

RESEARCH REPORT

An Assessment of Child Rights Risks in Sri Lanka's Accommodation and Tourism Sector



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Executive Summary

Two years after successfully launching the Mother and Child-Friendly Seal for Responsible Business in Sri Lanka's tea sector, The Centre for Child Rights and Business is now extending the programme to the country's tourism sector – a vital pillar of Sri Lanka's economy that is poised to expand significantly in the next few years. As an initial step, The Centre conducted a comprehensive child rights risk mapping within the tourism sector's accommodation supply chain to identify the needs, challenges and risks faced by children and families associated with this industry. The qualitative study spanned five prominent tourism hotspots and incorporated interviews with stakeholders from accommodation establishments, government departments and civil society organisations. Additionally, focus group discussions with children and parents, supplemented by thorough desk research, provided a robust foundation for this study.

Our research found significant risks that children in the tourism supply chain face, including:

- Child sexual exploitation and abuse
- Child labour
- Educational disruptions to education during tourism peak season

According to our findings, the key factors contributing to these risks are:

- Inadequate regulations for supplementary accommodation establishments, particularly in guesthouses and homestays
- Absence of child safeguarding protocols among tourist service providers
- Lack or limited formal young worker programmes connecting youth to decent work opportunities

The study findings show that child sexual exploitation is linked to accommodation establishments and that there is a pressing need for these establishments to introduce stringent measures to prevent child abuse within their premises. There is also a notable mismatch between cases of child labour reported to authorities and the experiences shared by children and parents in local communities, highlighting the need for a thorough analysis of the true extent of child labour by authorities. Moreover, peak tourist season in some hotspots directly impacts children's school attendance as families engage in short-term, tourist-related income-generating activities.

To safeguard children and uphold their rights, we recommended that accommodation establishments:

- Strengthen recruitment practices to ensure rigorous vetting of staff
- Undertake human rights due diligence of business partners
- Develop adult and child safeguarding policies and provide training to all staff and service providers
- Collaborate on initiatives that address child rights in the tourism sector
- Introduce young worker programmes
- Invest in family-friendly workplaces

With the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) aiming to attract three million tourist arrivals in 2025, it is important for SLTDA and tourism service providers to implement responsible tourism measures and regulations to ensure this boost in tourism will not create adverse risks to children and their families. Collaborative action among accommodation establishments and their supply chains, government institutions and civil society organisations is essential to address root causes and enablers of child rights violations in the tourism sector. This will be crucial to ensure a sustainable and responsible tourism industry.

1. Introduction

The Centre for Child Rights and Business, a social enterprise working with businesses to address child rights issues in global supply chains, has been implementing a programme called the Mother and Child-Friendly Seal for Responsible Business¹ since 2022 with Save the Children and tea industry stakeholders. Until 2024, this initiative has focused on working with actors along the tea supply chain to make continuous improvements for tea communities. The initiative arose from risk mapping in tea (2020) and textiles and apparel (2021). The tourism sector was also identified as a sector of interest at the time because of a study² that Save the Children and the IOM undertook on child sex trafficking in the tourism sector in Sri Lanka.

Two years after the Seal initiative's successful launch in the tea industry, plans are underway to expand this initiative to the tourism industry, one of the main contributors to Sri Lanka's GDP. However, as a first step, it is necessary to understand the risks, challenges, and opportunities regarding child rights in tourism. Moreover, the recommendations derived from this study's findings will provide valuable input for the Seal initiative in the tourism sector, and will help inform its focus and priorities for businesses and stakeholders operating in this space. Hence, this child rights risk mapping of the tourism sector, with a focus on the accommodation segment of the supply chain.

In particular, this study aims to understand:

- What child rights issues exist in the accommodation supply chain?
- What other high risks to children exist in popular tourist areas?
- What are the drivers of these child rights violations?
- What are the potential entry points that can enable engagement with the tourism sector and improve the level of support for children, youth, parents and other workers?

1 The Mother and Child-friendly Seal for Responsible Business Initiative is an action-based programme developed by The Centre for Child Rights and Business in collaboration with Save the Children and key tea industry stakeholders in Sri Lanka. The Initiative enables business entities to identify the risks to children and their families in their business operations and mitigate them through positive, continuous actions. Details can be found in Mother and Child Seal. (n.d.). Mother and Child Seal. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from srilanka-motherandchildseal.org

2 See Pieris, P. (2021). *Child Sex Trafficking in the Tourism Sector in Sri Lanka*. Save the Children and IOM

1.1. Overview of the Tourism Sector in Sri Lanka

The tourism sector in Sri Lanka has faced numerous challenges since the country gained independence and the government tourism bureau was revived in 1948.³ From the economy's periodic closures and subsequent economic reforms to the civil war, the tourism industry has been heavily impacted. After the war ended, the focus on tourism was renewed, and in 2012, it became the third largest sector contributing to the country's economy, surpassing the one million tourist arrivals mark. Since then, arrivals steadily increased, peaking at 2.4 million in 2018 and generating over USD 4 billion in income.⁴

However, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the sector, with tourism identified as one of the most affected industries in Sri Lanka (Save the Children, 2020). Tourism in 2020 and 2021 generated around USD 500 million annually. In 2022, the industry began to recover, with 700,000 international tourists generating USD 1 billion in revenue⁵ for the country. The Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority's plan for 2021 to 2025 on tourism arrivals aims for an optimistic target of over 3 million arrivals in 2025.⁶

Since government investment in tourism has only taken a front seat since the 2010s, with a primary focus on increasing foreign arrivals, there is little information on domestic tourism. Given this limitation, the hotspots selected for this study focused on international tourism hotspots.

10% of the service sector's labour force is engaged in tourism, within which accommodation is a key segment, employing approximately 81% of the workers within the tourism industry.^{7,8} Related to this segment is a wide range of services, including transportation, food and beverages, handicrafts, leisure and excursions, and other support services linked to the accommodation value chain, which complicates child rights risk mapping in this fragmented supply chain.

In addition to formal employment in the tourism sector, a large informal segment relies heavily on tourism. This informal segment is mainly engaged in unstable economic activities and can fluctuate rapidly due to seasonal trends, visitor spending and short-term work.⁹ In tourist areas, these activities are heavily dependent on the flow of tourists, which can vary greatly throughout the year.¹⁰

In the regions where tourism plays a pivotal role in local economies, this transient nature becomes evident through heightened activities during peak seasons. This cyclical surge and characteristics of transient economies create an influx of opportunities but also harbours the potential for exploitation, particularly in informal employment.

3 Refer to Fernando, S., Bandara, J. S., & Smith, C. (2016). *Tourism in Sri Lanka*. The Routledge Handbook of Tourism in Asia (pp. 251-264)

4 CEIC. (n.d.). *Sri Lanka tourism revenue*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from , '[Up-to-Date] Sri Lanka Tourism Revenue [Data & Charts], 1966 - 2023 | CEIC Data', accessed on 15.05.2024)

5 Board of Investment of Sri Lanka. (n.d.). *Invest Sri Lanka*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from investsrilanka.com

6 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (n.d.). *Growth scenarios for tourism to Sri Lanka*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from GROWTH SCENARIOS FOR TOURISM TO SRI LANKA4001659430.pdf (sltta.gov.lk)

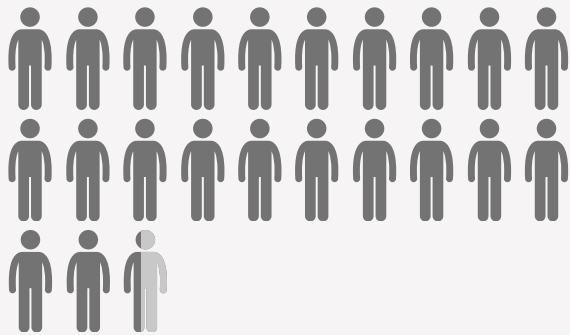
7 Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka. (2022). *Annual labour force report 2022*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://statistics.gov.lk/LabourForce/StaticallInformation/AnnualReports/2022>

8 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. 2020. *Annual Statistical Report*. Retrieved from April 22, 2024 from Annual Statistical Report 2021 -Final 25.4.20223624932970.pdf (sltta.gov.lk)

9 See Wang, W.-C. (2019). *The effect of early-life outdoor experiences on residents' attitudes towards sustainable tourism within an urban context*. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 25, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2018.10.002>

10 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (n.d.). *Growth scenarios for tourism to Sri Lanka*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from GROWTH SCENARIOS FOR TOURISM TO SRI LANKA4001659430.pdf (sltta.gov.lk)

At a Glance: Sri Lanka and its Tourism Sector



2.4 million

Number of tourists in 2018



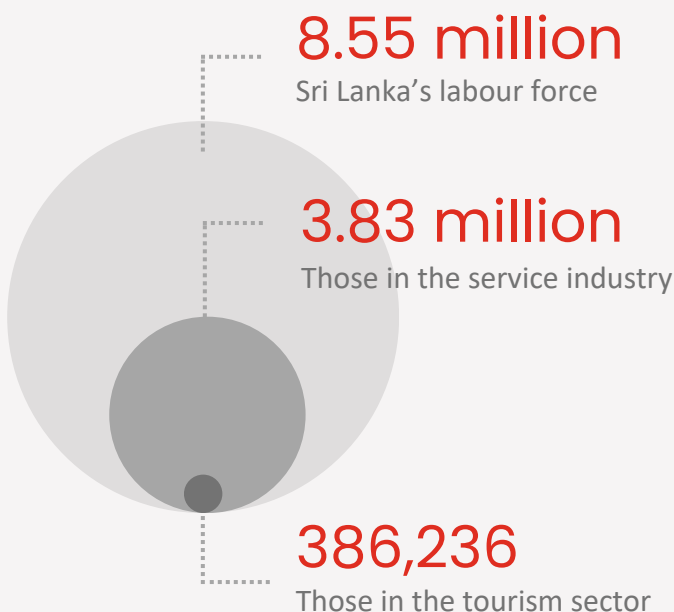
US \$4 billion

Income from the tourism sector in 2018



US \$5 million

Income from the tourism sector was severely affected by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021



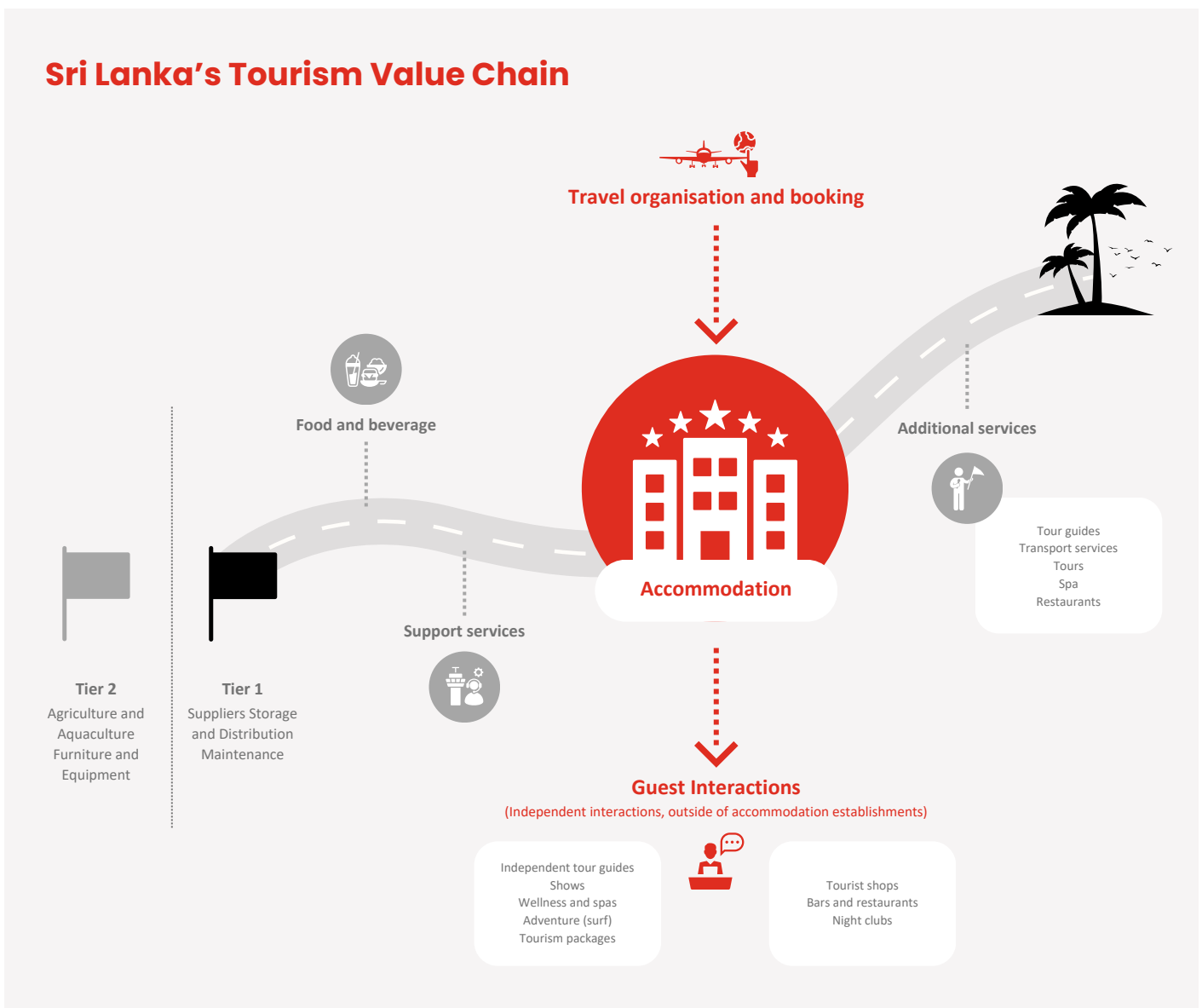
49%



The percentage of people in the service industry working formally in the tourism sector. However, there is also a large informal workforce (51%) as the work is often seasonal.

1.2. The Rationale for Focusing on the Accommodation Value Chain Within the Tourism Sector

This study focuses on the accommodation segment and its related value chain for several reasons. Firstly, as already mentioned, it is an important employer within the tourism sector, providing jobs to a vast majority of workers. Secondly, the nature of employment in the tourism accommodation sector involves various specifics that might be linked to human and child rights risks. For example, seasonal employment creates a demand for a high number of part-time and casual workers, which subsequently increases the risk of high labour turnover, training costs and recruitment costs. Given the key role the accommodation segment plays in the tourism sector value chain, our study focuses on the accommodation providers and their formal and informal supply chains.



The above value chain diagram illustrates how the accommodation sector is at the centre of the tourism value chain, connecting tourists with various other services and working with other service providers to ensure the running of their business.

1.3. Overview of the Human and Child Rights Risks Associated with the Tourism Sector in Sri Lanka

This section provides an overview of the child rights risks associated with the tourism sector in Sri Lanka based on a literature review.

1.3.1. Sexual Exploitation

Several reports and studies show that sexual exploitation of children is a pressing issue in the tourism sector, constituting one of the worst forms of child abuse in the industry. While the actual scope is unclear, the government has made the elimination of sexual abuse an element of its national child protection action plan.¹¹

Several studies have highlighted gender differences in sexual exploitation within this sector. According to the 2016 ECPAT study, “vulnerable boys tend to be involved in street-based sexual exploitation while girls tend to be victimised in brothels and other sex venues.” The study further highlights that sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism not only involves tourists but may also involve a range of travellers, including business travellers, migrant/transient workers and ‘voluntourists,’¹² as well as offenders who do not fit a specific profile. Significantly, the majority of offenders are ‘situational’, meaning they exploit opportunities as they arise.

The rapid access to mobile technology and the expansion of travel and tourism infrastructure, while boosting the tourism sector, have also contributed to the increased exploitation of children.

According to ECPAT,¹³ travelling child sex offenders (TCSOs) are able to make direct contact with children via chatrooms and social media and groom them. In a study¹⁴ on online violence in Sri Lanka, 27% of children who participated in the study experienced cyberbullying and extortion, while nearly 20% had an indecent image of them shared on the internet.

In Sri Lanka, the government recognises the severity of child abuse in tourism and has made it a part of the National Child Protection Authority’s (NCPA) remit; the agency is required to “engage in dialogue with all sectors involved in tourism to minimise the opportunities for child abuse.”¹⁵

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- 11 International Labour Organization. (2019). *Child labour: Global estimates 2017, trends and the way forward*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_717435.pdf
- 12 While there are no standard definitions of voluntourism yet, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)’s tourism working group included this definition in their 2018 report *Voluntourism best practices: promoting inclusive community-based sustainable tourism initiatives*: “The combined act of tourism and volunteering, where volunteer services are delivered free at the point of delivery at the destination. The duration of volunteering can last from a few hours to up to one year, and can be undertaken by domestic or international tourists.
- 13 ECPAT International. (n.d.). *Sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism online*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://ecpat.org/resource/sexual-exploitation-of-children-in-travel-and-tourism-online/>
- 14 Social Policy Analysis and Research Center. (2021). *ECVAC research summary report*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://sparc.cmb.ac.lk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ECVAC-Research-Summary-Report-Design.pdf>
- 15 National Child Protection Authority NCPA. (2021). *Annual report*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://childprotection.gov.lk/images/annual-reports/Progress__Performance__2021_1.pdf

1.3.2. Child Trafficking

Children who are trafficked for sex in the tourism industry¹⁶ most often enter the process when they are first sexually molested or abused or introduced to drugs and then subjected to deception by persons familiar to them. According to our literature review, they are often first trafficked for sex locally before being moved to the international context. Once the child enters the international tourism sector, it is very difficult for authorities to identify them and take action. It is important to note that, at times, parents are involved in the process, making children even more vulnerable.

1.3.3. Child Labour

While there have been few studies on child labour in the tourism sector, one study conducted in an Eastern Sri Lankan tourism hotspot¹⁷ revealed that the majority of child workers were aged between 15 and 17 years and were predominantly male. Sociocultural norms in the region often prevented girls from entering the sector. These young workers held various positions and typically worked weekends and evenings. The study identified children employed as helpers of recreational activity service providers such as windsurfing and scuba diving, janitors in accommodation establishments, baggage carriers or hotel porters, assistants of tourist vehicles, brokers of accommodation suppliers, communication staff, watchers of tourist attractions and vehicle parks, beach boys, as well as processors and sellers of roadside food stalls. Most of these children were found to work on weekends or in the evenings.

1.3.4. Unhealthy Degree of Transience

Another risk to children identified by researchers in the tourism landscape occurs when families engage in short-term income-generating activities associated with the tourism sector during peak tourist seasons, such as opening their family homes as accommodation venues and offering local experiences and services. While these short-term opportunities provide additional income, they may also result in children being temporarily displaced, unable to attend school, or lacking privacy. This level of transience can disrupt the children's environment, particularly when they become involved in these income-generating activities.¹⁸

16 See Liyanage, S., & Jayawardana, A. (2019). *Child labour utilization in the tourism industry: A case study from Ampara District in Sri Lanka*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 5(2), 45-60. <https://doi.org/10.4038/ijms.v5i2.103>

17 See Pizam, A., & Milman, A. (1986). *The Social Impacts of Tourism*. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 11(1), 29–33.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.1986.11014414>. While available data is old, we included this point here as it has proven relevant for the situation children are in today

18 Refer to Pieris, P. (2021). *Child Sex Trafficking in the Tourism Sector in Sri Lanka*. Save the Children and IOM

2. Assessment Approach

This qualitative study involved 166 participants in in-depth interviews, semi-structured discussions, focus group discussions (FDGs) and children's consultations. The findings are based on a thematic analysis of the interviews and the extensive desk research by The Centre team.

2.1. Categorisation of Accommodation Establishments

The study uses the following classification from the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority¹⁹ to categorise accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka:

- Tourist hotels include classified tourist hotels, unclassified tourist hotels, boutique hotels and boutique villas
- Supplementary establishments include guest houses, rest houses, homestay units, tourist bungalows, rented tourist homes, rented tourist apartments and heritage bungalows/homes etc.
- Other establishments are those not formally registered with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. Currently, there is no formal data on these facilities

2.2. Sample

The stakeholder groups participating in the interviews and discussions were accommodation service providers, tour companies and tour guides, government officials, civil society organisations and community members from the selected tourism hotspots. In addition, 12 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from Colombo.

The focus group discussions with community members and children were organised through civil society organisations working in the respective districts. Most of the children who participated were members of local children's clubs. The focus group discussions were carried out in four of the five tourism hotspots, as we did not have a local civil society organisation partner in Negombo to facilitate community outreach.

Name of the Hotspot	No. of Interviews	No. of Focus Group Discussions
Jaffna	11	3
Anuradhapura	7	2
Negombo	6	0
Mirissa	7	2
Kandy	5	2

19 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2022). *Annual statistical report 2021*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://www.slttda.gov.lk/storage/common_media/Annual%20Statistical%20Report%202021%20-Final%2025.4.20223624932970.pdf

The table below provides the male-female breakdown of interviewees, focus group discussion participants, and the type of stakeholders interviewed.

Target Group	Data Collection Method	Male	Female	Total
Tour Operators	Interview	1	1	2
Government Officials (Local)	Interview	9	2	11
Government Officials (National)	Interview	2	2	4
Accommodation Service Providers	Interview	18	1	19
Service Providers (Tour Guides, Restaurants)	Interview	5	0	5
CSOs, Schools	Interview	5	2	7
Community Members	FGDs	34	44	78
Children	Consultation	19	21	40

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The study developed ethical protocols, informed consent and assent forms, an information sheet, interview and focus group discussion (FGD) guides, a child safeguarding risk assessment and mitigation plan, and a data protection plan. Ethical clearance was obtained from Save the Children's Ethics and Evidence Generation team.

Children were consulted to explore their daily routines, identify key positives and challenges in their lives, and create a comfortable group setting. Additionally, a Kahoot survey was administered to anonymously gather their perspectives on child labour-related questions, allowing them to share without directly discussing potentially traumatic experiences.

2.4. Limitations

Due to the ethical research protocols²⁰ in place, the research design limited the children's consultations to discussions on their daily routines. This was supplemented with an anonymous Kahoot survey to gather information on the types of work children in their community engaged in. However, this approach did not allow us to discuss whether or not the children participating in the consultation were involved in income-generating activities.

Since the accommodation establishments included in this study were interviewed for the first time, it was not possible to request a walk-through of the establishment premises. Therefore, the researchers did not observe child labour in the accommodation establishments.

While many interviewees from relevant government departments and civil society organisations spoke of child trafficking, there were not many recorded cases to cite for the purpose of this study. This underlines the complexity of child trafficking.

20 The ethical research protocols for this research was based on the Save the Children procedure for Ethics and Evidence generation.

3. Key Findings

3.1. Context of Accommodation Establishments in Sri Lanka

The accommodation sector is defined by a high degree of informality and possible non-compliance. According to the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 3,824 registered accommodation establishments catered to the 719,978 tourists who visited Sri Lanka in 2022. Only 469 (12%) of these establishments were classified under tourist hotels (classified and unclassified tourist hotels, boutique hotels and villas), while 3360 (88%) were supplementary establishments such as guesthouses, homestay units and bungalows.²¹

We know that many more establishments that are not monitored or registered are in operation. The Tourism Act No 38 of 2005 requires any accommodation establishment or tourism service provider to be mandatorily registered²² with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and to obtain the necessary license to operate. In 2023, 4,037 accommodation establishments in Sri Lanka registered with SLTDA.²³ However, 13,183 properties²⁴ in Sri Lanka are listed on booking.com, more than 12,000 properties on Airbnb and more than 11,000 properties on Agoda, which are the top three online booking platforms for accommodation establishments. These numbers are a good indicator of the degree of informality within the tourism sector.

21 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2023). *Year in review 2022: Final report*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://www.slt-da.gov.lk/storage/common_media/Year-in-Review-2022-Final-Report-2023.03.24.pdf

22 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2020). *Are you a service provider?* Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://sltda.gov.lk/storage/common_media/ARE_YOU_A%20SERVICE_PROVIDER_Paper_Advertisement_2020_english2899360352.pdf

23 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2023). *Year in review 2023: August update*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2020). *Are you a service provider?* Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://sltda.gov.lk/storage/common_media/ARE_YOU_A%20SERVICE_PROVIDER_Paper_Advertisement_2020_english2899360352.pdf

24 Perera, R., & Silva, D. (2022). *Platformization of travel and tourism real estate: A study on the operation of online tourist accommodation booking platforms in Sri Lanka*. *Tourism Studies and Development Review*, 3(2), 123-145. <https://doi.org/10.31098/tsdr.v3i2.68>

3.2. How does the Accommodation Value Chain Impact Children's Rights?

Through our research, we could identify different instances where children's rights are impacted by, or at least intrinsically linked to the operations within the accommodation value chain. We observed that business operations are directly linked to children's risk of falling into child labour or experiencing sexual abuse and exploitation.

3.2.1. Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

In 2023, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) received 423 complaints of grave sexual abuse against children, 469 complaints of sexual harassment and eight cases of child sexual exploitation. However, NCPA officials interviewed across the districts mentioned that there was under-reporting due to various reasons, including fear of loss of reputation or ostracisation in the community. In our study, the majority of industry insiders and local child experts knew about child sexual abuse. We found the risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation particularly high in supplementary accommodation establishments and niche tourism (e.g. voluntourism). These risks are further exacerbated through the internet and social media, which often facilitate easy access to children.

Most of the cases shared by protection and law enforcement officials indicated that accommodation establishments where the violations occurred were either complicit or ignored obvious red flags.

During focus group discussions with community members in Anuradhapura and Kandy, the parents mentioned that accommodation establishments renting rooms by the hour were a high risk for children, as the parents felt that these places were often used for child sexual activities.

While in most cases, accommodation establishments are not the ones initiating or directly causing child sexual abuse and exploitation; our interview partners stressed the important role accommodation establishments play in preventing sexual abuse and calling for measures to identify and prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation.

In some cases, however, businesses are not just bystanders but directly benefit and enable the sexual abuse of children. An example is the rapidly expanding voluntourism and community tourism sub-sectors that give domestic and international travellers access to local communities and children without safety protocols in place.

Our interview partners further listed situations where children were forced into prostitution and where children were lured into these situations through high pay and misled to believe that offering these services was a valid option to make some extra money.

"A local school teacher took a student to a guesthouse 61 times and abused the child. During the police investigation, the owner of the accommodation was questioned as to why s/he had not informed the police about the suspicious behaviour. The owner responded that s/he did not know the child was not a relative of the school teacher."

– Police officer

"We were at an accommodation establishment, waiting to meet the responsible officer, when we saw two children walk in. The front desk officer handed a room key to the children and wordlessly pointed to a room with his eyes. The children took the keys and walked into the room. A few minutes later, several four-wheel drive vehicles pulled up and a man got out and went directly into the room where the children had gone in. We were there for 45 minutes and during the entire time, neither the children nor the man came out."

– Representative of a CSO working with child victims of abuse

"In a case where a child jumped from a hotel room, where the child had been sexually abused, the law held the hotel owner accountable even though the hotel did not link the perpetrator with the child. Many are not aware of the law that they will be held responsible and continue to ignore incidents of child sexual exploitation that takes place within their premises."

– Child protection official

3.2.2. Child Labour in the Accommodation Supply Chain

While our qualitative research design did not allow us to generate statistics on the scale of child labour, the focus group discussion and a short survey on Kahoot did give us some indication of the situation of child labour in the tourism sector. As mentioned under Section 2.4. on limitations, rather than asking the children solely about their own experience, we asked them to share experiences they know of. This could include their siblings, friends or possibly themselves, but they did not have to specify. This allowed us to stay within the ethical guidance framework but also allowed for more honest answers and open discussions. From the discussions and responses, we can conclude that nearly 3/4 of children are aware that children are working to make an income. 70% of the children (n=30) stated that they knew children working (Chart 1), and three-quarters were likely to be 12 years old and above.

36% mentioned that the working children they know are employed in accommodation establishments (Chart 2). Although the children's responses are likely estimates and may not be fully representative, they indicate that, from their perspective, the working children they know generally work more than 6 hours a day and 6 to 7 days per week on average (Chart 4 & 5).

The majority of the children who participated in the Kahoot survey knew of children working at shops, restaurants and accommodation establishments. 42% of the children mentioned that working children receive under a thousand rupees (approximately USD 3) per day, and 39% stated they get over a thousand rupees per day (Chart 3). As wage labour work in Sri Lanka is normally paid at a rate of a thousand rupees or less per day, the reasons for children receiving more than this warrants further research. What it does indicate is that many of the children do believe they can make considerable amounts by working in these establishments.

The children's responses indicate that at least half of the working children they know are employed full-time. These children are employed in workplaces such as accommodation establishments or related service providers like restaurants and shops.

These observations suggest that child labour is quite widespread, which contradicts the official report of only 181 cases nationwide in 2023. Hence, a follow-up study involving in-depth interviews with children, identified with the support of Child Rights Promotion Officers and civil society organisations (following comprehensive ethical protocols required for such a study), is necessary to understand the context and depth of child labour in the tourism sector and to gather more quantitative data.

"A case we had worked with was that of a children's institution offering volunteer packages for tourists to stay at the institution and support the children, but the institution had been using it as a cover to provide child sexual services to the travellers."

– Representative of a CSO working with child survivors in the tourism sector

"A case that was reported to the police by a child was that the tuk-tuk driver had promised to pay LKR100,000 if the child engaged in a sexual activity with a tourist but the driver did not pay the agreed amount after the activity."

– A CSO representative

"Beach boys present themselves as service providers, identify tourists and serve as coordinators for sexual activities."

– Representative of a CSO working with child survivors in the tourism sector

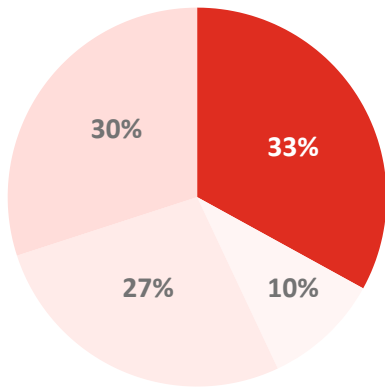


Chart 1: How many children do you know who are earning an income?

- 1 to 5
- 6 to 10
- More than 10
- I don't know of any

n=30

Chart 2: Do you know any children from your vilage working in the following places?



n=23

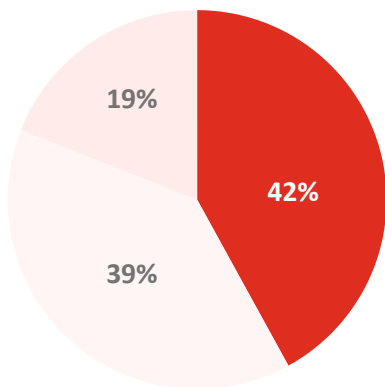
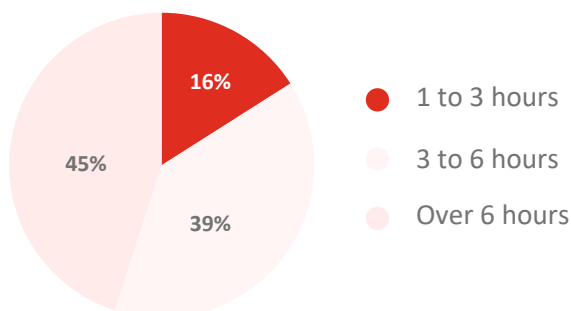


Chart 3: How much are they earning on a daily basis?

- Under 1,000 rupees
- Over 1,000 rupees
- They don't get their earnings

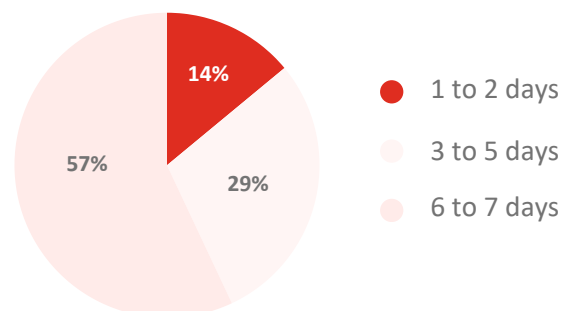
n=31

Chart 4: How many hours per day do these children work?



n=23

Chart 5: How many days per week do these children work?



n=23

3.2.3. Disruption of Education Due to Children Supporting Income-Generation Activities Related to the Tourism Sector

In tourism hotspots, community members and officials mentioned during focus group discussions and interviews that some local families engage in temporary tourism-related income-generating activities during the peak tourist season. Some interviewed officials noted that more families are turning to these seasonal income-generating activities due to the worsening economic situation since the country's financial crisis.

In Mirissa, community members mentioned that 90% of the local economy was reliant on tourism and highly linked to the spikes in the local economy during peak seasons. In Mirissa, examples of income-generating activities related to tourism include providing accommodation services, offering experience services such as renting swimming kits and snorkelling gear, and transport services like renting tuk-tuks or other vehicles for tourists. Families often engage in short-term income-generating activities, providing one or more of these services, and children support their parents with their work. While this often results in a much-needed increase in the families' revenue, it has also been observed to cause disruptions to the children's education.

Officials have indeed observed that economic pressure and children's involvement in supporting their parents' tourism-related activities have led to an increase in children dropping out of school or having irregular attendance.

“While education resources are available, there has been an increase in children dropping out of school or irregular attendance due to the economic situation. Parents are sometimes encouraging their children to work, rather than go to school.”

– Child protection official

“During tourist peak seasons, some families rent out their houses to tourists and move their family to a distant, cheaper rental place. This causes children to attend school irregularly for various reasons, from not having access to their regular transportation mechanism or having to help parents at home.”

– Community member, Mirissa

“During key festival seasons in Anuradhapura District, huge crowds of pilgrims and tourists come to the district. The army is usually deployed to the district to maintain control of the crowds. The schools are then closed to provide accommodation to the military personnel. These school closures affect children's education, as they miss out on learning as there are no catch-up classes scheduled for later.”

– Community member, Anuradhapura

3.3. Other Forms of Child Rights Risks and Violations in Tourism Hotspots

The study also identified child rights risks and violations occurring in tourism hotspots that were not directly linked to the accommodation supply chain or the tourism sector but significantly impacted children's well-being in these areas and may increase the understanding of the context within which the accommodation providers operate.

3.3.1. Child Begging

According to National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) statistics, 323 cases²⁵ of child begging were reported to the authorities in 2023. However, a recent study estimated that there are about 20,000 – 30,000 child beggars in the country.²⁶ The parliament also recognised child begging as a key issue, and the Ministerial Consultative Committee directed the Ministry of Social Services to survey child beggars.²⁷

In our study, the majority of interviewed officials in all the tourism hotspots and community members in Anuradhapura district expressed that child begging is common in these areas. Officials interviewed in all tourism hotspots indicated a comparatively high likelihood that child begging increases during festivals (e.g. in Anuradhapura and Jaffna, both districts are famous for their temple festivals). This issue is further heightened when some children are involved in begging activities as part of an organised network. In our focus group discussion in Anuradhapura, some interviewees expressed that the extent of organised child begging can be as large as involving the local villagers in the operation.

The implication that this has on a child's right to education, as well as on their right to protection and from exploitation, is significant.

“We have also observed that there is an influx of street vendors coming in for the festival seasons from other districts, and these vendors bring their children with them. So it is obvious these children are not going to school and are working with their parents at the street stalls. When we have responded by sending the families back to their home district, they will simply move to another district. So, prohibition is not a solution. At the same time, since these families generally book accommodation places nearby the festival zones, as camping is not allowed around temple premises, accommodation providers can be engaged in mitigating this phenomenon.”

– Child protection official

3.3.2. Children Working at Street Stalls

There is a social norm that children accompany their parents or relatives to sell things on the street. However, some of the officials interviewed mentioned that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between children working at their parent's street-side stalls during non-school hours and child labour.

Further, during observation walks by the research team, it was identified that children are sometimes used as a marketing tool to gain the visitors' sympathy and increase sales of products around tourist sites.

“Along the road leading to Sri Mahabodhi, at 7pm, we came across a child who was approximately 7 to 9 years old accompanying a woman selling flowers. The woman used the child as a reason to sell the flowers to us, saying: ‘I need to go home now because my child wants to go to school in the morning’. Two hours later, we saw the same woman and the girl continuing to sell the flowers.”

– Research team member

25 National Child Protection Authority. (2023). *Statistical data as at December 31, 2023*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://childprotection.gov.lk/images/lem-statistics/Statistical-data-as-at-_20231231.pdf

26 Daily Mirror. (2024, June 1). *Nearly 30,000 underage street children begging around the country, study reveals*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://www.dailymirror.lk/worldnews/breaking-news/Nearly-30-000-underage-street-children-begging-around-the-country-Study-reveals/108-279735>

27 Parliament of Sri Lanka. (2024). *Committee report on recent legislative developments*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://www.parliament.lk/en/committee-news/view/3480?category=33>

3.3.3. Child Trafficking

Another form of violence against children, often closely linked to sexual abuse, is trafficking. This was mentioned mainly by government and CSO representatives interviewed in the north-central and southern tourism hotspots.

“Children from the estate areas are trafficked into the southern coastal belt for sexual exploitation.”

– Representative of a CSO working with child survivors

Child trafficking is a hidden phenomenon because cases are often recorded under legal provisions that match the nature of the criminal activity that was directly reported to the police. Hence, most cases are reported as rape or assault and very rarely is it traced back and identified as a child trafficking case. Officials also mentioned that when a case was being filed, it was rarely recognised as a trafficking case as there was not sufficient training or sensitisation of investigators across the country on the nature of trafficking.

Interviewees mentioned that children fell into trafficking traps in different ways. A commonly mentioned way was when a child entered into a relationship with another child or adult and then was blackmailed into providing sexual services for others. Protection officials mentioned relationships formed online as a way for criminals to lure children into child sex work. In the examples shared by protection officials, a common theme was that often children who were trafficked were not aware that they had either been trafficked or exploited and genuinely believed that their behaviour in their love relationship had led them onto a path with no way out.

Another challenge in trafficking that continues to be under-reported, according to the police and NCPA officials interviewed, is the fear of community ostracisation or loss of family reputation. Some interviewees also mentioned that financial incentives have also contributed to families willingly allowing their child(ren) to be trafficked for labour or sexual exploitation. Hence, there is limited visibility of child trafficking and exploitation.

3.3.4. Traps of Online Grooming

Easy access to the internet and social media platforms has also increased the risk of domestic and international tourists easily accessing children. Online grooming has become an increasing threat, as access to children no longer requires a traveller to first visit the country, meet with procurers and access children for sexual activities. Officials from civil society organisations and government departments working with child victims of abuse stated that children who are groomed online are at high risk of contact abuse, as perpetrators often meet their victims in person when they travel to the country after establishing contact online. It was further mentioned by some of the interviewees working on online violence cases that innovations like virtual tourism have also increased the risk of virtual tourists having access to online child sexual abuse materials.

“According to Interpol, over 100,000 child pornographic images were sent out of Sri Lanka.”

– Representative of a CSO working with child survivors

The participants of the validation workshop re-emphasised the increasing role of social media in propagating child sexual abuse and that approaches to mitigate child sexual abuse and exploitation needed to rapidly keep up with the evolving nature of exploitation and have corresponding mechanisms to address it.

3.3.5. Drugs

According to the Police Narcotics Bureau Statistics of 2020,²⁸ the highest drug-related arrests have been in the Western province, followed by North-western, Southern and Central provinces. These are also the provinces with significant tourism hotspots.

22 out of the 27 interviews with government officials, tourism service providers and CSO and school representatives mentioned that drugs were becoming a major risk for children and youth in the area. Community members who participated in the focus group discussions in all five tourism hotspots also mentioned this a high risk for children and have a perception that access to drugs has increased because of increased travellers into the district.

This concern over an influx of drugs in many areas, involving children, is also increasingly reflected in media reports^{29,30,31} on children peddling drugs. Officials are taking action by checking the bags of school children as they enter and leave school, and emphasising the growing concern authorities have had in recent years over school children becoming addicted to drugs.

However, given that the number of drug cases has steadily increased across the entire country over the years, the link between tourism and access to drugs is not clear and might need to be explored further to draw definitive conclusions.

“Children from the estate areas are trafficked into the southern coastal belt for sexual exploitation.”

– Representative of a CSO working with child survivors

“Drugs are like beer in Negombo. It can be easily accessed by anyone, including children.”

– Local tour guide

“There were no drug cases 10 years ago. Around 2-3 years ago, drugs started flooding Mirissa.”

– Restaurant owner

28 National Dangerous Drugs Control Board. (2022). *Drug-related statistics 2022 (January - October)*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from [https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20\(January%20-%20October\).pdf](https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20(January%20-%20October).pdf)

29 Colombo Gazette. (2021, February 5). *School children among 100,000 drug addicts in Sri Lanka*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from <https://colombogazette.com/2021/02/05/school-children-among-100000-drug-addicts-in-sri-lanka/>

30 Daily News. (2022, November 10). *Eighty-one students under rehab for drug abuse: Minister*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from *National Dangerous Drugs Control Board*. (2022). *Drug-related statistics 2022 (January - October)*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from [https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20\(January%20-%20October\).pdf](https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20(January%20-%20October).pdf)

31 DW Documentary. (2021, May 5). *Child labor: The shadow in supply chains | DW Documentary [Video]*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jgnpwtuSxX8>

3.4. Drivers of Child Rights Violations in the Accommodation Supply Chain

3.4.1. Limited Regulations in Supplementary Accommodation Establishments

The SLTDA guidelines³² for accommodation providers clearly specify design requirements for each type of accommodation establishment, providing detailed specifications from the number of rooms needed, the restaurant design, parking facility and lighting, firefighting system, green design etc. As part of the registration process, SLTDA organises an inspection of applicants' premises to ensure that the accommodation establishment fulfils the requirement as specified by the guidelines for the type of registration they have applied under.³³ However, there are no guidelines from SLTDA for accommodation establishments on being responsible businesses that do not enable child abuse.

From the cases shared by interviewees, the majority of child sexual abuse and exploitation occurred at supplementary accommodation establishments, such as guesthouses and homestays. As mentioned in the beginning of this report, a majority of the accommodation service providers are not registered with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. Therefore, there is little or no oversight of these accommodation establishments by the authority responsible for their registrations. As a matter of fact, there seems to be a lack of clarity and guidance for supplementary accommodation establishments on the mandatory requirement of registering with Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority. The Authority also currently does not have an oversight mechanism that is able to monitor and take action against the accommodation establishments not registered with SLTDA.

More importantly, there were no guidelines from Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority or other tourism associations on adult and child safeguarding protocols or a list of restricted activities at the accommodation establishments. The lack of guidance to accommodation establishments enables the business that engage in child sexual exploitation or child labour to act with impunity.

3.4.2. Lack of or Limited Safety Protocols for Child Guests in the Accommodation Supply Chain

Representatives of tourist hotels, who were interviewed, mentioned they have safeguarding and quality control measures in place in the areas of food safety, hygiene, pool safety and security guards. However, they do not

“Everyone who stays with us are lovely people”

– Owner of a supplementary accommodation establishment

32 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (2021). *Design guideline V1.0*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from National Dangerous Drugs Control Board. (2022). *Drug-related statistics 2022 (January - October)*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from [https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20\(January%20-%20October\).pdf](https://www.nddcb.gov.lk/Docs/research/Drug-related%20statistics%202022%20(January%20-%20October).pdf)

33 Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority. (n.d.). *Tourism promotional image*. Retrieved June 5, 2024, from https://sltda.gov.lk/storage/common_media/f2bc0a22521dcd0e498828c0314bdf9.jpg

have similar control measures or safety protocols for child guests, or training for front desk staff to handle any suspicious guests with a potential child victim. Needless to say, supplementary accommodation establishment providers have even fewer resources and protocols in place for protecting child guests.

“We have never had cases of child sexual exploitation at our hotel. Our front desk staff always checks relevant identification documents of guests during check-in.”

– Representative of a tourist hotel

There is a need for an industry-wide guidance on red flags on child victims of trafficking and child sexual exploitation and how to respond to red flags.

3.4.3. Lack of Security and Background Checks in Accommodation Establishments' Recruitment Processes

In Sri Lanka, there are no regulatory requirements for police checks on tourist hotels or supplementary accommodation staff. Our participants in the in-depth interviews with accommodation providers highlighted that during recruitment in hotels, the human resources team focused on qualifications and experience. While they did collect copies of the national identity card and in some instances, birth certificates, which would allow them to check the age of the employee, they did not request employees to submit a police clearance certificate.

The need for police clearance on staff who would be interacting with children and their families had never been considered by any of our interviewees within the tourism sector. It was brought up only by child protection officials in one district as a suggestion for mitigating risks to children in the tourism sector.

3.4.4. Lack of Safeguarding Measures Taken by Accommodation Establishments on Services They Offer Travellers

The accommodation establishments interviewed indicated they offered activities or services to their guests on demand. From a range of immersive experiences with the local communities, guided tours to providing transport services, the accommodation establishments worked with third party service providers or directly with the community for these services.

Some of the community experiences were agriculture-based or fisheries-based, where guests could choose to stay with a farming or fishing family for a few days and take part in activities of the farm or fishing.

“If a guest chooses an experience in farms or fields, we have an arrangement with a few houses in the village and we send the guest to one of the houses, where they stay with the family and participate in some of the daily farming activities etc.”

– A tourist hotel owner

In the example quoted on the right, the hotel did not have any contracts with the host families in the community nor did they have training for the host families on the do's and don'ts in responsible tourism that ensures the safety of the host family and guests.

Guided tours were offered by most accommodation establishments interviewed for the study. Once again, it was noted that no training was given to the tour guides on safeguarding protocols, such as obtaining consent for taking photos of community members or handling requests from travellers to drop into a local school for ad hoc volunteering or arrange visits with children in a local community to donate educational materials.

“When I take a tourist around, sometimes I get a request to stop by a local school or village so that the tourist can meet the children, take some photos and donate something. I take them to meet the children so that the poor people can also have some benefit.”

– A registered tour guide

While engaging with local communities in a meaningful way is part of responsible tourism, it is important for the travel and tourism service providers to be aware of what responsible tourism entails, especially in terms of safety and protection of children in local communities.

The accommodation establishments that provide community experiences, tour services and transport services need to map out what the potential risks could be for the local host families as well as the guests and to have a mitigation plan in place that would help safeguard the host and guest. Training on the safeguarding protocols and responsible tourism needs to be provided for the service providers.

3.4.5. Lack of Formal Young Worker Programmes

Given that a key driver for child labour is the economic situation of the family, not having opportunities for decent work for young workers pushes children to seek informal work in precarious conditions.

Large hotels and tour operators, who cater to high-end domestic clientele and international tourists, have policies of zero tolerance towards child labour. These companies stated they do not hire anyone under the age of 19. There is also an underlying fear in these large companies regarding the introduction of young worker programmes or internships within their companies, as any incident could potentially result in reputational damage and financial losses to their business.

Mid-sized tourist hotels were more open to hiring young workers (aged between 16 -18). Some hotels viewed young worker programmes as an investment in potential future staff, where those who excelled in these programmes had higher chances of being permanently hired by the hotel. On the other hand, other hotels mentioned that due to recent business downturns, hiring temporary young workers was a cost-saving measure for them.

The hotels that provided training to young workers stated that the training consisted of on-the-job learning in various roles within the hotel departments, such as supporting staff at the front desk or kitchen assistants, among others. However, there was no mention of a specific young worker policy in place, nor was there any training provided to staff on how to mentor young workers effectively. Neither was there awareness of the decent work parameters defined for the young workers, such as appropriate working hours, types of work they could engage in, and zero tolerance policies on harassment.

“There is a need to create awareness of potential risks associated with tourists interacting with local communities and there is a need for clear guidelines and training to prevent potential exploitation or space for grooming.”

– Representative of CSO working on child rights

“We don’t recruit anyone under 18 years of age. We recently had an applicant who was 17, who wanted to intern with us. We told her to wait until she turned 19 years and then we would get her onboard as an intern.”

– Representative of a large tour operator

“We do have an internship or trainee programme, where we also recruit youth who are in the 16-18 year old category but our requirement is that such young workers should be enrolled in a hotel school or vocational training centre and the internship programme serves as a training for them.”

– A mid-sized tourist hotel manager

3.4.6. Lack of Child Labour Remediation Programmes for the Tourism Supply Chain

All the tourist hotels and supplementary accommodation establishments we interviewed did not have a child labour remediation policy or mechanism in place.

“We don’t see the need for having a child labour remediation policy because we don’t have child labour.”

– A representative of a tourist hotel

There is a need for businesses to understand the drivers of child labour and work with their suppliers to prevent it. In the event that a case is reported, there should be a remediation mechanism in place to support the affected child.

3.4.7. Lack of or Limited Human Rights Due Diligence Process in Supply Chain Management Practices

Tourist hotels indicated that they have clear sourcing procedures and contracts with Tier 1 suppliers for their requirements. The primary focus during supplier selection is on quality, reliability in providing a consistent supply, and competitive pricing.

“We have people we know as tour and city guides, who are 100% safe that we recommend.”

– Representative of a supplementary accommodation establishment

On the other hand, supplementary accommodation establishments did not indicate having any formal sourcing procedures in place. They rely on trust, personal acquaintance with suppliers and pricing as the basis for supplier selection. The absence of formal contracts in these arrangements can lead to ambiguity in accountability, and standard safety protocols may not be rigorously applied.

“Focusing on due diligence acts can also support global requirements, particularly from European or American tourism segments. However, these acts do not specifically address child labour. The Federation of Tour Operators’ guidelines emphasise the need for vigilance, especially in the informal sector.”

– A tourist hotel representative

There is a need for embedding human rights due diligence processes into the sourcing practices of the accommodation supply chain to mitigate risks to children.

4. What Does This Mean for the Tourism Stakeholders?

While there is no doubt that the tourism sector creates vast opportunities and jobs in Sri Lanka, we did show in this report that it can also contribute to adverse impacts for families and children in the sector. It will be important for the tourism sector to pro-actively address those risks.³⁴

This section focuses on areas that different tourism stakeholders need to address to jointly mitigate risks to children in the accommodation supply chain.

4.1. Accommodation Providers: Creating an Enabling Environment in the Accommodation Supply Chain that Mitigates Risk to Children and Adults

4.1.1. Strengthening Recruitment Practices

Given that staff at accommodation establishments have interactions with guests and their families, it is important for hotels to ensure the following:

- Staff and workers, be it full-time, part-time or casual, are within the legal age range for employment through ID verifications
- Staff or workers who will be directly in contact with guests and their families, including children, have a police clearance certificate

4.1.2. Human Rights Due Diligence For Business Partners and Sub-Contractors in the Supply Chain

While a few of the large hotels mentioned that they undertook due diligence processes, the interviews indicated that most of the tourist hotels only considered pricing and quality of services when selecting suppliers and that was limited to Tier 1 or direct suppliers only.

There is a need to be constructively engaged and aligned with international human rights standards, in particular, the business responsibility to respect human rights, as clarified in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights³⁵ for implementing the UN 'Protect, Respect, Remedy' Framework (UNGPs)³⁶ as well in the OECD Due Diligence Guidance.³⁷

Therefore, a good starting point for the accommodation establishments to ensure that they have the proper mechanisms in place that help prevent or

34 OECD guidelines & HRDD laws (e.g. LKSG, CSDDD) legally oblige companies to assess, prevent, mitigate and remediate adverse impact caused or linked to their operations or business partners.

35 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011). Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

36 United Nations, Protect, Respect and Remedy: A Framework for Business and Human Rights (2008). Retrieved from <https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/files/reports-and-materials/Ruggie-protect-respect-remedy-framework.pdf>

37 Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct(n.d.). Retrieved from <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/trade-investment/oecd-guidelines-ncp/due-diligence-guidance/>

reduce human rights or child rights violations is to have a human rights due diligence process as part of their procurement policy. Having clear contractual guidelines will also allow businesses to align with more recent human rights due diligence laws, such as the EU CSDDD.

Given that supplementary accommodation establishments will not have adequate resources to undertake a human rights due diligence process, larger tourism operators, associations or groups such as the Ceylon Chambers of Commerce, or other relevant trade groups could invest in developing guidelines on practices that supplementary accommodation establishments can adopt to ensure human rights risks are mitigated.

4.1.3. Adult and Child Safeguarding Training and Policies

The cases highlighted in the study indicate that risks to children in the tourism sector often happen at accommodation establishments. Therefore, it is important for the accommodation establishments to undertake a joint safeguarding risk assessment through a relevant representative body, such as the Hoteliers Association/Ceylon Chambers of Commerce, for example, and agree on actions that will help mitigate these risks. The members can then self-report progress towards actions taken and the group can carry out spot checks on randomly selected establishments to monitor the status of implementation.

In addition to the association-led safeguarding reporting mechanism, tourist hotels that can afford to undertake adult and child safeguarding risk mapping and action plan development for their respective hotels, should do so.

A key element of safeguarding is ensuring that accommodation establishments' staff and workers receive training to be aware of risks and know how to mitigate them.

4.1.4. Collaborations on Initiatives that Address Child Rights in the Tourism Sector

Interviews emphasised that awareness of different forms of child exploitation, especially related to child trafficking, is quite low among accommodation service providers. This indicates that there is a need for a sector-wide awareness campaign, created jointly by the relevant government and non-government officials. Such campaigns could emphasise the legal accountability of accommodation establishment owners to prevent child exploitation on their premises, and educate on appropriate types of work for young workers, among other relevant topics.

Some of the larger national and international hotel chains mentioned initiatives they were undertaking in collaboration with other stakeholders to create awareness among community members and homestay operators, on issues identified within the local community.

“There is a need to actively promote diversity and inclusion, and to pledge adherence to the UN WTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, including implementing human rights policies within the sector.”

– A large tourist hotel representative

Some of the initiatives being implemented by civil society organisations in certain tourism hotspots include a hotline and SMS campaign to raise awareness on child rights issues in tourism hotspots, the development of a mobile app for local communities to access information on key stakeholders providing services to victims and providing legal support for victims and high-risk groups. Learnings from the initiatives need to be shared with other tourism stakeholders. Moreover, the scaling up of initiatives that are largely localised, need to be undertaken to increase collaboration on initiatives that have demonstrated positive results in mitigating risks to children.

4.1.5. Young Workers Programmes

The tourism sector is a labour-intensive sector, heavily reliant on quality services. At the same time, our results have shown that there is little support for youth who leave school early. This opens an immense opportunity for the sector to become a driver of decent work for youth – by providing both training and employment opportunities for youth (in the form of internships, apprenticeships or employment). A sector-wide guidance for employing young workers can be a first step to creating more opportunities for youth. If followed up with practical implementation, it will enable children of working age to be employed under formal and safe employment terms rather than be pushed into informal and hazardous work.

In addition, it is important for hotels to collaborate with vocational training institutions to align training programmes with the specific skills required by hotels. Several hotels mentioned that trainees they recruited from tertiary institutions did not meet the minimum expectations required for the job and had to be re-trained from the beginning.

4.1.6. Family-Friendly Workplaces

Some tourist hotels shared good practices in creating family-friendly workplaces that enable mothers and fathers to balance their work and parental responsibilities effectively.

To facilitate this, the hoteliers association could compile a guidance note outlining these examples of good practices and distribute it among their members. This initiative could encourage more hotels to adopt similar family-friendly policies and contribute to a more supportive work environment for employees with parental responsibilities while creating intrinsic value for the business through improved retention and work satisfaction.

These quotes on the right illustrate how the company HR team has thought through a family-friendly policy for their employees to ensure parents can be there for their newborn child in their first year.

“We have a paternity leave policy that allows fathers to take 100 days of leave.”

– HR staff of a large tour operator

“When we considered why women were hesitant to join hotels in Jaffna, despite competitive pay scales, we identified that the shift-based working approach was a significant deterrent. Women preferred to return home in the evening rather than work night shifts. Therefore, we revised our policy, assigning day shifts exclusively to women employees while male employees covered night shifts. This change was well-received by women and their families, resulting in an increase in job applications when we advertised vacancies. As a result, we now maintain a balanced gender ratio among our employees at the hotel.”

– Front desk staff member of a tourist hotel

Good Practices: Creating an Enabling Environment in the Accommodation Supply Chain



Cultivate a Respectful Culture

Ensure the workplace has a respectful culture that respects individuals of all sexual identities, and does not tolerate discrimination or harassment



Accommodate Parental Responsibilities

Offer flexibility in accommodating parental responsibilities and obligations, to enable parents to fulfil their parental responsibilities when required (e.g. parent-teacher meetings, looking after a sick child etc.)



Provide Care Packages

Provide care packages for new mothers and their babies



Allow for Breastfeeding Breaks

Allow nursing mothers to take breastfeeding breaks during work hours



Provide Paternity Leave

Provide paternity leave beyond the days indicated in the Shop and Office Act to allow new fathers to spend meaningful time with their babies



Provide Annual Health Check-ups and Insurance

Provide annual health check-ups for staff members and insurance packages that cover the staff and family



Understand Barriers Faced by Vulnerable Groups

Strive to understand and address gender barriers faced by women, youth and other vulnerable groups entering the hotel industry in each hotspot (e.g. flexible working hours and non-mandatory night shifts for women if these reasons prevented them from working. Moreover, providing transport for staff working late-night shifts can enhance safety and accessibility)

4.2. Government Institutions: Strengthening Regulations and Oversight

4.2.1. Working With the National Child Protection Authority to Protect Child Rights in the Tourism Sector

The National Child Protection Authority has set up the first forum, with representatives from key stakeholders, including the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, to address key issues related to child protection in the tourism sector. This forum can contribute towards:

- Developing a code for all businesses engaged in the tourism sector that works towards mitigating risks to children
- Given that ECPAT and the UN World Tourism Organisation developed The Code³⁸ in 1996, the forum needs to review the code and adapt/incorporate key elements to the contextualised code that is developed for the Sri Lankan context and ensure that all tourism service providers sign up to contextualised Code
- Developing guidelines for accommodation establishments and other tourism service providers on identifying risks to children and mitigating measures that can be taken
- Taking a stance to combat child sexual exploitation in the tourism sector by working closely with the NCPA and tourism service providers
- Ensuring that all accommodation establishments registered with SLTDA have undergone adult and child safeguarding training

4.2.2. Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority to Improve Oversight of Tourism Service Providers

The Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) is the authority that enacts guidelines and regulations for tourism service providers. It is crucial for SLTDA to understand the ramifications of child rights violations and other human rights abuses within tourism service sectors, not only for the victims but for the industry at large. Collaboration with other government bodies such as the National Child Protection Authority and Department of Probation and Child Care Services is essential for effective oversight and enforcement of regulations to safeguard vulnerable populations.

“Child protection is not our mandate. It is the mandate of the National Child Protection Authority. If they share a hotline, we can share it on our website. That is all we can do.”

– Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority official

Recommendations for the SLTDA:

- Follow up on the Tourism Act of 2005 to ensure that all businesses linked to tourism services are registered with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority and introduce a penalty for non-compliant businesses that includes cancellation of business operations for repeat offenders

38 The Code, developed by ECPAT Sweden and UN World Tourism Organization in 1996, is a set of 6 criteria that members voluntarily sign up to adhere to, to keep children safe in the tourism sector.

- Ensure that all supplementary accommodation establishments are registered with SLTDA and that they have guidelines on ethical conduct and training on safeguarding adults and children
- Establish a hotline through which non-compliance and unethical practices of tourism service providers can be reported to SLTDA for investigation and action
- Establish procedures for hotels and tour operators to monitor supply chain practices, ensuring alignment with ethical and human rights standards
- Introduce mandatory training on adult and child safeguarding and safety protocols for tour guides and transport providers as a pre-requirement for issuing licenses

4.3. Civil Society Organisations: Creating Awareness Among Communities on Responsible Tourism and Safeguarding Children and Their Families

Some civil society organisations work across Sri Lanka on different aspects of child protection and responsible tourism. These interventions are not connected or coordinated. The impact and sustainability of the interventions would be improved if there was coordination and joint action among the CSOs.

- Collaborating with government and private sector stakeholders on campaigns to raise awareness on issues affecting children and their families within the tourism sector
- Jointly developing training programmes for different tourism stakeholders on responsible tourism, including adult and child safeguarding
- Working with schools to introduce a participatory learning approach among children and youth on the dignity of work, decent work, employee rights and adult and child safeguarding risk mapping and mitigation action plan development
- Working with the tourism service providers to establish a remediation hub so that support can be provided to children who are at risk or have been reported in a child rights violation incident

5. Conclusion and Next Steps

With Sri Lanka poised to triple its annual international tourist arrivals within the next few years, the tourist industry must be prepared to manage this influx without negative consequences for the children and families of local communities. This report has highlighted key risks to children, drivers of child rights violations, and recommendations for different stakeholders.

The Centre for Child Rights and Business, a social enterprise that works with businesses to mitigate risks to children in their value chain, will undertake the following next steps:

- Share the findings and recommendations of the study with the NCPA forum for tourism stakeholders as well as conduct district workshops for tourism stakeholders in the districts where the study was conducted
- Introduce the Mother and Child-friendly Seal for Responsible Business Initiative to hotels and tour operators and work with companies that joined the initiative to identify risks to children and families in their specific value chain and review actions taken to mitigate them
- Launch the Seal Challenge for the tourism sector to encourage and facilitate businesses within the tourism sector to think of innovative, creative ways to address key child rights challenges
- Work with key tourism sector stakeholders such as NCPA on developing guidelines for the industry, that incorporate adult and child safeguarding and protection

39 The Seal Challenge, formerly known as the Child Rights in Business challenge, was launched by The Centre in 2023 to complement the efforts taken by the Mother and Child-friendly Seal for Responsible Business Initiative. The challenge seeks to enable innovation and creativity in addressing core challenges that children and their families face in a particular value chain.

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