Christian Conference of Asia

International Consultation on Strengthening Responses to Child Trafficking in Asia

Chiang Mai, Thailand | 20 - 23 October 2026

Communiqué

The International Consultation on Strengthening Responses to Child Trafficking in Asia, organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) from 20 to 23 October 2026 in Chiang Mai, brought together 30 representatives of CCA member churches, member councils, and relevant non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to address the urgent issue of child trafficking and strengthen collective responses to it. The consultation sought to build the capacity of Asian churches to prevent and respond to trafficking, protect children and uphold their rights, enhance safeguarding policies and practices across church ministries and programmes, amplify advocacy, and deepen ecumenical cooperation for sustained collective action.

Through reflection on biblical themes, we were reminded that Scripture bears witness to the enduring realities of human exploitation, economic injustice, and the abuse of power. Joseph was sold by his brothers (Genesis 37:2, 27–36); Hagar, an enslaved woman, suffered abuse and was cast out with her son Ishmael (Genesis 16; 21:8–21); and a young Israelite girl was taken captive to serve in Naaman's household (2 Kings 5:2–4). Economic hardship drove families to surrender their children into servitude (2 Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5:1–5). Prophet Joel condemned the trading of children (Joel 3:3), and Acts recounts the exploitation of an enslaved girl for financial gain (Acts 16:16–19). These accounts reveal the devastating consequences of exploitation, particularly for children and other vulnerable people.

Human trafficking reduces people to commodities, denying their dignity, freedom, and fundamental rights. Child trafficking violates the God-given worth of every child, created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*, Genesis 1:26–27). Scripture condemns kidnapping and trafficking (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7) and affirms God's solidarity with the oppressed: God is the "Father of the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5), hears their cries (Exodus 3:7–8), and responds to Ishmael in the wilderness (Genesis 21:17). Jesus placed children at the centre of His ministry, teaching that welcoming a child is equivalent to welcoming Him and warning against harming "these little ones" (Matthew 18:1–6, 10–14). Protecting children is therefore not merely an act of compassion but a commitment to justice, righteousness, and faithfulness to God's will (Psalm 82:3–4; James 1:27).

We are thus called to be vigilant defenders of the dignity, rights, and well-being of every child. Faith demands more than words of compassion; it calls for collective action to address the root causes of trafficking, including poverty, inequality, discrimination, and the exploitation of people for profit. As Proverbs 24:11–12 reminds us, we have a responsibility to rescue those facing destruction and not turn away from their suffering. The Church must embody this calling through prevention, protection, advocacy, accountability, and solidarity with children and families at risk. Protecting children means affirming their sacred worth, upholding justice, and embodying God's promise of life in abundance for all.

We affirm the family as *ecclesia domestica*, the domestic church where children first encounter God and grow in faith and grace, following the tradition of the early Church. Yet this sacred role is undermined by systemic pressures, including poverty, economic inequality, limited access to education, discrimination, displacement, forced migration, and trauma. Compounded by inadequate state protection and support networks, these pressures force some families into desperate choices and expose children to forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced criminality, forced marriage, and other forms of abuse. Emotional neglect and the lack of a safe, nurturing family environment further increase children's vulnerability to exploitation, particularly among those who are rejected, neglected, or abandoned because of their gender, disability, or economic hardship.

Discussions revealed that harmful cultural practices can conflict with national laws against human trafficking. Child marriage, illegal adoption, and orphanage trafficking[1] persist in some communities where they are socially accepted. Cultural expectations, such as the pressure on eldest children to support their families' survival, can expose children to unsafe migration and exploitative labour. We affirm family-based care as the preferred setting for children, recognising residential care as a last resort only when necessary and when it can be provided in a safe and well-managed environment. We further emphasise the urgent need to equip families and communities to recognise and address the risks of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful cultural practices.

The consultation also highlighted the growing crisis of digital child exploitation, in which technology facilitates the abuse and exploitation of children across geographical and national borders. This includes cyber-grooming, online sexual abuse and exploitation, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), digital surveillance and blackmail, financial control, and forced criminality. The anonymity and cross-border nature of these crimes pose significant challenges to law enforcement and the effective implementation of protective measures. Families and communities must therefore strengthen their digital literacy and awareness to better protect children online. The Church must also be equipped to recognise and support child survivors of online abuse and exploitation, ensuring access to professional medical, legal, and psychosocial support.

These forms of exploitation, whether occurring within families, communities, cultural structures, or digital spaces, highlight the need for a comprehensive and coordinated response that prioritises the safety, dignity, and well-being of every child. Recognising this, we affirm that effective child protection requires more than awareness and good intentions. Preventing child trafficking demands sustained, long-term commitment and collaboration with organisations, experts, and advocates already engaged in this work. The consultation highlighted the need to strengthen safeguarding policies and reporting and referral mechanisms, while equipping church leaders, workers, and volunteers to respond appropriately to suspected trafficking and exploitation. Churches must receive disclosures with care, prioritise children's immediate safety, and report concerns through appropriate channels, leaving investigations and protection assessments to qualified professionals. Perpetrators must be held

[1] Orphanage trafficking involves the recruitment or transfer of children into residential care institutions for the purposes of exploitation and profit. When children are relocated to such institutions, many lose contact with their families and are provided with false identity documents to legitimise their classification as orphans.

See Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Orphanage Trafficking: A Hidden Crisis Aided by Good Intentions," March 2025, https://www.ipu.org/news/voices-and-videos/2025-03/orphanage-trafficking-hidden-crisis-aided-good-intentions.

accountable, while churches and communities work collectively to address the systemic causes of children's vulnerability. As Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us, "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

We also affirm children's right to know their rights and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Their voices and experiences must be heard and respected by churches, families, and authorities through age-appropriate, safe, and trauma-informed approaches. We call for stronger collaboration among churches, government agencies, civil society organisations, and social, health, and legal professionals to ensure timely, continuous support for children's recovery and, wherever safe and appropriate, reintegration into family-based care.

Calls to action

We call upon churches and ecumenical councils in Asia to:

- Incorporate the issues of human trafficking, child trafficking, and child exploitation, including exploitation in the digital world, into their official church documents, church policies and governance frameworks as a baseline for combating these issues.
- Build awareness among parents, children, and communities by developing training modules for congregation members and a handbook on understanding and preventing trafficking and exploitation.
- Develop and implement comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies, with clear reporting procedures and regular capacity-building for clergy, church workers, Sunday School teachers and volunteers.
- Establish safe, accessible and child-friendly mechanisms that enable children to express their concerns, report abuse, and participate meaningfully in matters affecting their safety and well-being.
- Empower children by creating safe spaces, adopting trauma- and shame-informed practices, eliminating stigma around disclosing abuse, and establishing pathways for healing and accountability, while rejecting the concealment of abuse and the protection of perpetrators.
- Collaborate with NGOs, government agencies, qualified professionals, and licensed service providers to support safe recovery spaces and referral pathways for survivors, ensuring that pastoral care complements medical, psychological, and legal support.
- Foster effective cooperation with relevant stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, civil society organisations, child protection professionals, and interfaith communities, to coordinate the prevention, referral, protection, recovery, and reintegration of children affected by trafficking and exploitation.
- Address the root causes of child trafficking, including systemic poverty, by creating meaningful opportunities for children and families and working towards communities and societies free from the conditions that enable child exploitation.

To every child who has been sold, trafficked, or exploited; whose voice has been silenced or whose right to protection has been denied: the shame is not yours to carry. The responsibility lies with those who harmed you and those who failed to protect you. You were created in the image of God, and your

dignity has never been diminished. We believe you, we stand with you, and we will not ask you to carry this alone.

To the churches and ecumenical bodies of Asia: we have named the harm, and we can no longer claim ignorance. We are called to be communities safe for children, where truth can be spoken without fear, and no one is shamed into silence. Let us act with courage and not wait for comfort. Let us make our churches safer, strengthen our safeguarding practices, listen to children and stand beside survivors throughout their journeys of recovery, respecting their choices and dignity. The task is large, but we do not carry it alone. We are called to meet it together. Some are guilty, but all share the responsibility to protect, and so together we choose to act.