



Suojellaan Lapsia
Protect Children


JUSTICE
INITIATIVE
European response
to child abuse cases

Statutes of Limitations and Sexual Violence Against Children

Findings from the Global 'Our Voice' Survivor Survey
with a Case Study on Finnish Survivors' Experiences

December 2023



By Anna Katariina Ovaska, Tegan Insoll, Katarina Leivo, Eva Díaz Bethencourt,
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Executive Summary

This report explores the experiences of survivors of sexual violence in childhood with disclosure, with a view to informing the reform of laws and regulations concerning the statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children. As victims of childhood sexual violence often need decades to process trauma and disclose the abuse they have been subjected to, short and varying statutes of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children prevent victims and survivors from accessing justice and seeking remedies.

We present the responses of adult survivors of childhood sexual violence to the global 'Our Voice' survivor survey and a specific case study on Finnish survivors. In the context of legal reform, it is crucial that the voices of those impacted are not merely acknowledged but taken into a leading role in shaping the discourse.

Protect Children

Protect Children is a non-governmental child-rights organization based in Finland, working globally to end all forms of sexual violence against children. We adopt a holistic, research-based approach to address the issue from multiple angles, advocating for victims, survivors, and families; equipping children and young people with essential skills and knowledge to stay safe online and offline; developing offender-focused prevention measures; and conducting innovative research to better understand the issue.

Learn more about Protect Children: www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en

Justice Initiative

Protect Children leads the Nordic Hub of the Justice Initiative, a European initiative aiming to restore justice for past victims of abuse across Europe and strengthen child protection for future generations. With the support of the Justice Initiative, Protect Children developed the global 'Our Voice' survey for adult survivors of childhood sexual violence, with the goal of impacting legislative change to strengthen child protection measures and the rights of victims and survivors, and to effectively prevent all crimes of sexual violence against children.

Learn more about the Justice Initiative: justice-initiative.eu

This report has been research and written by Anna Katariina Ovaska, Tegan Insoll, Katariina Leivo, Eva Díaz Bethencourt, Dr. Hanna Lahtinen, Matilda Sandvik & Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen. © Suojellaan Lapsia, Protect Children ry. 2023.

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1. Statutes of Limitations and Sexual Violence Against Children

What is the statute of limitations?

Statutes of limitations identify the timeframe during which a suspected offence can be investigated, and its alleged perpetrator prosecuted. In cases of sexual violence against children, once the statute of limitations has expired, a suspected offence against a child can no longer be investigated or otherwise pursued within the legal system and its alleged perpetrator can no longer be punished. In addition, victims are commonly prevented from accessing compensation or support once the statute of limitation has expired.

Who sets the rules relating to the statute of limitations in crimes of sexual violence against children in Europe?

Both the Lanzarote Convention¹ and Directive 2011/93/EU² lay down the minimum standards relating to the statute of limitations in crimes of sexual violence against children within their Member States. On a national level, each Member State interprets these standards into their national legislation. As an example, the Finnish Criminal Code³ determines the statutes of limitations in Finland.

What is the issue with the statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children?

Research into childhood sexual violence has established that it typically takes decades before victims of childhood sexual violence disclose their abuse.⁴ As such, short statutes of limitations often prevent victims from receiving justice and accessing adequate support, as they may expire before the victims are ready to disclose.

“[Child sexual abuse] is a serious public health epidemic and a severe violation of children’s human rights, both of which are exacerbated when justice is denied”.⁵
CHILD Global and Brave Movement

Legislation prescribing the statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children is complicated at best. Moreover, the rules differ drastically from country to country and, as CHILD Global and the Brave Movement state in their report, “there is a postcode lottery system for [child sexual abuse] victims regarding their ability to have effective access to

¹ Convention on Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (adopted 25 October 2007, entered into force 1 July 2010) CETS 201 (Lanzarote Convention) art. 33.

² Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA [2011] OJ 2 335/01 (Directive 2011/93) art. 15(2).

³ The Criminal Code of Finland 39/1889 section 8 §1.

⁴ Steine, I. M., Winje, D., Skogen, J. C., Krystal, J. H., Milde, A. M., Bjorvatn, B., Nordhus, I. H., Grønli, J., & Pallesen, S. (2017). Posttraumatic symptom profiles among adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse: A longitudinal study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 67, 280–293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chab.2017.03.002>.

⁵ CHILD Global and Brave Movement, ‘Justice Unleashed: Ending Limitations, Protecting Children’ <[Justice Unleashed: Ending limitations, protecting children](#)>.



remedial judicial action".⁶ Access to justice and consequences for committing criminal offences should not be determined by location.

It is unacceptable that victims and survivors are forced to navigate a complex web of rules and information laying out whether the violence committed against them is no longer valid to be investigated or its perpetrator to be punished, all whilst coping with the severe consequences of the sexual violence committed against them.

“Who does the statute of limitations serve? The crueler the violence that the child is subjected to, the more certain it is that the child’s psyche will lock these memories away, the resurfacing of which can take decades.”

Finnish survivor, member of the Our Voice survivor advocacy group.

Attempts to reform the statute of limitations for child sexual violence offences in Europe

Important steps have been taken to unify and reform the statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children throughout Europe. Legislation setting minimum standards has been implemented on both EU⁷ and Council of Europe⁸ levels. And whilst many States have taken steps or even leaps forward to lengthen or completely abolish their statutes of limitations in cases of sexual violence against children, the reforms lack unity and consistency throughout the Council of Europe Member States.

What is our position?

At Protect Children, we express our solidarity with victims and survivors of childhood sexual abuse and exploitation. Consequently, we firmly advocate for a significant extension of statutes of limitations in cases involving sexual violence against children and, ideally, their complete abolition in all member states of the Council of Europe. This approach aims to ensure justice for victims and survivors of childhood sexual abuse and exploitation.

“I don’t think that crimes of sexual violence against children should ever expire. Mine did and I will carry that burden with me for the rest of my life.”

Finnish survivor, member of the Our Voice survivor advocacy group.

⁶ CHILD Global and Brave Movement, ‘Justice Unleashed: Ending Limitations, Protecting Children’ <[Justice Unleashed: Ending limitations, protecting children](#)>, 20.

⁷ Directive 2011/93/EU (n 2); Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA.

⁸ Lanzarote Convention (n 1); Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (adopted 11 May 2011, entered into force 1 August 2014) CETS No 2010 (Istanbul Convention).

2. Methodology of the Global 'Our Voice' Survivor Survey

'Our Voice' survey for survivors of sexual violence in childhood

Protect Children's global 'Our Voice' survey was developed to understand the experiences of adult survivors of sexual violence in childhood around the world. The primary aim of the survey is to raise the long-silenced voices and wisdom of those directly affected by any form of child sexual abuse and/or exploitation. Our goal is to impact legislative change to strengthen child protection measures and the rights of victims and survivors, and to effectively prevent all crimes of sexual violence against children.

The survey asks respondents about different aspects of survivors' experiences and the impact that the sexual violence they suffered in their childhood has had on them. The survey collects information about the characteristics of sexual violence experienced, including the nature of the act and the relationship with the perpetrator(s), characteristics of the perpetrator(s), factors influencing disclosure, long-term consequences, legal implications, including statute of limitations, police investigations, criminal proceedings, compensation, and factors that have supported or hindered healing and recovery. Additionally, the survey includes some final open-ended questions, in which we ask participants about important information to strengthen victims' rights and protect children, as well as their feelings and emotions after completing the survey.

 "I am grateful and, to my surprise, moved. Someone wants to know how I survived all this. Someone wants to know how I'm doing with it, even though it's been almost 20 years."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Finnish.

Participants to the survey are completely anonymous and are not asked to disclose any identifiable information. Support resources are provided at the beginning and end of the survey if the respondents begin to feel uncomfortable or distressed. All participants provide their informed consent prior to completing the survey.

Recruitment

Participants are recruited voluntarily through social media platforms in which we share and communicate about the global 'Our Voice' survivor survey. The survey is also disseminated through local survivor organizations and non-governmental organizations around the world. Participants to the survey must be over 18 years old and have experienced sexual violence in their childhood.

Data collection period

The global data presented in the report was collected from 4 November to 19 December 2023, and covers responses from 1,104 respondents to the global 'Our Voice' survivor survey.

In addition, data collected from Finnish survivors was collected from 14 June to 17 October 2023 and 198 respondents participated in the Finnish survey.

Languages

The global 'Our Voice' survivor survey is available in multiple languages with the aim of fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the experiences faced by survivors of sexual violence against children worldwide. This multilingual approach allows us to reach a larger and more diverse number of survivors and, consequently, to collect crucial information and data to better understand crimes of sexual violence against children. The survey is currently available in 15 languages: Albanian, Croatian, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, and Swedish.

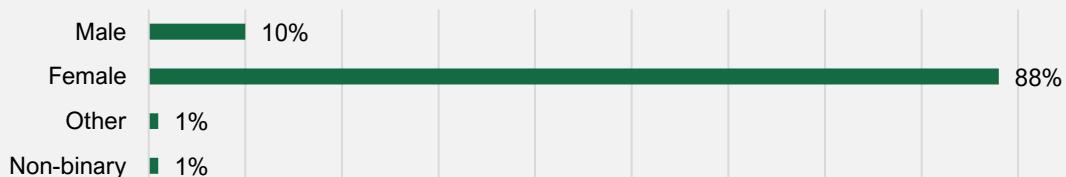
We are continuously expanding the reach of the survey by translating into more languages. If you are interested in translating the survivor survey into your language, contact Nina Vaaranen-Valkonen nina.vaaranen-valkonen@suojellaanlapsia.fi.

Respondent demographics

The respondents were asked to share their basic demographic information, including gender and age. 88% of the respondents identified themselves as female, 11% as male, 1% as other, and 1% as non-binary. Most respondents reported themselves to be over the age of 35, with the most common age bracket being 35-44 years old.

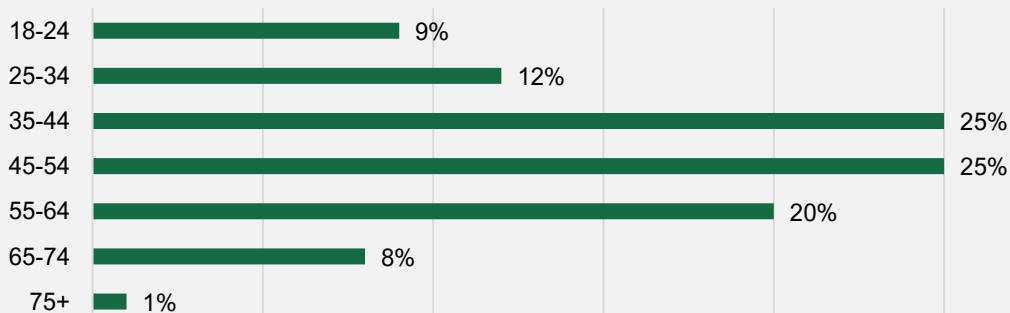
Gender

Number of respondents: 1092



Age

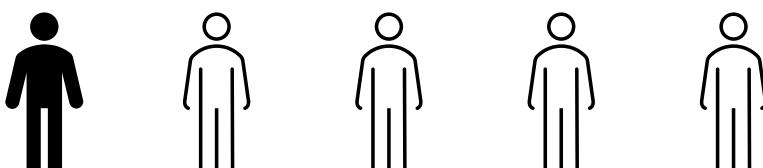
Number of respondents: 955



3. Findings from the Global 'Our Voice' Survivor Survey

Victims often disclose the abuse long after it occurs or not at all

One in five respondents to the global survivor survey say that they have not disclosed to anyone the sexual violence they were subjected to as a child.⁹ Early disclosure has been found to be essential for a child victim's healing as it is associated with improved mental well-being, gains in internalizing behavioral adjustment problems, and improvement in attitudes and beliefs concerning the acceptability of violence compared to delayed disclosure or non-disclosure.¹⁰ Early disclosure assists victims in receiving services without delay, and therefore prevents further sexual victimization.¹¹



One in five respondents to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey say that they have not disclosed to anyone the sexual violence they were subjected to as a child.

Non-disclosure often has a negative impact on the wellbeing of victims. Two thirds of respondents who have not disclosed say that the non-disclosure has impacted their healing process.¹² Many respondents refer to their difficulties in processing the trauma, difficulties relating to others, and overall negative impact on their mental and physical health. When asked to describe the impact, one respondent to the 'Our Voice' survey in Spanish explained:

“Not having anyone to vent to. My parents never understood the reason for my depression.”
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Spanish.

As extensive previous research supports,¹³ the results from the 'Our Voice' survey indicates that victims of sexual violence in childhood typically need decades to disclose their experiences. Over half of the respondents who have disclosed say that they first told someone at least 11 years after the abuse occurred. Only 12% say that they disclosed immediately following the sexual violence. For survivors in countries with statutes of limitations in place, the statute of limitations may have expired by the time they disclose, severely limiting their access to justice and remedies.

⁹ 19% of respondents to the question “Have you disclosed the sexual violence you were subjected to as a child to someone?” answered “No” (Number of respondents: 1,103).

¹⁰ Graham-Bermann, S. A., Kulkarni, M. R., & Kanukollu, S. *Is Disclosure Therapeutic for Children Following Exposure to Traumatic Violence?* (2011) Journal of Interpersonal Violence 26(5) 1056-1076; Scott D. Easton, *Childhood disclosure of sexual abuse and mental health outcomes in adulthood: Assessing merits of early disclosure and discussion* (2019) Child Abuse & Neglect 93 208-214.

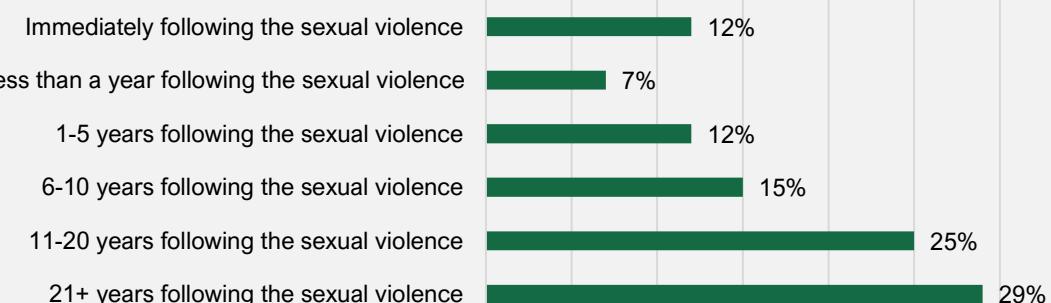
¹¹ Alaggia et al., *Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Disclosures: A Research Update (2000–2016)* (2017).

¹² 64% of respondents to the question “Has the non-disclosure impacted your healing process?” answered “Yes” (Number of respondents: 205).

¹³ Steine et al., *Prolonged silence on sexual assault. Predictors and correlates in adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child* (2016); Easton SD., *Disclosure of child sexual abuse among adult male survivors* (2013).

When did you first disclose the sexual violence? If you have been subjected to sexual violence in your childhood on more than one occasion, please answer the question considering the first instance of sexual violence.

Number of respondents: 883



Disclosure doesn't always lead to police investigations

Even when victims disclose, this disclosure is not guaranteed to lead to an investigation. One reason for this stems from who the victim discloses the abuse to. According to previous studies, disclosures to adults, and particularly to authorities are rare.¹⁴ Not disclosing to authorities allows perpetrators to continue their offending and victims are unlikely to receive support or legal assistance.¹⁵ When responding to the 'Our Voice' survey, 54% of respondents who disclosed immediately following the sexual violence say that they disclosed to a parent. 25% say that they disclosed the abuse to a friend, and only 6% say they disclosed it to the police. Several respondents mention that even when they did disclose the abuse to an adult, this did not result in an investigation. In total, 89% of respondents to the survey say that their disclosure did not lead to a police investigation.¹⁶



Nine out of ten respondents to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey say that their disclosure of childhood sexual violence to did not lead to a police investigation.

“I reported the events to the school and to the police. In no case did I receive any response or subsequent communication.”

Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Spanish. (Response edited for confidentiality)

¹⁴ Lahtinen H-M., Child abuse disclosure from the perspectives of children to influencing attitudes and beliefs held by interviewers (2022).

¹⁵ Bottoms, B. L. et.al. *Abuse characteristics and individual differences related to disclosing childhood sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and witnessed domestic violence* (2016) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 31(7) 1308–1339; Pipe, M.-E. et.al. *Seeking resolution in the disclosure wars: An overview* (2007) M. E. Pipe, Y. Orbach, and A. Cederborg (eds) *Child sexual abuse* 3–10.

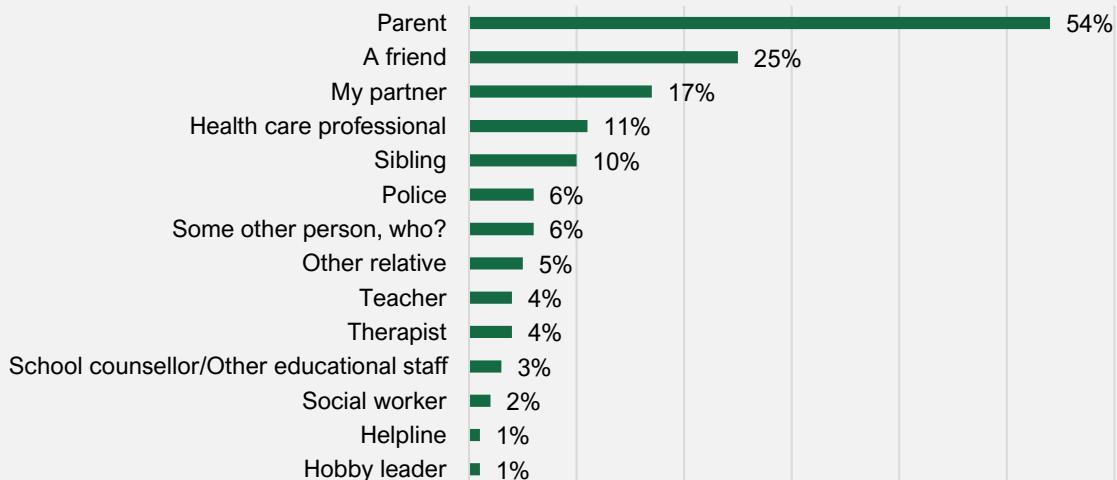
¹⁶ 89% of respondents to the question “Did your disclosure lead to a police investigation?” answered “No” (Number of respondents: 691).



"When after several years I filed a police report, my mother asked me to remove it."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Spanish.

To whom did you disclose the sexual violence?

Number of respondents: 228, selected answers: 373



Barriers to disclosure include feelings of shame, being afraid to tell, and a belief that the disclosure would not help

In the survey responses, we found the most common barriers to disclosure to include feelings of shame, being afraid to tell, and a belief that the disclosure would not help. Nearly half of the respondents said that they felt too ashamed to disclose the sexual violence they experienced. Other reasons that respondents mentioned include being threatened, being afraid, worrying that it wouldn't be taken seriously, wanting to forget that it happened, and not being able to verbalize what had happened.



"I couldn't put into words what I experienced, and I was afraid of the consequences for the perpetrator, my parents and myself. I wanted to protect myself from further violence."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in English.

Which of the following options best describes the barriers for your disclosure immediately following the sexual violence?

Number of respondents: 773, selected answers: 1,564





"Nothing would have helped me disclose."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Finnish.

Whilst research on child sexual abuse disclosure is inconsistent due to variation in methodology,¹⁷ it is estimated that it takes between 17.2 and 21.4 years before victims of childhood sexual violence disclose their abuse, their symptoms increasing in severity with the delay in disclosure.¹⁸ According to a systematic review by Lemaigre et al.,¹⁹ children and young people face a number of barriers to disclose sexual abuse including limited support, perceived negative consequences, and interpersonal issues caused by feelings of self-blame, shame and guilt. Many child victims lack the ability to understand and verbalize their abuse. Lahtinen's 2022 study found the child victim not considering the experience of sexual violence to be serious enough as the most common reason for non-disclosure.²⁰ Furthermore, victims experiencing emotional abuse by their mothers was also found to be a barrier to disclosure.



"I was afraid that I would be belittled or rejected."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in Finnish.

The abuser being the victim's primary caregiver or a close family member further complicates disclosure due to the victim having an ambivalent relationship with the abuser.²¹ Children inherently depend on their family system for their basic needs and emotional support which can be disrupted by disclosure.²² There is a need for robust, longitudinal studies to replicate these findings and to understand how survivors of child sexual abuse experience the process of disclosure.²³



"I didn't think my mom could handle it, and it was possible that she would blame me."
Respondent to the 'Our Voice' survivor survey in English.

¹⁷ Lahtinen H-M., *Child abuse disclosure from the perspective of children to influencing attitudes and beliefs held by interviewers* (2022).

¹⁸ Steine et al., *Prolonged silence on sexual assault. Predictors and correlates in adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child* (2016); Easton SD., *Disclosure of child sexual abuse among adult male survivors* (2013).

¹⁹ C. Lemaigre, E.P. Taylor, C., *Barriers and facilitators to disclosing sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review* (2017).

²⁰ Lahtinen H-M., *Child abuse disclosure from the perspective of children to influencing attitudes and beliefs held by interviewers* (2022).

²¹ Magnusson et al., *Preschoolers' disclosures of child sexual abuse: Examining corroborated cases from Swedish courts* (2017).

²² CHILD Global and Brave Movement, 'Justice Unleashed: Ending Limitations, Protecting Children' <[Justice Unleashed: Ending Limitations, Protecting Children](http://JusticeUnleashed.org)>, 8.

²³ Halvorsen et al., *To say it out loud is to kill your own childhood: An exploration of the first person perspective of barriers to disclosing child sexual abuse* (2020).



4. Case Study on Finnish Survivors' Experiences with the Statute of Limitations

The statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children in Finland

In a recent report by the Brave Movement and CHILD Global, Finland was among the lowest ranking European countries for their interpretation and implementation of the commitments laid out in the Lanzarote Convention, the Istanbul Convention, and Directive 2011/93/EU. This is because Finland has not suspended the statute of limitations regarding all crimes of sexual violence against children at least until the victim reaches the age of majority.²⁴

Whilst amendments to the Finnish Criminal Code have improved the situation, by adding the minimum age before the statute of limitations can run out in certain crimes, there are still substantial limitations for victims and survivors. For example, there is no provision to suspend the statute of limitations in crimes of sexual violence against children until they reach the age of majority.

Finnish national legislation has not abolished the statute of limitations for any crime of sexual violence against children. The time limits differ from crime to crime depending on the severity of the offence as identified in the law. For some offences, the statute of limitations is reached already in two years after the commission of the offence, whilst for some, this period may be up to 20 years.²⁵

“Statutes of limitations do not serve us victims. If I had been able to bring a case from the violence done against me, I am certain I would be further along in my path of recovery. But instead, I am now carrying this weight on my shoulders.”

Finnish survivor, member of the Our Voice survivor advocacy group.

As discussed in this report and confirmed by the findings from the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey, disclosure of child sexual abuse and exploitation often takes decades. In countries such as Finland, where the statute of limitations may expire before the victim is ready to disclose, victims are refused access justice and are unable to seek remedies for the harm they have suffered.

Many Finnish survivors disclosed after the statute of limitations had expired

“I can't say if I would have had it in me as a child to talk about what had happened to me.”

Respondent to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey in Finnish.

38% of Finnish respondents to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey said that they first disclosed the sexual violence they experienced in their childhood after the statute of limitations had expired. This means that over a third of the Finnish respondents were automatically denied justice for the violence that had been committed against them. As discussed above, the

²⁴ CHILD Global and Brave Movement, ‘Justice Unleashed: Ending Limitations, Protecting Children’ <[Justice Unleashed: Ending limitations, protecting children](#)>, 8.

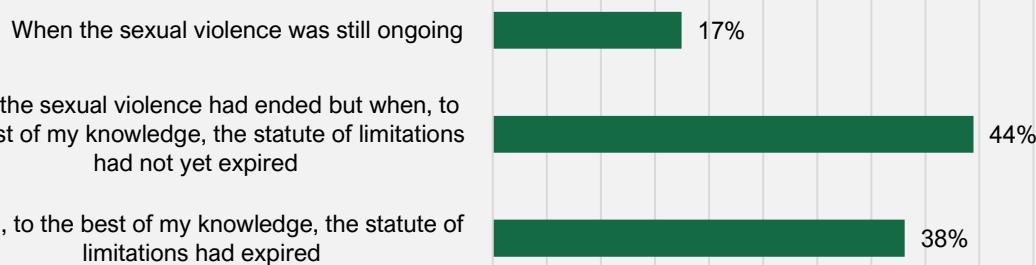
²⁵ The Criminal Code of Finland 39/1889 section 8 §1.



situation is especially dire in Finland, where statutes of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children do not respect the rights of the child to receive effective remedy and justice for the actions committed against them.

When did you first disclose the sexual violence?

Number of respondents: 126



“Maybe I could have disclosed if someone would have listened patiently and would have truly been present in that moment. If someone would have been that safe adult that I could have told.”

Respondent to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey in Finnish.

“If someone would have told me acts like those are always wrong, and if these things were spoken about like they are today.”

Respondent to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey in Finnish.

The effect of disclosure after expiry of the statute of limitations

The existence of the statute of limitations not only bars the victim’s access to justice through police investigations, court proceedings, and a potential conviction, but in many cases, it also reduces the victim’s access to support and help services. When asked about access to support, over half of Finnish respondents said that they were not able to access appropriate support or help as they disclosed after the statute of limitations had expired.

“I still need help to deal with what happened.”

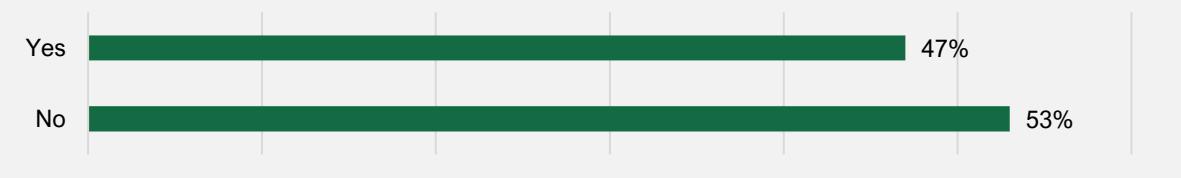
Respondent to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey in Finnish.

From the Finnish respondents who had received support or help, few received support from licensed specialists. Many say that they received help from family, friends, and other close ones. Access to appropriate help resources, which can often be very difficult, if not impossible to locate, should not be left to the victim and survivors’ responsibilities.



As you disclosed the sexual violence when the statute of limitations had already expired, do you find that you were able to access appropriate support or help?

Number of respondents: 47



“It would have been good to be able to consult a professional that would have known the legislation. I now understand that my therapist was not aware of the law.”

Respondent to the ‘Our Voice’ survivor survey in Finnish.

5. Looking Ahead

Crimes of sexual violence against children increasingly know no State borders as perpetrators and victims no longer need to be in physical contact for the crimes to occur. Therefore, to ensure that victims of childhood sexual violence have access to justice long after the commission of the offence regardless of the location of the perpetrator or of the victim, a unified standard should be applied across the States Parties to the Council of Europe. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe notably urges States Parties to “abolish the statute of limitations for sexual violence against children, or to at least ensure that the prescription periods for sexual violence against children in civil and criminal law are proportionate to the gravity of the alleged abuse and, in any case, no shorter than thirty years after the victim has reached the age of 18”.²⁶ As a result of the strong statement by the Parliamentary Assembly, many Council of Europe Member States have their work cut out for them to amend their national legislation.

“The statute of limitations for crimes of sexual violence against children needs to be extended. The threshold to disclose is enormous, because you blame yourself and the amount of shame you carry is huge. The journey is very long.”

Finnish survivor, member of the Our Voice survivor advocacy group.

²⁶ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2330, *Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and Co-operation in Europe* (2020) para 6.1.4.

