

Report highlights a culture of violence and abuse against children in Tonga

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A Loughborough-led study aimed at investigating the experiences of children in Tonga has uncovered systemic and cultural abuse and mistreatment of children in families and schools.

The 78-page report authored by Professor Jo Aldridge highlights some of the routine violence, verbal [abuse](#) and commonplace 'punishments' experienced by six-to-17-year-olds across the Polynesian islands.

On Monday (October 29), Tonga's Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pōhiva unveiled the findings, which described [children](#) being hit with planks of wood and sticks, whipped, denied food and forced to carry out tasks, as a form of discipline, by teachers and close family members.

It revealed that children with disabilities were also likely to experience everyday abuse which is framed as punishment or discipline, both at home and at school.

Professor Aldridge's report highlighted the abuse as a traditional, or handed down, part of Tongan culture, which many youngsters accepted as part of their lives – even though in many cases it caused them misery.

Her findings included the testimonies of numerous school-aged children, as well as their parents, grandparents and teachers, and the experiences they all shared when it came to receiving and administering discipline.

She said: "This research is very important because too many children in Tonga, including children with disabilities, suffer violence and abuse

both in the home and at school.

"The messages from this research should be used to help transform children's lives.

"Hopefully, new policies and practices can be introduced that protect children from harm and help them to live safe and happy lives."

Despite the negative experiences, some youngsters reported family life as good and enjoyable and spoke about parents with love and affection.

Similarly, mothers and fathers were aware that harsh discipline practices were wrong, but poverty and hardship contributed to anxiety and stress which often also manifested itself as domestic violence.

The report offered a number of recommendations to the Tongan government and organisations which work with children about how it can bring an end to violence against children.

They include:

- Developing and implementing a risk and protective factor framework in order to assess the short- and long-term impact of children's exposure to violence in families and schools.
- New national policies and laws to address child abuse, based on the principles set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- Better health and social care services that include the provision of parenting support.
- Improvements in education services – for example, greater awareness in schools and among [school staff](#) that physically abusing pupils is against the law.
- Consulting children and young people to ensure that their views

- are included in any decision-making and policy-making
- A national survey of schools to examine awareness and understanding among [school](#) staff of abuse issues and to collate statistical evidence on the prevalence of abuse in schools – the views of pupils should also be included in the survey.

Provided by Loughborough University

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