



FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

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Suva, Fiji

**INFORMATION PAPER 4: EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT-
THE COST OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN THE PACIFIC**

Purpose and Recommendations

Purpose

This paper highlights the economic and social costs of Violence Against Children (VAC) in the Pacific, using Fiji and the Solomon Islands, as case studies. It presents recent evidence to demonstrate that VAC is not only a human rights issue but also a major development and economic concern. The paper seeks to inform policymakers and stakeholders of the urgent need to invest in child protection and prevention measures.

Summary

VAC remains widespread and deeply embedded across Pacific societies, manifesting in physical, emotional, sexual, and neglectful abuse. Prevalence rates are extremely high, over 80% in many countries and likely underreported.

The 2024 Fiji study estimates that VAC costs the nation FJD 459.8m (USD 200.0m) annually, or 4.23% of GDP, far exceeding other public health burdens. Costs include both direct expenses (health, legal, child protection services) and indirect losses (productivity, earnings, long-term trauma)¹. While the Solomon Islands study estimated that VAC costs SBD 1,116.1m (USD 133.7m) annually; equivalent to 9.13% of the national GDP².

Globally, VAC costs range between 2–8% of GDP³ with Fiji and the Solomon Islands ranking among the highest. These findings emphasise the urgent need for prevention, early intervention, and system-wide reform.

Key recommendations include strengthening child protection systems, investing in family support services, improving data collection, integrating child protection into national budgeting, and enhancing regional cooperation.

Next Steps

To address this urgent issue, Pacific governments are encouraged to integrate VAC prevention into broader development and fiscal planning, including strengthening child protection

¹ UNICEF Pacific 2024 report on the Economic Costs of Violence Against Children in Fiji

² UNICEF Pacific 2025 draft report on the Economic Costs of Violence Against Children in Solomon Islands

³ UNICEF 2015 report on Estimating the Economic Burden of Violence against Children in East Asia and the Pacific

systems and legal frameworks, scaling up early childhood and family support services, and investing in routine data collection and evidence-based policymaking.

It is important for Pacific governments to mainstream child protection into national budgeting processes and to leverage regional cooperation to share good practices, build capacity, and harmonise standards. These steps will not only uphold the rights and wellbeing of children but will also generate long-term economic and social benefits for Pacific societies.

A. BACKGROUND

1. Children born today are critical actors in realising the vision of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (2050 Strategy) “...for a resilient Pacific region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives”⁴. This vision requires immediate action so that Pacific children reach their full potential.

2. Children are the future of the Blue Pacific Continent. Their environment directly impacts risks for their wellbeing, and resilience, as does the extent to which communities and duty bearers respond. The context in which they grow up and are nurtured continues to change, with many new challenges to navigate such as climate change, labour mobility, and online safety and protection.

3. VAC represents a significant public health, human rights, and development concern, across the Pacific. It encompasses various forms of abuse and neglect, including physical, emotional, sexual, and digital, and causes profound, long-term harm, to children’s development, health, education, and overall wellbeing. For many countries, VAC imposes substantial national costs by straining public services, reducing workforce productivity, and reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. These impacts are particularly pronounced in the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific, where limited economic and institutional capacity heightens vulnerability.

4. Despite its scale and consequences, VAC remains under prioritised in policy and planning, often because of the limited availability of measurable data. Encouragingly, recent research, including economic cost analyses conducted in Fiji, has begun to provide compelling evidence to inform policy action and investment.

B. DISCUSSION

Pacific Context

5. VAC is a deeply rooted issue and manifests in multiple, often overlapping forms. Physical violence, such as corporal punishment, and emotional abuse, including shaming, rejection, and harsh verbal punishment, have damaging impacts on children’s development and wellbeing. Sexual violence, including incest and abuse by trusted adults, remains heavily stigmatised and underreported. Neglect, a less visible but equally damaging form of violence, usually stems from poverty, family breakdown, and overstretched social and child protection systems.

⁴ PIF Leaders vision for the Blue Pacific Continent as stated in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

6. High rates of violent child discipline (1-14 years) continues to be a challenge in the region, requiring urgent action to address the problem.

• Fiji = 81% ⁵	• Samoa = 91% ⁶
• Kiribati = 92 ⁷	• Solomon Islands = 86% ⁸
• Marshall Islands = 64% ⁹	• Tonga = 87% ¹⁰
• Nauru = 81% ¹¹	• Tuvalu = 80% ¹²
• Vanuatu = 89% ¹³	

7. These figures, while alarming, still understate the true extent of VAC, due to stigma and limited reporting pathways. Moreover, children with disabilities, girls, and those living in remote outer islands or hard-to-reach communities, are particularly vulnerable due to compounded social exclusion and limited access to support services.

8. In the Pacific, the pervasiveness of VAC presents a direct challenge to traditional structures of care and protection. Addressing this issue requires culturally grounded, community-led approaches, that respect local values while promoting the rights and safety of all children.

Fiji Case Study

9. The VAC in Fiji carries an immense and largely hidden economic burden. According to a 2024 study by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the Fijian Ministry of Women, Children, and Social Protection, the total annual cost of VAC in Fiji is estimated at FJD 459.8m (USD 200.0m) or approximately 4.23% of the country’s GDP¹.

10. These figures represent a significant drag on national development and far exceeds the costs typically associated with other public health issues. The magnitude of the economic burden signals that VAC is not just a social or moral issue, it is a major development and economic concern that affects the entire nation.

11. The cost estimation includes both direct and indirect impacts. Direct costs are those associated with service delivery, such as medical treatment for physical and mental health consequences, and non-medical costs like child protection services, transportation, and shelter services.

12. However, it is the indirect costs that constitute the bulk of the economic impact. These include tangible costs, such as reduced future earnings due to lost educational opportunities and lower productivity and intangible costs, which reflect the long-term psychological and emotional damage inflicted on survivors. These intangible costs often manifest in depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and chronic health problems that continue into adulthood.

⁵ Fiji Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2021

⁶ Samoa Demographic and Health – MICS 2019-20

⁷ Kiribati Social Development Indicator Survey 2018-19

⁸ Solomon Islands Demographic Health Survey (DHS) 2015

⁹ Republic of Marshall Islands Integrated Child Health and Nutrition Survey 2017 Report

¹⁰ Tonga MICS 2019

¹¹ Nauru MICS 2023

¹² Tuvalu MICS 2019-2020

¹³ Vanuatu MICS 2023

13. Furthermore, the costs borne by Fiji’s institutions are also substantial. In 2023, the Fiji Police Force spent an estimated FJD 9.98m (USD 4.4m), on responding to VAC-related cases. Similarly, judicial costs related to VAC were valued at FJD 2.93m (USD 1.3m)¹, covering legal aid, prosecution, and court operations. These expenditures divert resources from other essential services, demonstrating the far-reaching institutional consequences of inaction.

Solomon Islands Case Study

14. The total economic cost of VAC in the Solomon Islands is estimated to be SBD1,116.1m (USD 133.7m), equivalent to 9.13% of the national GDP². This figure includes direct medical costs, direct non-medical costs, indirect tangible costs, and indirect intangible costs¹⁴.

15. These figures underscore the severe and far-reaching economic consequences of VAC - a burden which is not inevitable. Targeted investments in evidence-based interventions, to prevent and respond to VAC, have the potential to significantly reduce its prevalence and associated costs. This presents a compelling economic and social case for scaling up child protection efforts in the Solomon Islands.

16. This highlights that the high prevalence of VAC in Solomon Islands (where more than four in five children experience some form of violent discipline annually) is closely linked to the substantial economic burdens borne by the country each year.

17. This high rate of prevalence, coupled with the associated economic burden, provides a critical foundation for advocacy efforts aimed at prioritising policy interventions to address VAC in the Solomon Islands. It also offers a strong empirical evidence base to support increased investment in prevention and response measures.

Comparative Economic Costs of VAC

18. Across the Pacific region, the economic burden of VAC is increasingly being recognised as a major development and fiscal issue. Although data remains limited in many countries, available studies in the Pacific and globally show that the costs are significant, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of national GDP.

Table 1 – VAC cost as percent of GDP¹⁵

Country	VAC Cost as % GDP
Fiji ¹	4.23%
Globally – Lower Estimate ¹⁶	2-5%
Globally – Higher Estimate ¹⁶	3-8%
Nigeria	2.72-5.72%
Vanuatu	0.5-0.75%
Turkey	1-7%
Australia	2%
Solomon Islands ²	9.1%
South Africa	5%
Canada	1.7%

¹⁴ While the economic cost of VAC as a percentage of GDP is significantly higher in Solomon Islands (9.1%) compared to Fiji (4.2%), the total monetized cost is greater in Fiji, amounting to approximately USD 200.0m, compared to USD 133.7m in Solomon Islands

¹⁵ Data in this table is extracted from the UNICEF Pacific 2024 report on the Economic Costs of Violence Against Children in Fiji (Table 25: Summary results of national economic cost of VAC studies, pg. 36; unless otherwise stated)

¹⁶ Reference made to the ChildFund Alliance 2014 report on The costs and economic impact of violence against children

USA	1%
Germany	0.45-1.2%
Cambodia	1.1%
China	0.84%
East Asia and the Pacific ¹⁷	2%

19. These figures are broadly consistent with trends in other developing contexts. Global comparisons reveal that developing countries often bear the highest proportional costs of VAC, reflecting both high prevalence rates and limited capacity for prevention and response.

20. UNICEF research estimates that child maltreatment costs East Asia and the Pacific around USD 209.0b annually or 2% of the region's GDP¹⁷. This includes losses from emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, and child deaths. The high cost highlights the severe economic impact of VAC. In comparison, Fiji alone loses up to 4.23% of its GDP to child maltreatment¹. These figures underscore the urgent need for Pacific countries to invest in research valuing the cost of VAC, and to invest in child protection to avoid long-term social and economic losses.

21. In another report by the Child Fund Alliance, it was found that in some low- and middle-income countries, the total cost of VAC could reach up to 8% of GDP¹⁶, particularly when intangible and intergenerational costs are included.

22. Fiji's estimated cost of 4.23% of GDP¹ stands out, not only exceeding the Asia-Pacific regional average, but also aligning with the upper end of global estimates. This suggests that VAC imposes a disproportionately high burden in the Pacific where economies are smaller, service delivery infrastructure is limited, and the social and economic impacts of violence can be especially far-reaching. The difference between Pacific country estimates like Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, may be due to more detailed methods used in these national studies.

23. While VAC is a global issue, the Pacific context reveals a uniquely high economic burden relative to national capacity. These findings reinforce the urgency for strengthened investment in child protection systems, prevention programmes, and cross-sectoral collaboration, both to uphold children's rights, and to reduce long-term economic losses. The growing body of economic evidence from the Pacific should serve as a catalyst for political will and resource mobilisation, not only within individual countries, but also across regional platforms such as those mandated by the Pacific Islands Forum.

Broader Impacts and Implications

24. The economic toll of VAC extends beyond immediate financial costs. The effects ripple across sectors and generations, thus requiring a multisectoral approach. Children exposed to violence are more likely to struggle in school, disengage from education early, and suffer long-term health complications. These outcomes translate into reduced human capital and undermine the future productivity and resilience of the Pacific workforce. This is especially concerning in countries where young people constitute a significant share of the population- this loss of potential has serious implications for sustainable development.

25. At a community level, VAC contributes to cycles of violence, poverty, and social exclusion. Communities with high rates of child maltreatment often experience weakened

¹⁷ Reference made to the UNICEF Pacific 2015 report on Estimating the Economic Burden of Violence against Children in East Asia and the Pacific

social cohesion, higher crime rates, and lower trust in institutions. In the Pacific context, where extended families, communal values, and traditional authority structures are central to social life, such erosion of trust can fracture the very fabric of society. Left unaddressed, VAC becomes a structural barrier to achieving national development priorities, and regional and global commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2050 Strategy.

26. From a fiscal perspective, the high cost of responding to violence, compared with the relatively modest investment required to prevent it, makes a strong case for policy shifts toward prevention. Evidence from the study supports the value of early childhood interventions, parenting support, community awareness programmes, and cross-sectoral coordination in reducing both the incidence and long-term costs. Investing in the prevention of VAC is not only a moral imperative, it is an economically sound strategy that yields returns through healthier, more educated, and more productive future generations.

C. NEXT STEPS

27. Given the significant economic and social costs of VAC in the Pacific, there is an urgent need for coordinated, multisectoral action to prevent violence, protect children, and reduce the long-term development burden. Pacific governments are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive, evidence-informed approach, that is grounded in both human rights and economic rationale.

i. Strengthen Child Protection Systems and Legal Frameworks

28. It is important for Pacific countries to accelerate the implementation and enforcement of national child protection laws, policies, and standards. This includes harmonising legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and ensuring the criminalisation of all forms of violence, including corporal punishment, online exploitation, and neglect. Dedicated child protection systems with sufficient human, financial, and institutional resources, should be integrated across social welfare, health, education, and justice sectors, particularly in rural and outer island communities.

ii. Invest in Early Prevention and Family Support Services

29. Prevention must be the cornerstone of the response to VAC. Evidence shows that early investment in parenting programs, across the life cycle, including early childhood development (ECD) services, and mental health support, can reduce risk factors associated with violence. Scaling up culturally relevant and community-based parenting support initiatives, including positive discipline training and home visits, can help reduce reliance on harmful practices while promoting healthy child development. These investments also offer high economic returns by preventing future costs associated with healthcare, lost productivity, and justice responses.

iii. Improve Data Collection and Evidence-Based Planning

30. A major barrier to addressing VAC in the Pacific is the lack of reliable and disaggregated data. It is important for the region to invest in routine data collection mechanisms including national VAC prevalence studies, administrative/ national budget data systems, and child-sensitive indicators, within household surveys. Improved data will enable policymakers to better understand the scale and drivers of violence, assess the cost-effectiveness of interventions, and inform budgeting and planning processes.

iv. *Mainstream Child Protection in National Development and Budgeting Processes*

31. Addressing VAC should not be treated as a standalone issue, but rather it should be mainstreamed into national development strategies, poverty reduction plans, and fiscal policy frameworks. Ministries of Finance play a critical role in prioritising child protection through gender- and child-responsive budgeting. Highlighting the cost of inaction, such as the estimated GDP/ economic growth lost annually, can help shift VAC from a social sector issue to a national economic priority.

32. Further, investment in capacity building of government staff and knowledge sharing in relation to costing and budgeting for VAC prevention and response, are highly recommended.

v. *Promote Regional Cooperation and Knowledge Sharing*

33. Pacific countries face common challenges that compound risks for children, including geographic isolation, resource constraints, and climate vulnerability. Regional development partners including CROP and UN agencies, and governing mechanisms such as the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD), offer opportunities for shared learning, coordinated investment, and the harmonisation of standards. Cross-country collaboration on research, technical assistance, and capacity-building, can amplify impact while ensuring culturally appropriate approaches.

34. By acting decisively to prevent and respond to VAC, Pacific governments and their key development partners, can protect the rights and wellbeing of their youngest citizens and future leaders, and generate significant economic and social returns. The evidence is clear: investing in child development, wellbeing, and protection, is not only the right thing to do, it is also the smart thing to do for the region's future.

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