

# Child protection

UNICEF Country Programme 2019–2023



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# Situation

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No child should be exposed to violence, abuse and neglect. Yet in Cambodia the situation is dire for many children. One in two children has experienced severe beating, one in four children has suffered emotional abuse, and one in 20 girls and boys has been sexually assaulted. Many children are trafficked, forced to work, including in the worst forms of labour, separated from their families and unnecessarily placed in residential care.

Children are exposed to violence and corporal punishment in their homes, schools, residential care facilities, and communities. Violence cuts deep into children's physical and mental health. In addition to its short-term impacts, such as physical injury and emotional trauma, experiencing violence in childhood can lead to emotional and behavioural problems in adolescence and adulthood.

While numbers have been declining over time, from 28 per cent in 1989 to 19 per cent in 2014, too many girls are still marrying in adolescence, especially among ethnic groups in the north-eastern provinces of Monduliri and Ratanakiri. Rooted in gender roles and social norms, and exacerbated by poverty and limited access to essential health and education services, child marriage deprives girls of choices and participation in society.

Family separation is one of the leading challenges to protecting children. Many children in residential care come from families who cannot afford to feed, clothe or educate them, and from families who are often unaware of the negative consequences of separation. In 2018, a government inspection report found that as many as 68 per cent of children in residential care had at least one living parent. Decades of research show that living in residential care can harm a child's social, physical, intellectual and emotional development.

Insufficient family support and family-based care services are among the main drivers of family separation. Children from broken families are exposed to high levels of violence and exploitation, including trafficking, sexual abuse, online sexual exploitation and forced begging, and are at great risk of joining the many thousands of children living or working on the streets. At the end of 2018, an estimated 1,641 children were in detention. Children who experience criminal acts are extremely vulnerable, and a judicial system that is not adapted to their needs can do them

additional harm. While detention should be used as a last resort and for the shortest period of time, children suspected or accused of having committed an offence are often detained. In detention, they may be exposed to physical and emotional abuse.

There is increased momentum in Cambodia to introduce laws to protect children. The Inter-Country Adoption Law, the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation and its Explanatory Note, the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Law on Domestic Violence, and the Juvenile Justice Law are among major achievements so far.

There have been significant changes in the alternative care system. The government has introduced legislative, data and programmatic reforms to control the rapid and unregulated increase in the number of children living in residential care facilities in Cambodia. For example, the Sub-Decree on the Management of Residential Care Centres was adopted in 2015 to regulate the residential care sector, and a full mapping was done of all residential care facilities across the country. Based on the results of this study, the Action Plan for Improving Child Care was developed and is being implemented.

These efforts have begun to show results. A reintegration programme for children in residential care started in late 2015 and as a result the number of residential care institutions (RCIs) in Cambodia has decreased by 35 per cent, while the number of children reported to be living in RCIs has decreased by about 54 per cent. Cambodia has also introduced a more rigorous digital system to inspect residential care facilities and to monitor children undergoing reintegration.

Despite progress, the country lacks a comprehensive legislative and institutional system for child protection, on which to base a national framework to protect its girls and boys from harm.

Social workers are the backbone of a functioning child protection system, however in Cambodia the majority of social workers have not been formally trained, and there are too few of them. There is an urgent need to expand social work beyond social welfare to include the civil service, health, education and justice sectors, so that cases related to violence, juvenile crime and

institutional care can be handled in the most appropriate and effective manner.

Compounding this situation are critical gaps in information: the country has a wealth of ad hoc child protection data but lacks a comprehensive child protection information management system.

Legal, social and cultural norms, as well as practical constraints, make justice for children a complex challenge in Cambodia. To ensure that girls and boys are progressively free from harm, it is imperative to nurture a culture of child protection. This includes funding and strengthening a comprehensive system that helps prevent children from being harmed, and providing access to appropriate support and care for children who have been harmed.



UNICEF is committed to supporting the successful implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Cambodia. We work with partners to put children at the heart of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and to see that the Goals deliver results for every child and for generations to come. In the descriptions of the following programme areas, relevant Sustainable Development Goals have been identified with icons.

# Fostering a culture of non-violence and family preservation

Communities play a critical role in keeping families together, protecting children from violence and ensuring that they thrive in a safe environment. Parents, teachers and caregivers who learn about positive parenting and positive discipline can promote non-violent behaviour, while well-respected religious leaders who understand the importance of keeping children out of residential care are more likely to support families to raise their children at home.

UNICEF continues to work with the government to support the implementation of the country’s Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children.

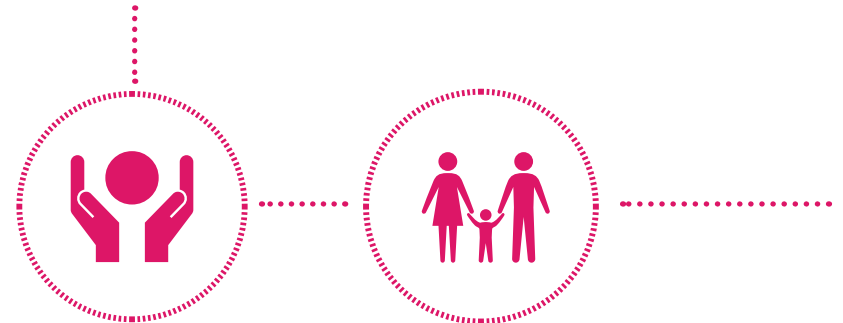
UNICEF works with partners to train teachers and religious leaders so that they have the knowledge and awareness they need to protect children. UNICEF runs campaigns to change people’s behavior and their perceptions of discipline—campaigns that champion positive discipline and challenge existing thinking that perpetuates unnecessary family separation.

scaling up the Positive Discipline, Positive Parenting programme, which promotes non-violent discipline in school and at home, the

child protection pagoda programme and the Cambodia PROTECT behavioural change campaign, which focuses on ending violence and unnecessary family separation. Importantly, we engage young people through digital and community platforms to make their voices heard.

The Child Protection programme works closely also with UNICEF’s Health and Nutrition programmes to roll out the Clinical Handbook on the identification and treatment of children subjected to violence, as well as to collect routine data on the health system response to violence against children.

**The Child Protection Pagoda programme is being implemented to make pagodas safe places for children, to equip monks with the knowledge to prevent and respond to violence against children in communities, and to prevent children from being placed in residential care unnecessarily.**



# Weaving a safety net for vulnerable children

Investing in the child protection workforce is essential to ensure that girls and boys have increased access to protection. UNICEF supports the government to develop the skills of social service workers to provide relevant and much-needed services to protect children. This paves the way for the professionalization and progressive development of child protection services across Cambodia.

Guided by a systematic approach, UNICEF supports the planning, development and support of the social service workforce responsible for protecting children—welfare, justice, health and social protection staff, so they have the knowledge and tools they need to identify vulnerable children and provide gender-inclusive and child-sensitive services. We prioritize urban poor communities and rural poor centres, and focus on children who are exposed to violence, separated from their families or at risk of separation, and children in residential care to be reintegrated to family- or community-based care.

Reliable, significant data is critical to powerful action. Cambodia has a wealth of child protection data, but they are sporadic and ad hoc. To bridge this gap, UNICEF is working with the government to consolidate and put in place a Child Protection Information Management System that will help generate data on violence, exploitation and abuse, and that can be tracked. This will allow for better interventions.

UNICEF supports the government's efforts to develop an effective child protection framework that identifies vulnerable children, refers them to the most appropriate kind of care, and improves access to justice for children who come into contact with the law, for example by providing specialized legal aid and diversion for children, or alternatives to detention that do not deprive children of their freedom. Social service workers in child protection case management play a critical role to ensure that children and their families receive quality protection services in an organized, efficient and effective manner, in line with their assessed needs.

To accelerate and systematize the process of removing children from harmful residential care, which involves identifying them for family reunification or family-based alternative care, UNICEF supports the government with the digitization of inspections of residential care institutions and other facilities, and case management of children in alternative care and in support of their reintegration.

Collaboration continues to reform key policies on alternative care, including kinship care, foster care, and other forms of family- based or family-like care. Plans are in place to enhance family support, foster care, domestic and inter-country adoption for every child, including children with disabilities. This includes capacity building of professionals in alternative care.





# Building a stronger child protection system



A functioning child protection system protects children in a coordinated, harmonized and systematic way, preventing and responding to harm. UNICEF supports the government to strengthen the country's largely underfunded and understaffed child protection system, so that Cambodian girls and boys are progressively protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect.

The absence of a child protection law is one of the main challenges to implementing existing policies and regulatory frameworks. This is a crucial barrier to a coordinated and effective child protection response across the country. UNICEF works closely with the government to strengthen polices, as well as the capacity of stakeholders to develop such a fundamental law.

To address the pressing challenge of child marriage in Cambodia, UNICEF is supporting the government with the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Ratanakiri Action Plan to Prevent Child Marriage. Lessons from this exercise will be documented and used to replicate the action in other provinces, working towards a national strategy to prevent child marriage, so that all adolescent girls can fully enjoy their rights.

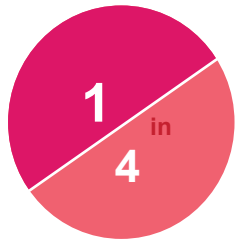
Limited government financing for child protection, including for alternative care and child justice, are compromising efforts to protect children in Cambodia. The Child Protection programme works closely with UNICEF's Policy programme to advocate for adequate investment in child protection. Specifically, UNICEF calls for the inclusion of basic child protection criteria in assessing families for social protection grants to reduce multi-dimensional poverty and prevent unnecessary family separation, violence, abuse and exploitation.

Natural disasters such as flooding, as well as unexploded remnants of war, such as landmines and bombs, put a large number of children at risk. UNICEF's disaster-risk reduction work supports on-going national efforts to improve disaster preparedness and response plans so that children are more resilient in an emergency.





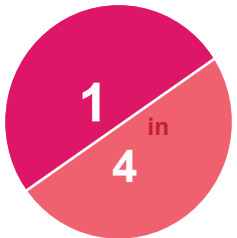
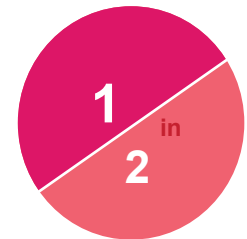
# Cambodia at a glance



1 in 4 victims of mine/explosive remnants of war casualties is a child



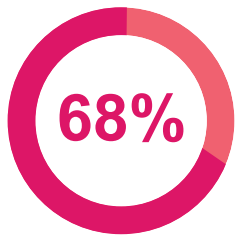
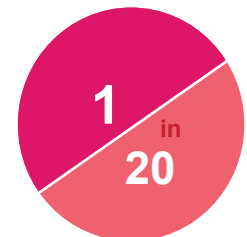
1 in 2 children has experienced **severe beating**



1 in 4 children has suffered **emotional abuse**



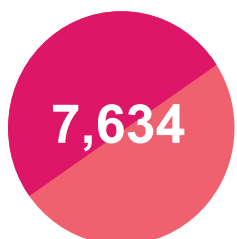
1 in 20 girls and boys has been **sexually assaulted**



68 % of children in residential care institutions have been found to have at least **one living parent (2018)**



An estimated 1,641 children were **in detention** in 2018



7,634 children were reported to be living in **residential care institutions** in 2018







## Partners

Increasingly free from the threat of violence and exploitation, in their homes, schools, communities and institutions, UNICEF works with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) and the following government partners (listed in alphabetical order): the Ministry of Culture and Religion (MoCR); the Ministry of Interior (MoI); the Ministry of Justice (MoJ); and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA).

Other key partners and networks include: Child Helpline Cambodia; Child Fund Cambodia; Family Care First; Friends International, Plan International; the Partnership Programme for the Protection of Children (3PC), Save the Children and World Vision International. Please refer to the UNICEF Cambodia website for a full list of partners.



**Estimated budget required for the  
CHILD PROTECTION programme:**

**US\$ 22,800,000**





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