

## **2026 Global Out of the Shadows Index**

**Still in the shadows: an assessment of  
national action to address sexual violence  
against children and adolescents**

**May 2026**



Researched and developed by



**Together  
for girls**

**ECONOMIST  
IMPACT**

# Introduction

Every child deserves a childhood free from harm. Yet, sexual violence against children (SVAC) remains an urgent threat to children's safety globally. One in five girls and women and around one in seven boys and men alive today—more than 1bn people in total—have experienced sexual violence before the age of 18.<sup>1,2</sup> The consequences of this violence are profound, affecting survivors' health, wellbeing and opportunities long into adulthood.<sup>3</sup> The impacts can also reverberate across society—overburdening systems, undermining development outcomes and stunting economic growth.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its scale, SVAC is preventable. Evidence shows that strong policy frameworks, well-functioning institutions, cross-sector coordination and survivor-centred, trauma-informed support can reduce risk, support survivors' healing and strengthen accountability for perpetrators.<sup>5,6</sup> Addressing this global epidemic requires sustained political, financial and institutional commitment from governments, alongside collaboration with academic institutions, industry, civil society and survivors.

## What is sexual violence against children (SVAC)?

SVAC encompasses any act of a sexual nature against a person under 18 years of age, including physical, verbal, non-verbal and technology-facilitated conduct. It includes both contact and non-contact sexual acts whether attempted or completed, such as rape and sexual assault, exploitation, harassment and sexualised exposure or communication.\* The term recognises the broad spectrum of sexual violence that children may experience, including violence perpetrated by both adults and peers, † including where a child lacks the capacity to give informed consent or where there is an imbalance of power due to age, development, responsibility or authority.<sup>9,10,11</sup>

However, even while the evidence of what works has grown, gaps in countries' efforts to tackle this crisis remain unaddressed. Many governments lack clear data on the scale of the problem, and visibility of national efforts has historically been limited. Without this understanding, it is difficult to gauge what progress has been made and where systems are falling short.

The Out of the Shadows Index is the first global benchmark to assess how governments are taking action to address SVAC. The 2026 Index is

researched and developed by Economist Impact, with advocacy and engagement efforts led by Together for Girls.\*\* It ranks 60 countries in six regions representing 83% of the world's children, assessing national progress across a core set of foundational laws, policies, programmes and services (see Figure 1). The Index aims to shine a light on what's working and where progress is still needed, offering a roadmap to guide action and drive accountability so more children can live free from violence.





\* The exploitative nature of the behaviour is what distinguishes sexual abuse from sexual exploitation of children. The UN has defined sexual exploitation, although not only related to children, as: "Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another".

† Up to half of survivors report that the perpetrator of the violence was a peer or another child at the time.

\*\* The Index is now in its third iteration, following editions published in 2019 and 2022. The 2026 Index is based on an updated methodology and Index framework. Please refer to the methodology report for more information.

**Figure 1: 2026 Out of the Shadows Index Framework**

Index domains and descriptions

Index domains		Descriptions
	Governance and accountability	Assesses whether governments have the leadership, plans and evidence base needed to prevent and respond to SVAC—alongside efforts to engage survivors, children and adolescents in shaping more inclusive and responsive systems
	Prevention	Assesses a range of key measures to reduce the risk of SVAC before it occurs and respond quickly to suspected abuse, covering: national education systems; parenting and caregiver support; safeguarding systems; and accessible helplines
	Healing	Assesses whether survivors can access timely, free and multi-disciplinary recovery services and support, spanning: crisis care and follow-up services; national guidance for response professionals; and other practical enablers of recovery such as legal aid and pathways to compensation
	Justice	Assesses the strength of legal protections and justice-system capacity to respond to SVAC, including: comprehensive criminalisation of offline and online offences; specialised law enforcement capability; and safeguards for children in criminal justice proceedings

## How we built it

The Index draws on an in-depth literature review to identify the core components of an effective national response to address SVAC and to align with established child protection frameworks and evidence-based standards.<sup>12</sup> The Index framework includes 23 indicators across four domains, representing a set of key measures in which governments should invest. Indicator selection was conducted with input from a multisector Advisory Group of 17 experts and academics, civil society representatives, youth advocates and survivor leaders from diverse regions and areas of expertise around SVAC.

The assessment is based on data collected by Economist Impact through desk-based research, which was systematically reviewed and calibrated for accuracy and consistency across countries. To validate the research, multiple stakeholders—including governments, Together for Girls and Advisory Group members—were given the opportunity to review and provide input on the draft findings. Other data were also incorporated from organisations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), ECPAT International and the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (ICMEC).

For more information about the development of the Index, country selection and the research process, please refer to the Out of the Shadows Index Methodology Report.

The index was constructed and researched by an Economist Impact project team including: Katherine Stewart, project director; Elly Vaughan, project director; Laura Avery, project manager; and Miranda Baxa, lead analyst and consultant.

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# Key findings

The 2026 Out of the Shadows Index reveals **insufficient global action to prevent and respond to SVAC**. Across 60 countries, the average national score is only 52.6 out of 100, roughly around the midpoint and well short of what is needed. No country demonstrates a fully comprehensive

approach, with the widest gaps appearing in governance and prevention. The findings show that while some important legal and policy foundations are in place, far more coordinated, transparent and sustained action is needed to protect children in every country around the world.

## Global action to prevent and respond to sexual violence against children is **uneven and insufficient**

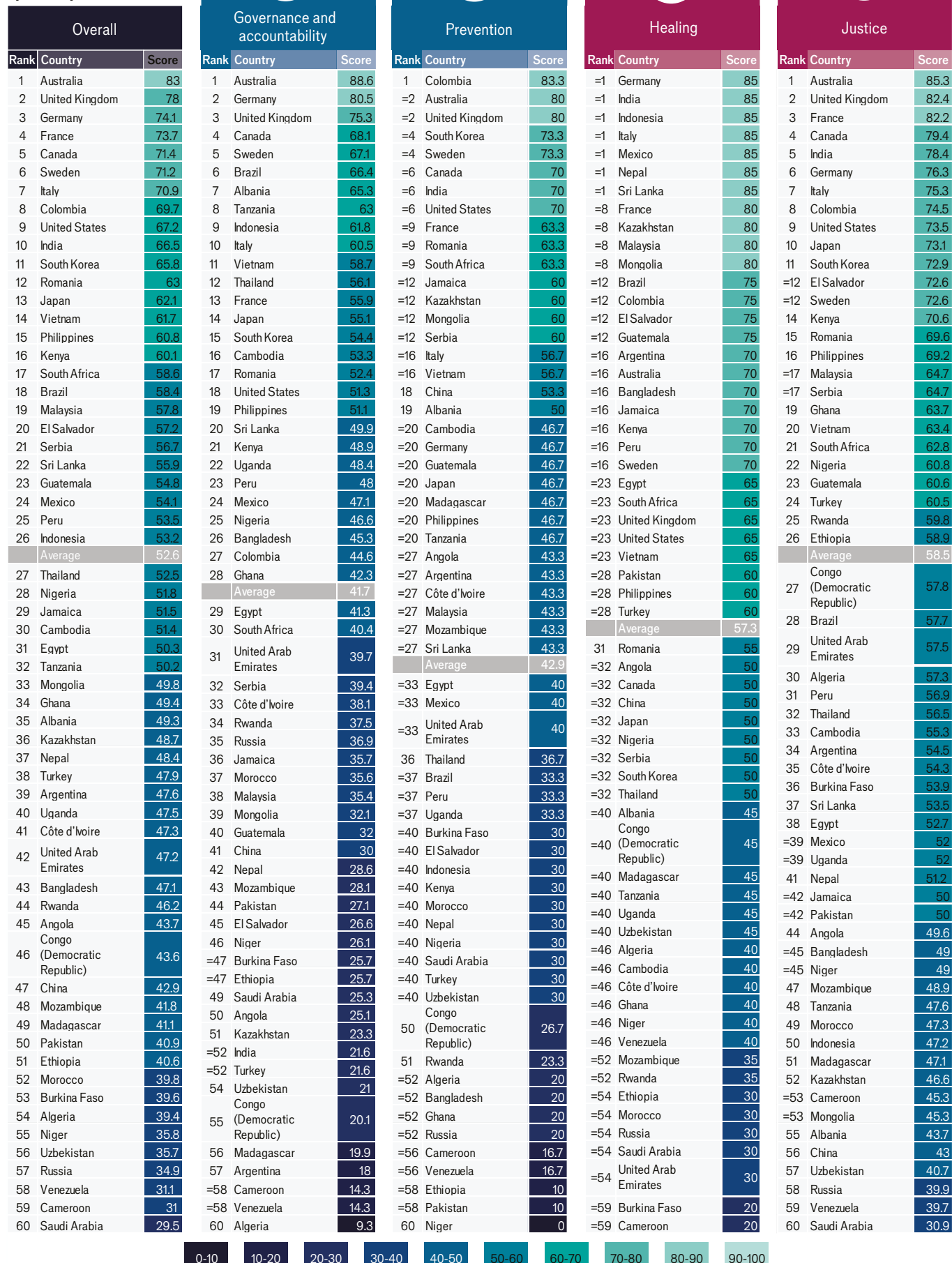
### **Progress to protect children from sexual violence remains uneven across countries.**

The Index reveals a concerning global picture of countries' investment in, and commitment to, addressing SVAC. A gap of more than 50 points separates the top performing country, Australia (83), from the lowest, Saudi Arabia (29.5), underscoring wide disparities in national efforts. Meanwhile, just seven countries—Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Canada, Sweden and Italy—achieve an overall score of 70 or above, still falling short of what is needed (Figure 2).

### **No country is taking a fully comprehensive approach to tackling SVAC.**

The Index reveals that progress is not only uneven between countries, but also within them. Across the four Index domains—governance and accountability, prevention, response and justice—many countries show progress in one or two areas, but lag significantly in others (Figure 2). On average, there is a gap of more than 32 points between a country's highest- and lowest-scoring domains. For seven countries—Argentina, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nepal and Pakistan—this gap is 50 points or more.

**Figure 2:**  
2026 Index rankings  
Overall and domain scores  
by country



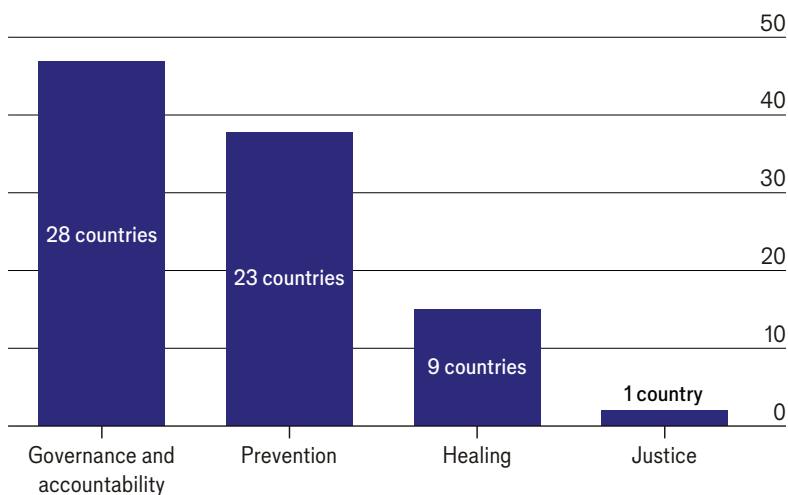
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A comprehensive and holistic approach requires sustained focus across all areas assessed by the Index to ensure investment in the full range of laws, policies, programmes and services needed to address SVAC effectively. Without this, a country may continue to perform well in a few areas while failing to address other critical measures needed to ensure children and survivors experience real benefits in their daily lives.

**Global gaps in governance and prevention drag Index scores down.** Across all countries, the lowest average domain score (41.7) is on governance and accountability; nearly half (47%) of countries rank lowest on this domain. Only three countries—Albania, Australia and Tanzania—rank this as their strongest domain. Countries also score poorly on prevention, with an average of 42.9—making it the second weakest domain, just behind governance and accountability. More than one-third (37%) of countries rank lowest on prevention (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Countries’ weakest areas**

Percentage of countries with lowest domain score



Source: Economist Impact

Governance and accountability form the foundation of an effective response to SVAC. Strong governance enables governments to set clear, evidence-based priorities, allocate resources strategically and use data to guide decision-making and monitor progress. Without these elements, countries risk operating with no clear direction, leading to fragmented and ineffective responses. Survivor participation is also recognised as essential for effective policy design to ensure measures are practical and responsive to survivors' needs. However, just two countries in the Index, Australia and Germany, have established government-supported National Survivor Councils to ensure survivor-led input on related policy and planning measures. This global gap suggests there is a significant opportunity for governance systems around the world to be designed with the leadership and insights of those most affected.

Limited action on prevention may reflect the historical focus on measures that punish and deter perpetrators with less focus on more holistic, all-of-society preventive measures, such as safeguarding systems, early intervention and awareness and education initiatives.<sup>13</sup> Prevention efforts are often complex and resource-intensive as they require

countries to embed protections within a wide range of institutions that children encounter every day, including—but not limited to—education, healthcare, labour and social services, as well as coordination between these sectors. However, research shows that preventive measures not only work to stop abuse before it occurs, but also offer a cost-effective solution: some estimates project the total global economic impacts and costs related to child sexual abuse to be as high as US\$7trn.<sup>14,15</sup>

#### **Wealth alone does not determine Index scores.**

While the majority of high-income Index countries rank in the top 20, the highest-performing group is not made up exclusively of the world's richest countries. For example, Colombia, an upper-middle-income country, stands out as a particularly strong performer overall (eighth). Several lower-middle-income countries also perform well, including India in tenth place, Vietnam in 14th, the Philippines in 15th and Kenya in 16th. Furthermore, three high-income countries fall below the Index average. This suggests that income level alone does not explain performance, and all governments can make meaningful progress if child protection is treated as a policy priority.

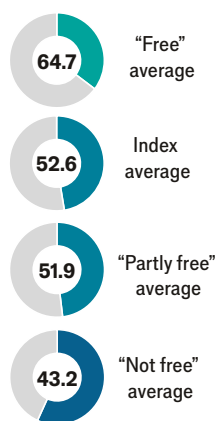
**Limited action on prevention may reveal a focus on measures that punish and deter perpetrators with less focus on more holistic, all-of-society preventive measures**

## The protection of **political rights and civil liberties**, and commitment to **international conventions** each contribute to higher Index scores.

In fact, a country’s protection of political rights and civil liberties appears to be an even stronger predictor of Index performance than income. Countries designated as “Free” by the Freedom in

**Figure 4:**  
**"Free" countries have better Index performance**  
 Average Index scores by level of political rights and civil liberties

Source: Economist Impact; Freedom House



the World report<sup>16</sup> score significantly better than countries with a status of “Partly Free” or “Not Free” (Figure 4). Countries with stronger protections for individual and minority rights,<sup>\*</sup> tend to demonstrate stronger efforts to prevent and address SVAC.<sup>18,19,†</sup> This indicates that a broader link may exist between general rights protections and child protection efforts.

**International commitments translate to local action.** International treaties and conventions set shared legal standards and obligations to guide national laws and policies. The Index assesses ratification of eight key instruments that establish internationally recognised benchmarks for children’s rights and protection from violence. Countries that have ratified more than half (ie, five or more) of the eight major conventions<sup>24</sup> score significantly higher on the Index than those that have ratified fewer than half, with an average score of 56.4 and 47.7, respectively. This trend indicates both the importance of international commitments in protecting children from sexual violence and the role they can play in driving accountability at the national level.

**Core offences are widely criminalised, but critical gaps in protection remain.** Overall, countries score the highest on the justice domain, which assesses legal protections and justice-system capacity to respond to SVAC. The widespread adoption of core criminal laws on SVAC is one of the clearest factors driving these high scores. For example, all countries in the Index criminalise contact sexual violence,<sup>\*</sup> non-contact sexual violence,<sup>†</sup> sexual abuse material (CSAM), and the trafficking of children for purposes of sexual exploitation.<sup>21,22</sup>

\* As measured by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Liberal Democracy Index, which assesses: “To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved? The liberal principle of democracy emphasises the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a ‘negative’ view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the Index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.”

† R value = 0.78, R2 = 0.62

## In many cases **legal frameworks continue to fall short** of being comprehensive, child-centred and reflecting the full range of coercive circumstances in which violence often occurs

This trend represents important progress in acceptance of SVAC as a serious crime—not a private or family matter—that demands legal protection for children. Yet, in many cases, these frameworks continue to fall short of being fully comprehensive, child-centred and reflecting the full range of coercive circumstances in which violence often occurs. For example, they may only cover

girls, apply to certain perpetrators (eg, teachers and parents but not school employees, childcare workers or foster parents) or only protect children below a certain age (rather than everyone up to the age of 18). Such limitations can leave some children unprotected or allow room for perpetrators to evade justice (Figure 5).

### Figure 5: Legal gaps in protecting children from sexual violence

#### Age of consent

Most countries in the Index (59 of 60) have established a minimum age of sexual consent, or the age below which any sexual activity with a child is considered illegal as they do not have the ability to consent (ie, they are too young to agree or refuse). However, in some countries this age remains either very low (eg, 12 or 13) or only applies to girls. In other cases, the design of these provisions is not fully child-centred or developmentally appropriate, such as where they fail to distinguish between exploitative relationships and consensual activity between underage adolescents (eg, 16- and 17-year-olds).\*

#### Sexual abuse by family members or persons in positions of authority

Many Index countries explicitly criminalise or set aggravated penalties in cases where SVAC is perpetrated by a family member, guardian or other person in a position of trust or authority in relation to the child. Yet the scope of these provisions often remains limited, such as only covering certain categories of perpetrators or children below a certain age. This represents a significant gap as research suggests up to 90% of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts or by a family member, and can affect children and adolescents of any age.<sup>21</sup>

#### Online grooming

While 38 countries in the Index criminalise the online grooming of a child, these laws often fall short at capturing the key dynamics of grooming relationships. For example, in 12 of these countries, this conduct is only criminalised if there was intent to meet the child or if an in-person meeting actually occurs (ie, not regardless of the intent to meet the child offline). Meanwhile, the laws in just six countries explicitly define or describe grooming in a way that includes a pattern of conduct aimed at building trust or an emotional connection with a child for the purpose of engaging them in sexual activity.

Source: Economist Impact

\* The WHO's 2020 Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children uses the following definition: "Contact sexual violence excluding intercourse is defined as intentional touching, either directly or through the clothing, of the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh or buttocks of any person without his or her consent, or of a person who is unable to consent or refuse."

† The WHO's 2020 Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children uses the following definition: "Non-contact sexual violence does not include physical contact of a sexual nature between the perpetrator and the victim. It includes acts such as: voyeurism; intentional exposure of an individual to exhibitionism; unwanted exposure to pornography; verbal or behavioural sexual harassment; threats of sexual violence to accomplish some other end; and taking nude photographs of a sexual nature of another person without his or her consent or knowledge, or of a person who is unable to consent or refuse."

**Rights on paper, barriers in practice.** In many countries, victims and survivors of childhood sexual violence have a legal entitlement to a range of services and remedies following abuse, such as medical care, legal aid and compensation. For instance, all countries in the Index have legal frameworks that provide a pathway for victims to seek financial compensation, commonly through court-awarded damages in criminal proceedings or through civil claims. Yet, various barriers often prevent meaningful access to these rights in practice. With regard to compensation, for instance, reported obstacles include: complex and lengthy legal processes; limited awareness of available remedies; perpetrators' inability or failure to pay; or short time-frames (ie, statute of limitations) for pressing charges or filing lawsuits.

Closing the gap between formal legal entitlements and their realisation in practice necessitates action to address the structural, procedural and informal barriers that undermine survivors' meaningful access to rights and remedies. This includes steps such as eliminating civil and criminal statutes of limitations for SVAC crimes or establishing victim compensation schemes that may not require a criminal conviction or engagement in court proceedings.

**Shifting towards a more integrated approach for survivor support and healing.** A promising trend is the widespread adoption of more integrated response models for survivors of sexual violence. While this model may appear under different names—including one-stop centres in parts of Africa and Asia and Barnahus (Icelandic for “children’s house”) in many European countries—

they share a common goal of bringing a range of relevant services such as healthcare, psychosocial support, legal services and law enforcement together under one roof.

The Index found that more than 40 countries have invested in this type of approach, although implementation may vary considerably in reach and quality. This reflects a growing global recognition that fragmented responses often fail survivors, and that effective responses depend on coordination across multiple, traditionally siloed, systems.

Research suggests that a more integrated service model not only helps reduce the need for survivors to navigate multiple systems and repeatedly recount experiences of violence, but can also increase coordination of key response professionals and improve investigation outcomes.<sup>16</sup>

Notably, the uptake of the one-stop service model is not confined to one region or income group, underscoring its adaptability across diverse contexts. In fact, the benefits of this model may be especially significant in countries where broader healthcare or child protection systems are more fragmented or difficult to access, helping to bridge systemic gaps and simplify pathways to care.

**A lack of budget transparency is weakening accountability on SVAC.** Even the most well-designed policies and plans are unlikely to translate into action without sustained financial commitments. But accountability also depends on the ability to review and track how resources are allocated.

Yet, the Index found that detailed information about sexual violence-related budgeting is rarely presented in a clear, consistent and accessible

**The growing use of one-stop service models reflects recognition that fragmented systems often fail survivors, while coordinated support can improve their experience and outcomes**

\* Age-of-consent laws should account for situations involving consensual relationships between adolescents who are both under the legal age. General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child during Adolescence provides: “States should avoid criminalising adolescents of similar ages for factually consensual and non-exploitative sexual activity.”

way within core budget documents (see Figure 6). Related allocations are often embedded and dispersed within broader categories, such as child protection, victim and survivor services, education, health, justice or social services, or otherwise scattered across programme documents, plans or funding announcements. Commitments may also only appear in earlier budget cycles or only become visible later through results and spending reports.

This lack of transparency means stakeholders are being left in the dark about public investment levels, the adequacy of resources and whether governments are delivering on their commitments to end SVAC. In the absence of clear budget reporting, commitments risk becoming little more than rhetoric that is shielded from scrutiny.

**Stakeholders are being left in the dark** about levels of public investment, the adequacy of resources and whether governments are delivering on their commitments

**Figure 6: The limits of tracking sexual violence-related funding in national budgets**

<p><b>What we set out to measure</b></p> <p>The Index team initially set out to assess whether national budget documents included specific sexual violence-related line items, such as allocations for medical services for victims and survivors.</p>
<p><b>The data challenge</b></p> <p>In practice, this assessment proved difficult as budget documents were not publicly available in some countries, or often lacked sufficient detail to identify relevant allocations, let alone compare them across countries. As a result, the original indicator was removed over concerns that it would unintentionally measure the visibility of budget information rather than actual government commitment, and was replaced with a more general measure of national budget transparency.*</p>
<p><b>What this reveals</b></p> <p>The inability to assess this issue is itself a critical finding, underscoring that the availability and clarity of budget data are so limited that even a dedicated research team is unable to reliably track and assess it.</p>

Source: Economist Impact

\* The International Budget Partnership's Open Budget Survey transparency score "assesses the public availability and comprehensiveness of the eight key budget documents, which taken together provide a complete view of how public resources have been raised, planned and spent during the budget year".

# Towards a world without sexual violence against children and adolescents

By clearly showing where countries are doing well—and where major gaps remain—the 2026 Out of the Shadows Index aims to increase transparency, guide action and strengthen accountability. Its findings show that while progress is possible, it remains uneven and insufficient. Governments must now turn commitments into coordinated action, with

civil society, survivor advocates and international partners as key technical partners to guide effective reforms. This would result in safer, happier children, stronger families and more resilient societies—an outcome that is not only a moral imperative, but an investment in the wellbeing, stability and prosperity of future generations.

Progress on SVAC is both **achievable and imperative** for the wellbeing, stability and prosperity of future generations

# Appendix: Out of the Shadows

## Index alignment with the Lanzarote Convention

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, known as the Lanzarote Convention, is the first international treaty wholly dedicated to tackling SVAC. It remains the most comprehensive and operational framework in this area, encompassing

full preventive measures, substantive criminal laws, child-friendly justice procedures and international cooperation. It is further supported by a dedicated monitoring mechanism and open to accession by all non-Council of Europe states.<sup>17</sup>

Out of the Shadows Index	Lanzarote Convention
Indicator 1.3.2 assesses whether there are formal mechanisms through which children and adolescents can influence national child protection or violence prevention policies.	Article 9 requires countries to encourage children's participation in developing state policies to prevent SVAC.
Indicator 1.2.1 assesses the existence and comprehensiveness of the country's National Action Plan (NAP) to address SVAC, including assigning specific objectives to relevant ministries or agencies.	Article 10 mandates national coordination between education, health, social services and law enforcement agencies.
Indicator 2.1 asks whether the national curriculum includes life-skills-based sexuality and reproductive health education for lower-secondary students, including content that builds awareness of sexual violence and encourages disclosure and help-seeking.	Article 6 mandates that primary and secondary students receive information on sexuality, the risks of abuse and how to protect themselves.
Indicator 2.2 assesses whether the country has criminal background-check requirements for nationals and non-nationals who work in direct contact with children.	Article 5 requires countries to ensure that candidates for professions with regular child contact have not been convicted of child sexual offences.
Indicator 2.5 assesses the availability of a child helpline.	Article 13 mandates the encouragement and support of telephone or internet helplines to provide advice confidentially or anonymously.
Indicator 3.1 assesses the provision of medical care for SVAC survivors, while 3.2 measures the provision of psychosocial services.	Article 31 stipulates that victims must have access to free legal aid where warranted.
Indicator 3.4 assesses the provision of legal aid for survivors of SVAC.	National Action Plans (NAPs)
Indicator 4.3.4 asks whether countries have criminalised intrafamilial child sexual abuse and 4.3.5 focuses on the criminalisation of abuse by a person in a position of trust or authority.	Article 18 requires criminalisation of sexual activities where an offender abuses a recognised position of trust, authority or influence, including within the family.

Out of the Shadows Index	Lanzarote Convention
Indicator 4.3.6 assesses legislation prohibiting trafficking of children for the purpose of sexual exploitation and 4.3.7 assesses legislation prohibiting selling/forcing into sexual exploitation and the purchase of sexual acts with a child.	Article 19 requires criminalisation of child exploitation and purchasing sexual acts from a child.
Indicator 4.4.1 assesses online grooming legislation.	Article 23 requires criminalisation of online grooming.
Indicator 4.5 assesses active and passive extraterritorial jurisdiction and extradition.	Article 25 establishes jurisdictional rules for child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes.
Indicator 4.6 assesses the elimination of statutes of limitations for statutory rape.	Article 33 requires that the limitation period continue for a sufficient time after the victim reaches the age of majority.
Indicator 4.7.1 assesses whether dedicated, specialised law enforcement units handle cases of SVAC.	Article 34 requires investigative units and personnel to be specialised and adequately funded.
Indicator 4.8 measures whether the criminal justice system uses special procedures, such as child-friendly interviewing and videotaped testimony.	Article 35 mandates the use of trained interviewers, a limited number of interviews and the use of videotaped evidence in court to prevent re-traumatisation.

Sources: Economist Impact; Council of Europe

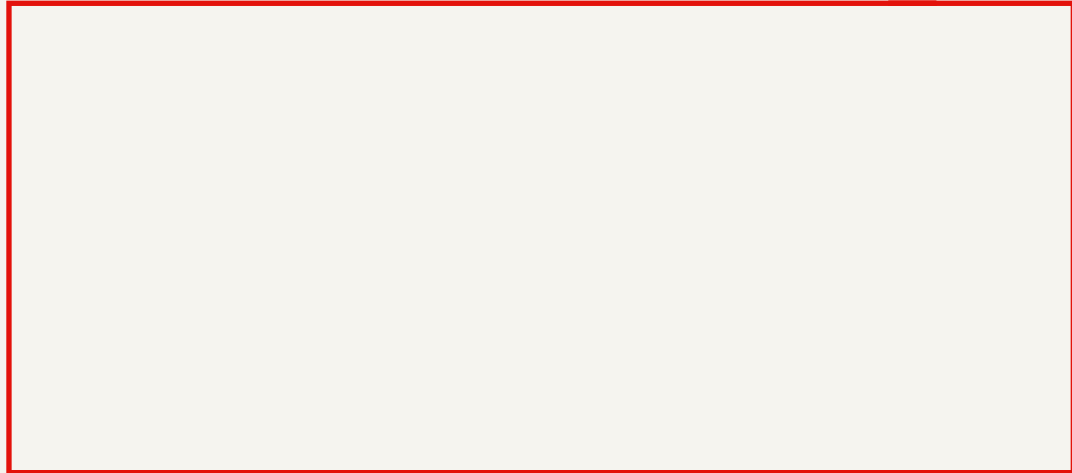
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