “Reservations”. While allowing States to have reservations makes it more likely that a convention will be ratified, they effectively weaken attempts to set norms and undermine commitment to equal rights for girls. Plan International’s analysis of reservations points to clear resistance among several countries to fundamental principles in CEDAW, CRC and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets that are key to girls’ attaining their rights (Plan International, 2017).

International treaties and platforms of actions, along with the SDGs, establish common global policies and targets for the realization of the rights of girls and for the achievement of gender equality. One of the ways governments can realize the rights of girls is by ensuring their national laws and policies are compatible with the rights obligations contained in treaties. However, as this report will discuss in greater detail in the section below, this process can be slow and not all governments are able or willing to ensure rights for all.

3.3 The girl child

While there has been some progress in gender equality for the girl child (defined as 18 years and under) in the Asia Pacific region in recent years, challenges remain. Discriminatory laws and social norms remain pervasive, there continues to be under-representation of females at all levels of political leadership, and gender-based violence⁸ continues to be one of the most prevalent human rights violations (UNICEF, 2020).

Women’s economic empowerment in the Asia Pacific region has remained practically stagnant. This is particularly concerning for young people and those in the informal labour market, noting women are already over-represented in the informal workforce in a majority of countries (OECD, 2019). The gender gap in the labour force participation rate remains an issue, particularly the female labour force participation rate in Southern Asia which is among the world’s lowest (behind only the Arab States and Northern Africa). The rate was trending downward even before the pandemic, illustrating the firmly embedded structural blockage to women’s work across the region (ILO, 2018).

Investing in girls’ participation and economic empowerment remains essential to achieving the SDGs and gender equality. Enabling girls to learn throughout their lives and develop key skills can transform lives, communities and entire countries.

Girls rights are human rights

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948**
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979**
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989**
- Platform for Action of the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing (Section L)**
- The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), 2015**

⁸ Gender-based violence does not discriminate according to race, religion, age, culture or class. Predominantly experienced by women and girls, it is rooted in gender-based power imbalances and fuelled by many factors, including harmful gender norms and insufficient legal protections.

3.4 The Global COVID-19 Pandemic and the girl child

Crises disproportionately affect girls ([StartNetwork, 2020](#)) and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shutdowns, as well as the unequal access to social support and digital technologies, has already had consequences for girls.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing a resurgence in extreme poverty. By 2021, around 435 million women and girls globally will be living on less than \$1.90 a day – including 47 million pushed into poverty as a result of COVID-19 ([UN Women, 2020](#)).

The gains made over the past decades to ensure that all girls have access to quality education, health care and justice systems are under threat. A recent World Bank report described circumstantial evidence of worsened inequality, noting that when faced with income losses, “poorer households are more likely to reduce their food consumption, drop out of school, accumulate debt, and sell assets, all of which undermine their ability to recover from the crisis” ([World Bank, 2021](#), p. xv).

At least every seventh girl globally, 222 million in total, has been unable to access remote learning due to schools shutting. While the existing digital divide is core to this problem, many learners in the Asia Pacific region live in areas with limited internet coverage or in families where internet or digital devices are unaffordable ([UNICEF, 2020](#)). Online learning has also exacerbated online harms, such as sexual exploitation and cyberbullying. While increased online activity supports children’s learning and socialization, even before the pandemic it also placed them at heightened risk ([UNICEF, 2020](#)).

Prior to the pandemic 15 million girls were already out of school in the region, however, more than 1.2 million additional girls (from pre-primary to upper secondary) may now be forced to drop out ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Increased rates of out-of-school girls, unemployed young women, gender-based violence and lack of access to family planning have the real potential to lead to a follow-on increase in child marriage across the region. Child marriage is used as a coping mechanism in times of fragility and uncertainty; the economic insecurity caused by COVID-19 may mean that child marriage is used to relieve financial pressure on families ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). [UNICEF \(2021\)](#) has estimated that over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides because of the pandemic.

Good Shepherd practitioners across the Asia Pacific during the data collection process for this project spoke about the challenges of managing the impacts of COVID-19 and the associated economic recession, disruption to health services, declining development assistance and health budgets, and lost educational and employment opportunities particularly for young people and those from marginalized populations. They commented that responding to the needs of girls, which in many cases are anticipated to be even greater than before COVID-19, will challenge not only their services but also their countries.

In light of ongoing challenges for the girl child to realise her rights in the Asia Pacific region, overlaid with the changes brought about by COVID-19, the practitioner insights provided rich insight into the barriers facing girls and how these can be overcome.

The effects of COVID-19

Poverty

By 2021, around

435 million

women and girls globally will be living on less than

\$1.90 a day

Source: [UN Women, 2020](#)



Education

Prior to the pandemic

15 million

girls were already out of school in the region. More than

1.2 million

additional girls may now be forced to drop out

Source: [UNESCO, 2020](#)



Remote learning

At least every seventh girl globally,



222 million

in total, has been unable to access remote learning due to schools shutting

Source: [UNICEF, 2020](#)



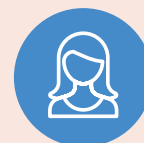
Child brides

An estimated

10 million

more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides because of the pandemic

Source: [UNICEF, 2021](#)



Family violence

Gender-based violence has increased globally during the pandemic

Source: [UN Women, 2020](#)



Medical

Disruption to health services, declining development assistance and health budgets



“Love and justice binds us
together to the whole mission.”

Saint Mary Euphrasia



4. Good Shepherd Practitioner insights

The following sections draw on the survey results and focus group discussion (FGD) conversations. They examine how practitioners understand the rights of girls in their country and work contexts. In seeking to better understand the knowledge and views of practitioners, the report explores how national laws and policies influence services where Good Shepherd works with the girl child, as well as practitioners' views of current issues pertaining to girls' right realisation. It delves into what practitioners identify as emerging issues for girls, and what is holding girls back from attaining their rights now. It then explores barriers girls face in realising their human rights and the possible solutions for the future.

4.1 Access to justice

The right to access justice – while being generally recognized for adults – for many still seems unimaginable or unattainable when it comes to children. This is true for all children but is exacerbated for the girl child, especially if she has a disability, is stateless or belongs to a marginalised and vulnerable community (UNICEF, 2015).

90 per cent of survey participants identified that there are laws and policies that prevent violence and exploitation of girls in the countries where they work. However, there was also recognition in open-ended responses that girls are often invisible in laws and policies – their rights, and the particular challenges they face, are concealed either under the ageless category of “women”, or the gender-neutral category of “children”, “adolescents” or “youth”.

Good Shepherd works with girls from many different cultural, social, economic backgrounds, which can have a considerable impact on their ability to access legal mechanisms. For example, one practitioner from Malaysia commented that “implementation of the laws do not sufficiently protect undocumented migrants, stateless children, refugees and asylum seekers.”

Comments such as the one above stress that while a body of basic rights and principles are encoded in laws and policies, the unfortunate reality is that many states are not ensuring the rights of everyone. This is particularly stark for girls who are not recognised by the state or who belong to marginalised groups.

Data from the survey also illustrates that while technically the girl child has the same human rights and legal protections as others, in practice girls can be faced with sex-, gender- and age-specific barriers that prevent them from fully enjoying their human rights.

“There are many loopholes. The laws are not sensitive to the girls’ needs and feelings. This inhibits the girls from reporting the crime since they are not respected. The country is still patriarchal, and the laws are likewise.”

(Practitioner from India)

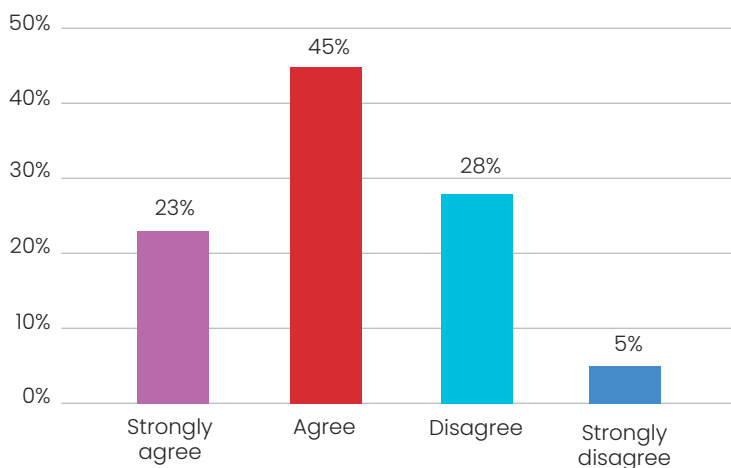
In countries where there is available data, UN Women (2020) report that less than 40 per cent of women who experience violence seek help of any sort, indicating barriers and lack of confidence in justice systems. The survey responses reflect a similar lack of confidence in how the justice system supports girls, with barriers existing in both developing and developed country responses (see Figure 1)⁹. Many practitioners commented on the unequal access girls (and women) continue to have to justice, with one practitioner writing:

“Our court system is not conducive to fair outcomes for women and girls affected by family violence and sexual harm. Our judges are not well trained in family violence dynamics and sexual harm. The processes are long and can be manipulated by perpetrators and are costly. For example, getting a protection order from a violent partner costs money, and can be defended by the partner. This creates a system where those that can afford good representation have an advantage, and because men are more likely to have financial security, it is usually them that benefit from this system even though they are more likely to be the perpetrator. This has long-term negative ramifications for victims of violence.”

(Practitioner from Australia)

Figure 1: Access to justice systems

Do you think the justice system in the country where you work supports the girls you work with?



Whilst Figure 1 shows the survey responses generally leaned favourably towards the justice system supporting girls in their respective countries, the comments in the survey and FGD reveal otherwise.

⁹ Definition provided in the survey: The justice system operates to maintain the rule of law within society. It should also focus on giving people access to fair outcomes and protecting their rights. It includes duty bearers such as: Law enforcement agencies (usually the police), courts and accompanying prosecution and defence lawyers, agencies for detaining and supervising offenders (such as prisons) and institutions that make policy and law reform.

The following reasons for justice not being upheld were listed by practitioners:

- Discrimination (class, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background).
- Lack of victim-centred/child-friendly environment (not trauma-informed¹⁰).
- State does not recognise undocumented migrants, stateless children, refugees and asylum seekers.
- Lack of budget for proper implementation.
- Geographical differences between urban and rural environments.
- Inadequate quality of training in specialised services (prevention and response).

Access to justice is an important part of the UN’s development agenda. The SDG 16 prescribes 12 targets, each with their own indicators. Target 16.3 is to “Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all”. Yet according to available data, rule of law and access to justice continued to face significant challenges in the region (Sachs et al. 2020). The survey responses also reflect this data and highlight the unequal access girls continue to have to justice across the Asia Pacific region.

4.2 Achieving gender equality

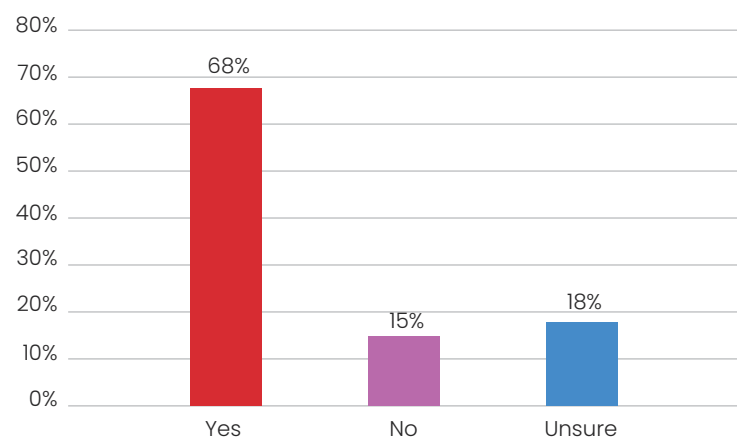
Over the past decade, 131 countries have enacted 274 legal and regulatory reforms in support of gender equality (UN Women, 2020). For example, according to a recent World Bank report, 86 per cent of countries outlawed sexual harassment (Tavares & Wodon, 2017). Regulations outlawing child marriage are also increasing, for example between 2015 and 2017 nine countries revised their laws by removing exceptions that allow for parental and judicial consent (ibid.).

Yet progress for gender equality is slow. In the same period almost 100 million girls were still not legally protected against child marriage (ibid.). While COVID-19 has put more girls at risk, even before the pandemic, Asia and the Pacific already experienced high numbers of children forced to marry for economic, cultural and family reasons.

Gender equity (SDG 5) is central to the UN’s development agenda. However, evidence is very limited on advancing gender equality in the region, with only two out of nine SDG targets incorporating measurable data and the data available shows progress is very slow (UNESCAP, 2021). This slow progress was reflected in the survey data. Practitioners were mostly aware of laws and policies that promote gender equality (Figure 2)¹¹, yet many responses spoke to the unequal implementation and adoption of policies across the countries where Good Shepherd works. For example, a practitioner from the Philippines acknowledged that “laws for gender equality are not implemented well [sic]. It lacks political will and budget.”

Figure 2: Laws and policies promoting gender equality

Does the country you work in have laws and policies that promote gender equality?



¹⁰ Good Shepherd understands trauma informed care as understanding and considering the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.

¹¹ Definition provided in the survey: Gender Equality means that women and men, and girls and boys, enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities, and protections. Effective gender equality laws and policies are crucial in guaranteeing the equal rights and opportunities of women and men in all spheres of life as well as in preventing systemic discrimination against women.

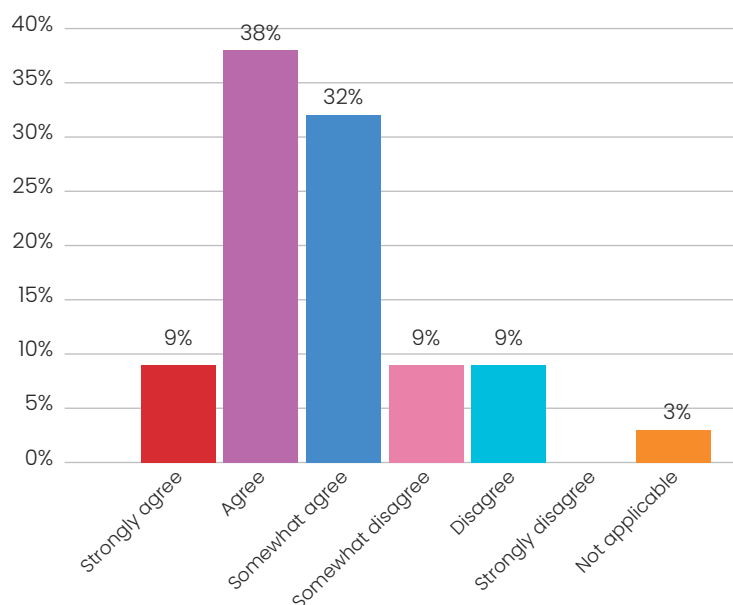
World Bank research highlights that for each extra year of a girl's education can increase a woman's earnings by 10% to 20%.

In addition to comments about the implementation of laws being slow and unequally applied, a number of practitioners also commented on the fact that laws, norms and practices are part of the wider ‘cultures’ that inform multiple aspects of behaviour and societies.

Practitioners did not have a unified opinion on how laws benefit the girls they work with (Figure 3). This is most likely because access to justice is not uniform and is dependent on such factors as the legal status of the girls the practitioners were working with. Open-ended responses highlighted underlying values, norms and attitudes associated with gender discrimination, indicating that patriarchal societies, societal norms, stereotyping and stigma continue to create major barriers to the realisation of rights and access to opportunities for girls in the Asia Pacific region.

Figure 3: Beneficial laws

If yes, do these laws benefit the girls you work with.



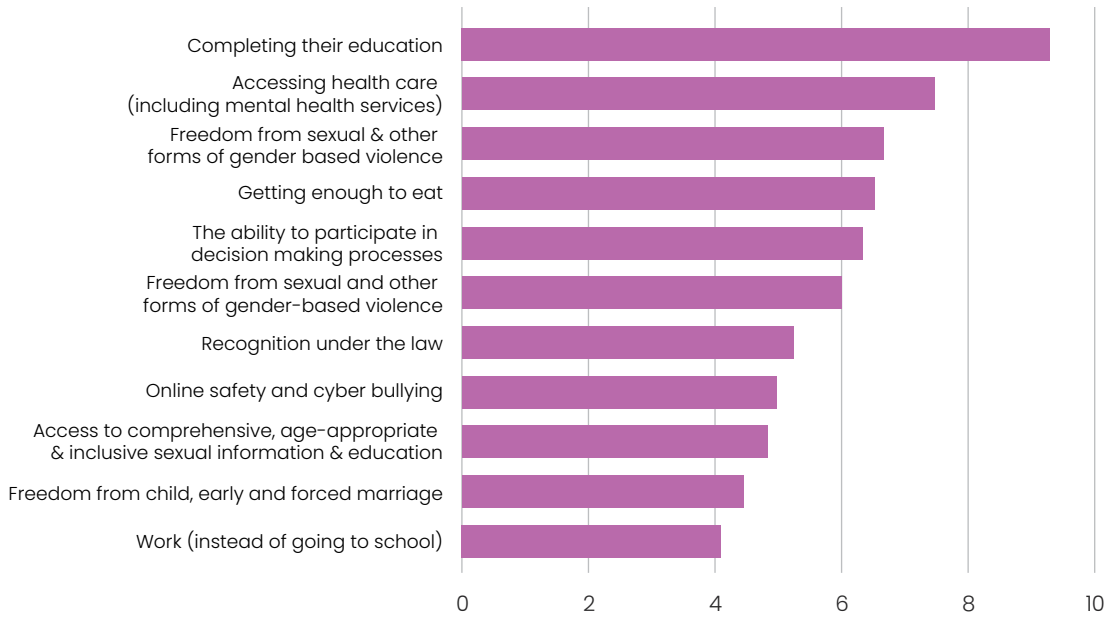
4.3 Access to quality education

While legal action is important, it must be supported by other reforms. Education in particular was touted as a key method for challenging discriminatory norms while also promoting improved financial security for girls in their adult years (Jha & Shah, 2019). World Bank research highlights that for each extra year of a girl’s education can increase a woman’s earnings by 10% to 20% (Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, 2002). Practitioners were also cognizant that education must be complemented by wider initiatives to ensure lasting change (UNESCO, 2020). In the FGD, practitioners highlighted that girls often outperform boys in school but also noted that educational attainment did not necessarily translate into economic and social empowerment. One practitioner from Myanmar noted that in her experience in school the “best students are always girls. It is recognised by the teachers that girls are more responsible and their ability to conduct their work is better.”

Good Shepherd provides numerous educational programs, thus unsurprisingly education was top and centre in the survey results (Figures 4 and 5). Not only do girls have a human right to education, but from the FGD it was clear that school is also a space in which girls exercise their agency, make their voices heard, access their first leadership opportunities and feel safe. The practitioners in the FGD noted that if girls are denied their right to education, they are also denied the chance to develop skills that will help them take charge in their homes, careers, communities and countries.

Figure 4: Presently important to the girls accessing Good Shepherd services

What is important to the girls you work with now? Rank from 1 to 11 where 1 is the most important



The survey was taken by practitioners attached to both Good Shepherd schools and social services. Both groups highlighted the importance of education. Responses convey the need for inclusive and equitable education to ensure a future where girls, and all children, have choices and opportunities in life. One practitioner from India commented that “inclusive and equitable quality education for all would be an effective pathway to lead people to think, to [critique] the cultural practices and engage health and well-being of a whole society.”

The responses illustrate that practitioners believe education is the most effective path to achieving an equal world – one where everyone can live happy and healthy lives, and where girls can take their rightful place as equals.

Across the region access to quality education (SDG 4) has been improved, but the data show increasing inequalities by gender, location and wealth, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels (UNESCAP, 2021). While the literature and data demonstrate that education continues to be an important equalizer, even before the pandemic a considerable number of girls enrolled in school were not on course to meet minimum proficiency in numeracy and literacy. Every fifth girl in the region was unable to read or understand a simple text by age 10 and even more girls were missing out on transferable skills and competencies (Babb & Pasic, 2020). COVID-19 has exacerbated the learning crisis in the region and will continue to do so.

4.4 Access to health and well-being

The prevalence of health issues raised in the survey responses is interesting as Good Shepherd does not provide health services or programs per se. However, in addressing the attainment of rights, issues related to girls' health intersect with Good Shepherd program offerings – including barriers for participation. This was clearly identified as important across the responses. While gender powerfully shapes all aspects of health and wellbeing, the questionnaire was completed during the pandemic, which may have also influenced practitioners.

When the topic of health was interrogated in the FGD, it became apparent that socially- and culturally-constructed gender norms determine roles and opportunities for girls. In turn this affected social and structural determinants of health, health-related risky behaviours, and access to and quality of health and social services. During both FGDs, practitioners identified the following key barriers for girls in accessing health care:

- Geographical location (urban/rural divide)
- Class/ethnicity
- Infrastructure and medical professional availability
- Affordability (private versus public)
- COVID-19 and e-health (reinforced by the digital divide)

They noted the correlation between poor health and nutrition and negative impacts on educational outcomes. This understanding of health aligns to the World Health Organization definition: a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO).

FGD participants also discussed the increased psychosocial stress and mental health issues of girls during COVID-19, which affected their ability to learn. They expressed concern that prolonged lockdowns, uncertainty, economic stress on families, and the loss of the school support system and routines negatively impacted hard-earned gains in girls’ education and the availability of safe spaces for girls. Psychosocial stress and mental health issues resulting from COVID-19 was also an issue that was raised by girls from Good Shepherd programs in India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines and Sri Lanka in a Good Shepherd [CSW65](#) panel event ([GSIF Asia Pacific, 2021](#)).

Asia and the Pacific has made significant progress on good health and well-being (SDG 3). However, there are concerns that progress made in this area may worsen because of the impact of COVID-19 ([UNESCAP, 2021](#)).

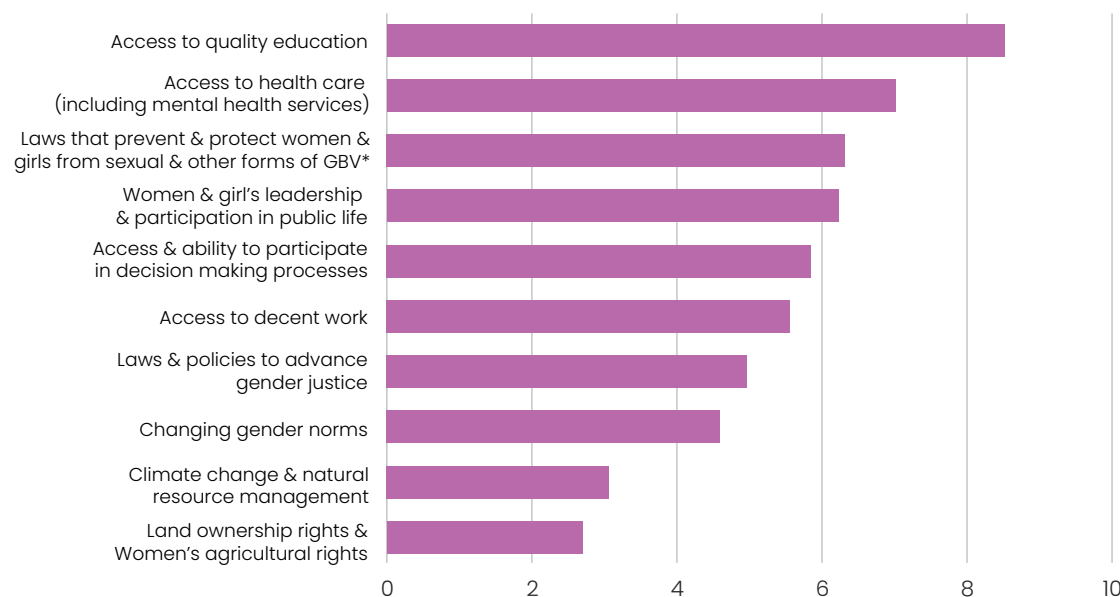
This data illustrates that practitioners who work with the girl child in Good Shepherd services view access to quality education (SDG 4) and good health and well-being (SDG 3) as the most important in ensuring girls realise their human rights.

4.5 Looking to the future

The survey asked respondents to look ahead and consider “what would improve girls’ rights attainment in the future” (Figure 5). Both education and health rated highly, which is not unexpected given rights to health and education are well recognised as basic human rights and particularly important for the girl child (see the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, CEDAW and the CRC). In the sections above, we examined the importance of access to quality education and health in ensuring girls can live happy and healthy lives, where their potential is unleashed and they can make choices for their futures. The following section examines the third and fourth highest ranking responses—equal participation and leadership, and prevention and protection from all forms of violence driven by gender inequality.

Figure 5: Important for the future of girls accessing Good Shepherd services

What is important to their future? Rank from 1 to 10 where 1 is the most important



*Gender-based violence (GBV)

4.5.1 Prevention and protection

The forms of violence experienced by women and girls are frequently hidden, socially and culturally sanctioned, and not recognised or adequately addressed by the institutions that should respond. Girls are specifically affected by forms of violence driven by gender inequality, such as forced and early marriage, trafficking, female genital mutilation, and other harmful practices (UNFPA, 2020).

Gender-based violence in all of its forms holds girls back. Nowhere in the world are girls free from violence and harassment, however, Asia has the largest number of women and girls intentionally killed by their intimate partners or family members (UNODC, 2019). Female victims continue to be particularly affected by trafficking in persons. In 2018, for every ten victims detected globally, almost five were adult women and two were girls. In East Asia and the Pacific, the most frequently detected form of exploitation among trafficked persons is sexual exploitation, making up 64 per cent of detected cases. Women and girls also make up the majority of detected domestic servitude cases (forced labour) (UNODC, 2020).

Global lockdowns have drastically exacerbated cases of gender-based violence in the home and online. Additionally, COVID-19 and subsequent economic downturns will result in more people, especially girls, at risk of trafficking.

The practitioner insights demonstrate that while it is necessary to accept the limitations of law, the gap between law and practice and the challenge of victims' access to available services, the law represents an important step in ensuring protections for girls, particularly in the post-COVID world. In highlighting the need for laws that prevent and protect women and girls from sexual and other forms of gender-based violence as a critical step to ensure girls' futures, practitioners acknowledge the importance of having accessible, effectively implemented and resourced legal mechanisms to protect girls from gender inequalities.

Global lockdowns have drastically exacerbated cases of gender-based violence in the home and online.



Practitioners in the FGD considered the nature of violence against girls, understanding it to be a widespread social problem rooted in the unequal distribution of resources and power between men and women, boys and girls. Practitioners commented that it is also institutionalised through laws, policies, and social norms that grant preferential rights to men and boys.

In discussions about the root causes of girls not attaining their rights, practitioners in the FGD spoke about the need for awareness-raising and providing training for law enforcement officers, the judiciary, as well as for support and protection service providers as being crucial to ensure that girls are protected. One practitioner explained it as:

“Girls not knowing their rights, or that they are rights holders, is definitely a huge barrier in terms of achieving their rights. But also, just knowing their rights is not enough. It depends on their context ... you may educate them about their right to a lawyer, right not to be tortured by the police, etc... But if you do not have safeguards in place, and if you do not have caring adults who will prevent reprisal, you may actually do more harm. [...] It requires context-specific, process-oriented, empowerment processes, but 100 per cent moving towards knowing and understanding rights, and the skills and know-how to claim them age appropriately.”

(Practitioner from India)

This emphasises the need for mechanisms to support law, which requires sustained action to ensure that political commitments translate into meaningful change, and support for coordinated, well-funded, evidence-informed strategies implemented by governments, communities, and civil society partners.

Many countries have seen a surge in reports of domestic violence against women and children as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns (UNStats, 2020). Evidence is very limited on gender equality in the region, with insufficient data to measure SDG 5.2 violence against women and girls in the latest progress report (UNESCAP, 2021). This lack of data and responses from practitioners highlights the significant challenges in the region to implementing laws that prevent and protect women and girls from sexual and other forms of gender-based violence.

4.5.2 Leadership and participation

Women’s equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the SDGs by 2030. However, data shows that women are under-represented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and achieving gender parity in political life is a long way off (IPU-UN Women, 2021).

Practitioners noted that women and girls experience significant discrimination related to their participation in public and political life in most domains of the public sphere and in all geographical regions. While the reasons for the under-representation in power and decision-making are multifaceted and complex, practitioners observed that significant barriers stem from economic, social and cultural issues, as well as from negative stereotypes and entrenched gender roles.

In addition to awareness-raising through education and advocacy, practitioners in the FGD spoke about the need for girls to have role models. One practitioner from India commented on the need to “connect girls locally and globally. I think that we must break the barriers of economics and cultural differences by showing girls what is possible. Girls need role models to show them what is possible.”

Morgenroth, T., Ryan, M. K., & Peters, K. (2015) argue that role models have three core benefits for girls: they represent and expand what is possible, inspire girls to be more ambitious, and demonstrate the mindsets and behaviours of how to rise. During the FGD several practitioners spoke about the importance of providing role models, either through school programs (like career days) or engaging with girls as equals in advocacy activities.

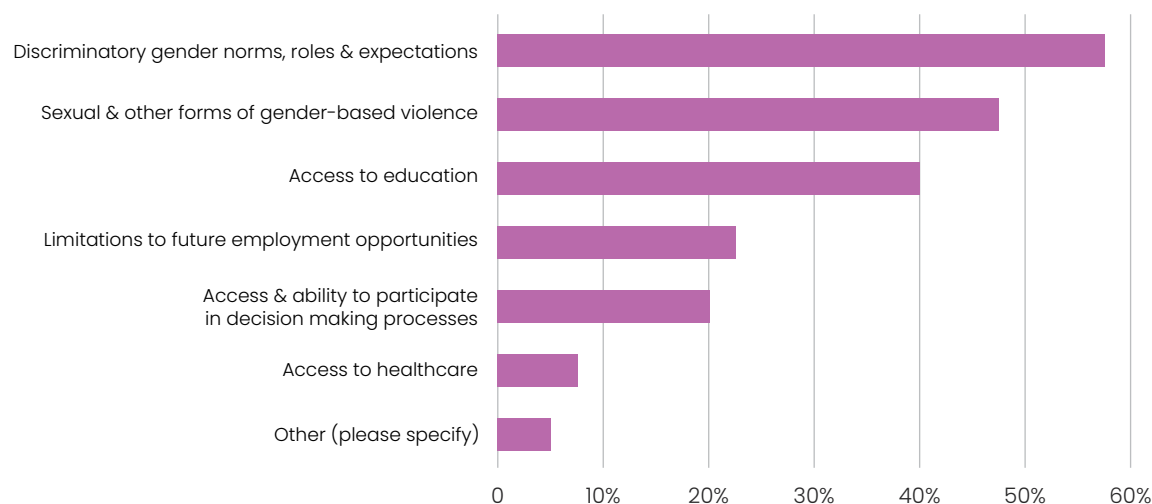
While the Asia Pacific region will have to accelerate progress to achieve the SDG 5.5 Women in Leadership target by 2030 (UNESCAP, 2021), the responses highlight that there is a strong desire by practitioners to enable the girls of today to make strong women leaders of tomorrow.

4.6 Barriers and solutions to rights realisation

Good Shepherd practitioners identified discriminatory gender norms and expectations, and sexual and other forms of gender-based violence as the two key barriers holding girls back from their full attainment of human rights (Figure 6). The responses demonstrate an interconnectedness with girl's equal participation in society and overall social and economic development.

Figure 6: Barriers holding girls back from achieving the full attainment of their human rights

What are the top two barriers holding girls back from achieving the full attainment of their human rights?



Culture and patriarchal societies were constant themes in the FGD. Practitioners spoke about underlying values, norms and attitudes associated with gender discrimination, societal norms, stereotyping and stigma. Discussions focussed on gendered attitudes and norms and patriarchal power structures that girls encounter in their homes, their schools, and their communities as being detrimental to their attainment of rights.

While this reflects the status quo in the countries where the practitioners work, it is also reflective of states' reluctance to tackle discrimination, especially when this clashes with religious or cultural views (Blok & Pehle, 2017).

Cultural practices and norms can survive across time by adapting to new contexts, including demographic, socioeconomic and technological changes. "Culture is not an untouchable and permanent fixture, rather, it is always in flux and contested, constantly being shaped by human interaction" (ODI, 2012, p.7). Nevertheless, culture remains pivotal to the contexts within which practitioners work. The practitioner insights speak to the role of culture in the devaluing of the girl child in the Asia Pacific region. For example, a practitioner from Nepal noted that "the situation in Asia Pacific or South Asia, is girls are not allowed to talk. People believe that girls are small, they don't know."

The discussion in the FDG highlighted that from the moment they are born, girls and boys face unequal gender norms regarding expectations and access to resources and opportunities, with lifelong consequences.

The devaluation of the girl child was also raised multiple times in the FGDs. Several practitioners commented that in patriarchal societies, where inequality is deeply rooted in its socio-cultural norms, gender prejudice and resulting gender discrimination begins even before a child is born.

The root cause of daughter devaluation is complex and reflect diverse political, economic, social, cultural and religious practices, none of which justify such a violation of human rights. Many of the countries where Good Shepherd works face real challenges of son preference. This is reflected in the State of World Population (2020) report, which indicates that the number of “missing women”¹² has more than doubled over the past 50 years, rising from 61 million in 1970 to an estimated 142.6 million in 2020. India accounts 45.8 million of the estimated missing female births worldwide, caused by gender-biased (prenatal) sex selection.

Practitioners also spoke about gendered expectations of the girl child, including but not limited to being accommodating, nurturing and responsible for a disproportionate burden of domestic work as a limiting factor in realising their future opportunities. In the Asia Pacific region, there is a noticeable separation of spaces and division of labor, with differentiated female and male influence and spheres of activities that are hierarchically valued (Croll, 2006).

An example from the FGD was the disproportionate burden of domestic work (unpaid). This often begins in early childhood and intensifies as girls reach adolescence, meaning girls sacrifice important opportunities to learn, develop or simply enjoy their childhood. This unequal distribution of labour among children perpetuates gender stereotypes and the double burden on women and girls across generations (UNICEF, 2016). Practitioners also spoke about the unequal opportunities to education because of societal norms, which they expressed were more pressing in a post-pandemic world.

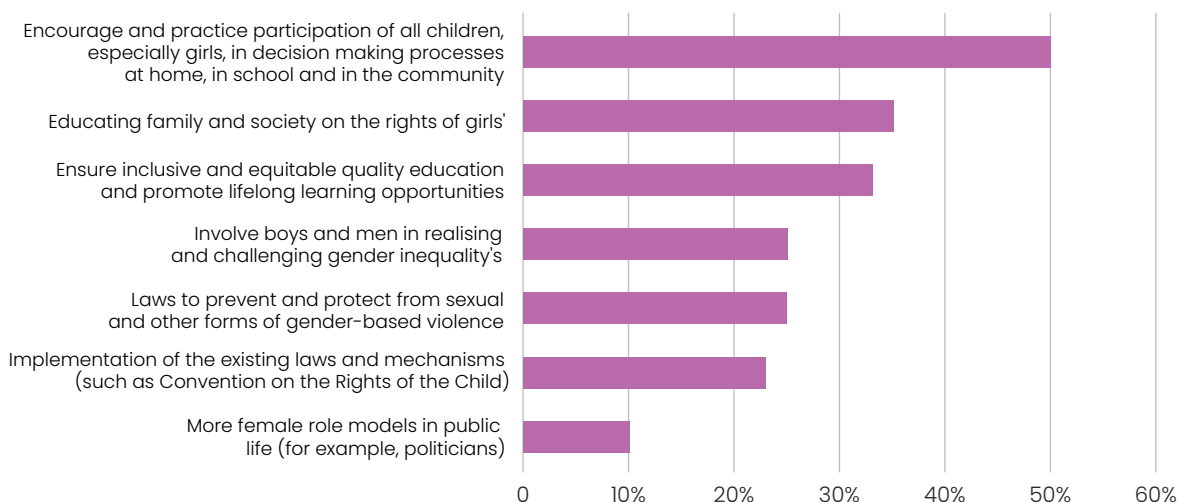
Another point raised was that from the earliest age boys are prepared for their future role as “provider and protector”, and girls as “mothers and caregivers”. Learning these rules and expectations in terms of behaviours and roles was viewed as limiting for all children but was seen as specifically limiting for girls. This illustrates that the patriarchal values and social norms that perpetuate gender inequalities continue to flourish in the Asia Pacific region. A concern voiced by a practitioner from India was about generational disadvantage, commenting that “mothers are unaware they hold rights and therefore cannot teach their daughters.”

When asked to select the two options from a pre-determined list that would most increase girls’ ability to actively achieve their human rights, survey respondents chose “encourage and practice participation of all children, especially girls, in decision making processes at home, in school and in the community” and “educating family and society on the rights of girls”. This illustrates that it is not just that girls need opportunities to exercise voice and agency within their families and communities; there is also the urgent and daunting collective task of ensuring that governments and civil society partners translate these voices into adequate support and resourcing (Jones, 2019). It is also dependent on states recognizing all children – regardless of their legal status (e.g., migrants, stateless children, refugees and asylum seekers). A practitioner from Malaysia noted that many girls “have learnt about empowerment and are able to speak up for themselves, but they don’t have any platform to speak from.”

¹² The phrase “missing women” refers here to “those whose numbers are reflected in sex ratio imbalances at birth as a result of gender-biased (prenatal) sex selection, combined with excess female mortality stemming from postnatal sex selection.”

Figure 7: Options for increasing girls' ability to actively achieve their human rights

Which two options would increase girls' ability to actively achieve their human rights?



While protecting girls from violence is central to Good Shepherd's work, the survey responses and FGDs illustrate that to truly overcome gender inequality we must include boys and men. Good Shepherd is committed to working with people of all genders to discourage norms and behaviours that perpetuate violence and encourage healthy relationships between men and women from a young age.

Even before the pandemic, the Asia Pacific region was not on track to meet any of the SDGs by 2030. The challenges of 2020 will have profound bearings on the SDG 2030 ambitions ([UNESCAP, 2021](#)). The impacts of COVID-19 have not been gender neutral, and the impacts on girls are likely to have long-term negative consequences ([UN Women 2020](#)). The responses highlight that there is much work to be done to ensure laws, policies, programmes and services benefit girls. To ensure the vision of the SDGs become a reality for girls, more focus must be placed on gender equity in the region.

Good Shepherd recognises the right of girls to participate in policy development, programme implementation and evaluation.



5. Good Shepherd as an agent of change

From an early age, girls internalise gendered stereotypes which both shape and limit their ideas, ambitions and self-confidence. At the heart of what Good Shepherd does is the urgent need to challenge and transform social and gender norms that hold girls back from achieving their rights.

Good Shepherd recognises the rights of girls to participate in policy development, programme implementation and evaluation. While Good Shepherd has a long history of centering on the girl child, there are still tensions between protecting the best interests of a girl child and empowering that girl child to determine her own destiny. Service providers, and the adult communities they work with, often assume they know what girls need – yet seeing change through girls' eyes can reveal something quite different ([Harper, 2015](#)).

As a general principle, and in line with the CRC, governments and service providers must support the leadership and participation of girls from all backgrounds to enable them to engage in advocacy and decision-making on legal and human rights issues. Good Shepherd practitioners spoke about the need for capacity-building of girls but also the importance of providing platforms for the girl child.

The data demonstrates that promoting equal opportunities for girls to access quality education and skills training is still crucially needed in the Asia Pacific region. Additionally, there needs to be more recognition of the linkages between girlhood and womanhood,

including the proven relationship between maternal, infant and child mortality rates or low birth weights and the nutrition and health of adolescent girls, between gender socialisation in childhood and multiple and low-status roles in womanhood, between the greater employment of women and increased domestic labour of girls and between women's empowerment and the self-esteem of daughters.

Additionally, practitioners spoke to the importance of recognising and dealing with stigma, stereotypes and discriminatory societal norms to effectively prevent human rights violations against girls from happening in the first place. The lack of political will to address patriarchal attitudes related to daughter devaluation and the slow progress in implementing gender equality laws has meant that girls and women in the region continue to face barriers accessing their rights. Good Shepherd calls for further work to ensure international agreements, including the SDGs, CRC and CEDAW, which governments have endorsed or committed to, are in alignment with governments' domestic laws and guarantee the way forward for realizing commitments to girls' rights.

While this research has helped understand how Good Shepherd practitioners view and understand how girls access – or do not access – their rights, the next step is for Good Shepherd to listen to girls themselves and reflect on their programming and advocacy.

Recommendations arising from the research include:

Good Shepherd programs across Asia Pacific collaborate as ONE voice to promote regional initiatives led “by girls, with girls, for girls” to raise awareness on overarching issues faced by the girl child.

Good Shepherd programs across Asia Pacific include and engage boys and men in realising gender inequality and how they can be part of systemic change.

Conduct a follow-through research providing more platforms to engage girls, their families and immediate communities of care to speak for themselves on issues affecting the girl child and to share their insights and recommendations on intervention approaches. This follow-through research can collect data on the magnitude of all forms of violence against girls and assess the effects of prevention and response strategies in the Asia Pacific Region.

Replication of the research to other regions where OLCGS is present (e.g., Latin America and Reseau Iles, Moyen Orient, Afrique [RIMOA]) where Good Shepherd International Foundation and the units are engaged in programs for the girl child.

Utilisation of this research as a resource for the capacity-development of sisters and partners-in-mission in social services and schools, especially those having direct contact with girls. There is a need to recognise and be familiar with the intersectionality of all the SDGs, the CRC and the CEDAW in advocating for the rights of the girl child. This is important as systemic change can only happen if the changemakers are aware of the influence they have and contribution that they make at all levels of the circle of care surrounding the girl child.

This research shows the many ways that Good Shepherd Asia Pacific fills gaps and seeks to ensure a better life for the girl child within the services, but not all programs adequately address the need for systemic change. Insights from this research could be used to create a mechanism that enable girls to mobilize and advocate for girls alongside practitioners advocating for justice.

At the heart of what Good Shepherd does is the urgent need to challenge and transform social and gender norms that hold girls back from achieving their rights.



Appendix – Methodology

Research questions

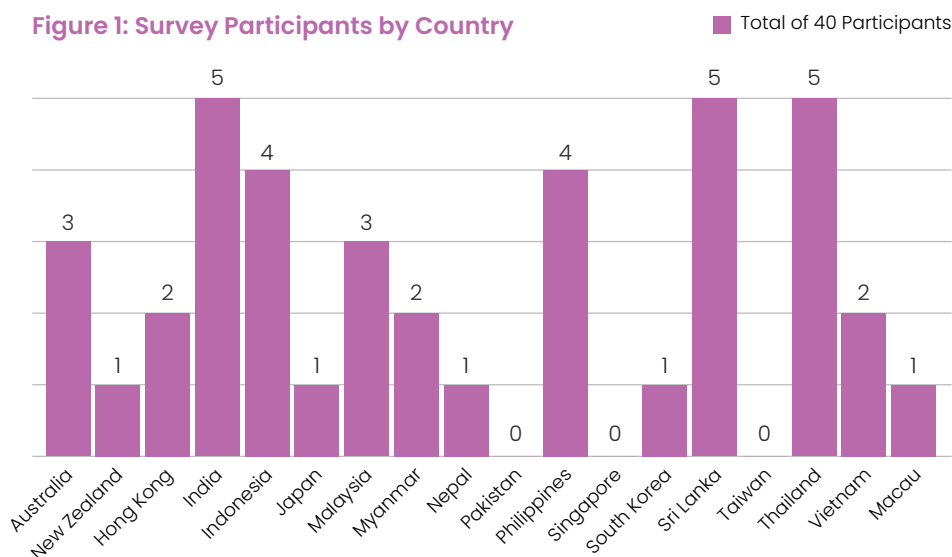
The central consideration of the project was the girl child, defined as young female child aged 18 years and under, who access Good Shepherd services. The study sought to understand the root causes holding these girls back from achieving fullness of life and attainment of human rights. The study responded to the following research questions:

- What is important to girls now and into their future?
- What is holding girls back from achieving the full realisation of their human rights?
- What solutions would improve the situations for girls in achieving greater human rights attainment?

Data collection

The study employed a mixed methodology using both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. To examine the specific problems faced by the girl child who access Good Shepherd services, an online survey was conducted exclusively for practitioners who work with girls (defined as female child under 18 years of age) across the Good Shepherd services in the Asia Pacific region. The online survey was live from 20 January to 9 February 2021 and attracted 40 responses from professionals working in 15 countries.

Figure 1: Survey Participants by Country



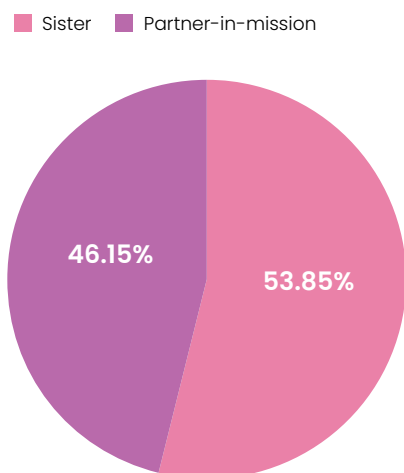
Good Shepherd sisters and partners-in-mission, working together in the Asia Pacific region ensure the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of Good Shepherd mission into the future. The Survey was filled out by both sisters and partners-in-mission.

As surveys are limited when it comes to providing nuanced data, two focus group discussions (FGD) were held on the 9 March 2021.

FGD participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

- practitioners with significant experience on the subject matter.
- practitioners in countries that provide significant programs to girls.
- practitioners that represented the diverse programs Good Shepherd provides across the Asia Pacific region.

Figure 2: Survey Participants



Participants for the interviews were selected from survey respondents. A total of 11 practitioners represented Good Shepherd social services and schools from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Informed consent was sought from all participants. Participants were given information at the start of the questionnaire explaining the project and their role in it and that they could withdraw at any stage from the project before publication. The text guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

Research limitations and challenges

Although the research applied a mixed methodology, it emphasised a qualitative approach. As a result, the survey data was not analysed in great depth and should be interpreted as playing a supporting role within the study. Overall, the quantitative sample was relatively small, and the resultant data should therefore be seen as indicative rather than representative.

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“It is up to you to make it possible that those exhausted and lost in the world should find strength in the shade of this healing tree.”

Saint Mary Euphrasia

**Good Shepherd's
vision is that all
women, girls and
families are safe,
well, strong and
connected.**

