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### **Lost in the system: A life course analysis of violence against children and gaps in Sri Lanka's protection systems**

Coswatte P\*

*National Child Protection Authority, Sri Lanka*

*[\\*polonnaruwa.dpso.ncpa@gmail.com](mailto:*polonnaruwa.dpso.ncpa@gmail.com)*

**Background:** Violence against children, including physical, emotional, and sexual harm, remains a critical issue in Sri Lanka, exacerbated by systemic failures in child protection mechanisms. Inadequate coordination among institutions and weak support mechanisms render children susceptible. The study traces the life course of Victim "D" from childhood to age 33 to examine how systemic gaps facilitate ongoing abuse and exploitation.

**Method:** Adopting a qualitative case study with a life course orientation, this study explores legal records, historical case files, and interviews to map Victim "D"'s journey through the child protection system. Thematic analysis is used to identify patterns of recurring neglect, re-victimization, and institutional failure.

**Results:** Results show that repeated institutional failure, characterized by ineffective legal interventions, poor inter-agency coordination, and absence of psychosocial service enabled ongoing violence against Victim "D." Absence of long-term follow-up interventions and a lack of family and community involvement further exacerbated her exploitation, while social stigma contributed to the challenges.

**Conclusions:** This study emphasizes the urgent need for a unified, survivor-driven child protection response in Sri Lanka. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing institutional coordination, and ensuring long-term psychosocial care are imperative to closing systemic gaps and preventing future abuse. Stronger inter-agency coordination and targeted community support are vital to mitigate risks and combat the broader social stigma faced by survivors.

**Keywords:** Violence against children, life course analysis, child protection, victimization.