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PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE: THE NEW LEGAL ARCHITECTURE OF CHILD PROTECTION IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

Background: Violence against children is a global problem with lifelong consequences for health, education and social development. Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges states to protect children from all forms of violence through legislative, administrative, social and educational measures. Between 2021 and 2026 Uzbekistan built a new legal architecture of child protection.

Aim: The article analyses this architecture, assesses its compliance with international standards and identifies directions for its further development.

Methods: The study combines doctrinal analysis of the Law of 14 November 2024 No. ZRU-996 “On the Protection of Children from All Forms of Violence”, the Law of 29 February 2024 No. ZRU-917 “On the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (Children’s Ombudsman)” and related acts; comparative analysis against the Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comments No. 2 and No. 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the WHO INSPIRE framework; and a review of international research.

Results: The new framework rests on three pillars: a comprehensive law that defines all forms of violence against children, including bullying, and introduces child protection case management and inter-agency standards; an independent parliamentary Children’s Ombudsman; and strengthened criminal and administrative liability, including for violations of the marriage-age legislation. Key challenges include the capacity of the social service workforce, coordination between agencies, child-friendly complaint mechanisms, data collection and the independence and resources of the Ombudsman.

Conclusion: The article proposes a national strategy to end violence against children, a qualified social work workforce, a unified child protection data system, accessible reporting channels for children and guaranteed resources for the Children’s Ombudsman.

Keywords: Children’s rights; violence against children; child protection; bullying; children’s ombudsman; case management; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Uzbekistan.

Introduction

Violence against children is one of the most widespread and least visible human rights violations. A systematic review published in 2016 estimated that up to one billion children aged 2–17 years had experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect in the past year.[1]

[1] Hillis S., Mercy J., Amobi A., Kress H. Global prevalence of past-year violence against children: a systematic review and minimum estimates // Pediatrics. 2016. Vol. 137, No. 3. e20154079.

The UN Study on Violence against Children concluded as early as 2006 that no violence against children is justifiable and all violence against children is preventable.[2]

Exposure to violence in childhood is associated with injuries, mental health problems, poor school performance and a higher risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence later in life.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Uzbekistan acceded in 1994,[3] requires states to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation while in the care of parents or any other person (Article 19). The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 13, interpreted this obligation broadly: it covers all forms of violence, in all settings, and requires a holistic child protection system that integrates prevention, identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up.[4]

In Uzbekistan, the basic law in this field was the Law of 7 January 2008 No. ZRU-139 "On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child".[5] In recent years the framework has been substantially expanded. Decree of the President No. PF-6275 of 9 August 2021 approved the establishment of a Children's Ombudsman;[6] the Law of 29 February 2024 No. ZRU-917 regulated the status of this institution;[7] and the Law of 14 November 2024 No. ZRU-996 "On the Protection of Children from All Forms of Violence", which entered into force on 15 May 2025, created a comprehensive system of prevention and response.[8] In 2026 penalties for violence against children and for violations of the marriage-age legislation were further strengthened.[9]

The aim of this article is to analyse this new legal architecture of child protection and to assess its compliance with international standards. The objectives are: (1) to describe the main elements of the framework; (2) to compare them with the requirements of the Convention and international guidance; and (3) to identify gaps and propose solutions. The research question is whether the new framework creates an integrated child protection system capable of preventing and responding to all forms of violence against children.

Methods

The study is a qualitative legal analysis based on three methods.

Doctrinal analysis: The Laws No. ZRU-139, No. ZRU-917 and No. ZRU-996, Decree No. PF-6275 and other acts were analysed on the basis of texts and official information from the National Database of Legislation (lex.uz) and official portals.

[2] Pinheiro P.S. World Report on Violence against Children. Geneva: United Nations, 2006.
[3] Girls Not Brides. Child Marriage Atlas: Uzbekistan. URL: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/uzbekistan/.
[4] Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence. UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/13, 18 April 2011.
[5] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child" of 7 January 2008, No. ZRU-139.
[6] Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Further Improvement of the System for Ensuring the Guarantees of the Rights of the Child" of 9 August 2021, No. PF-6275; see: Children's Ombudsman to be established in Uzbekistan // Kun.uz. 12 August 2021. URL: https://kun.uz/en/news/2021/08/12/childrens-ombudsman-to-be-established-in-uzbekistan.
[7] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (Children's Ombudsman)" of 29 February 2024, No. ZRU-917.
[8] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Protection of Children from All Forms of Violence" of 14 November 2024, No. ZRU-996.
[9] Strict measures against early marriages and illegal unions: New fines come into force // Zamin.uz. October 2026. URL: https://zamin.uz/en/society/224652-strict-measures-against-early-marriages-and-illegal-unions-new-fines-come-into-force.html.

Comparative analysis: The framework was compared with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 13 on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence,[10] General Comment No. 2 on the role of independent national human rights institutions in the protection of the rights of the child,[11] the Paris Principles[12] and the WHO INSPIRE technical package of seven strategies for ending violence against children.[13]

Review of research and reports: International research on the prevalence and consequences of violence against children and reports of international organisations on Uzbekistan were reviewed.

Limitations: The Law No. ZRU-996 has been in force for less than two years, and comprehensive data on its implementation are not yet publicly available. The analysis therefore focuses on the design of the framework and on risks for its implementation.

Results

A comprehensive law on violence against children: The Law No. ZRU-996 marks a turning point in the legal and institutional design of the state child protection system.[14] It lays down a system for prevention of and response to all forms of violence against children in all settings: the family, educational institutions, institutional care, the community and the digital environment. It envisages agency-specific and inter-agency standards for protecting children from violence and introduces child protection case management for dealing with situations of violence.[15] The Law explicitly recognises bullying as a form of violence against children, which is significant because bullying, including cyberbullying, had previously been treated mainly as a disciplinary issue for schools.[16] It also requires the state to ensure mechanisms through which violence can be reported.[17] The National Agency for Social Protection under the President plays a central role in implementation, supported by UNICEF.[18] The Law also established an order "For the Protection of Children" to recognise people who make a special contribution to child protection.[19]

The Children's Ombudsman: Decree No. PF-6275 of 9 August 2021 approved the proposals of the chambers of the Oliy Majlis to establish the institution of the Commissioner of the Oliy Majlis for the Rights of the Child (Children's Ombudsman), whose candidacy is submitted to

[10] Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence. UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/13, 18 April 2011.
[11] Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 2 (2002): The role of independent national human rights institutions in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child. UN Doc. CRC/GC/2002/2, 15 November 2002.
[12] United Nations General Assembly. Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (Paris Principles). UN Doc. A/RES/48/134, 20 December 1993.
[13] World Health Organization. INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children. Geneva: WHO, 2016.
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[16] Cyberbullying in Central Asia: what legal protections are there? // The Times of Central Asia. URL: https://timesca.com/cyberbullying-in-central-asia-what-legal-protections-are-there/.
[17] ECPAT International. Access to Justice for Child Survivors of Sexual Exploitation: Uzbekistan Legal Factsheet. 2025. URL: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/FINAL_ENG_A2J-Uzbekistan_Legal-Factsheet.pdf.
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[19] The law "On the protection of children from all forms of violence" came into force in Uzbekistan // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan. URL: https://pakistan.mfa.uz/en/news/v-uzbekistane-vstupil-v-silu-zakon-o-zashhite-detei-ot-vsex-form-nasiliia-1.

the chambers by the President.[20] The Commissioner acts as Deputy of the Authorised Person of the Oliy Majlis for Human Rights and submits to Parliament, by 15 February each year, a report on compliance by state bodies with legislation on the rights of the child.[21] The Law No. ZRU-917 of 29 February 2024 consolidated the legal status, functions and guarantees of the Commissioner.[22] During the Universal Periodic Review in November 2023, the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman's Office was welcomed by other states as a new national mechanism for the protection of human rights.[23]

Strengthened liability: The framework is accompanied by stricter liability. In January 2026 proposals were published to provide for punishment of up to life imprisonment for sexual crimes against children under 14 and to introduce administrative liability for parents or guardians who arrange the marriage of minors below the legal age and for persons who promote illegal marriages.[24] In October 2026 a law toughening penalties in this field entered into force: fines for parents who marry off a child below the marriage age were set at 8.8 to 11 million soums, and fines for performing religious marriage rites without state registration at 13.2 to 22 million soums.[25]

Table 1. Main elements of the child protection framework in Uzbekistan

Element	**Legal basis**	**Main function**
Framework guarantees of children's rights	Law No. ZRU-139 (2008)	General rights and guarantees
Children's Ombudsman	Decree No. PF-6275 (2021); Law No. ZRU-917 (2024)	Independent parliamentary oversight; complaints; annual report
Comprehensive protection from violence	Law No. ZRU-996 (2024, in force 15 May 2025)	Definitions including bullying; prevention; reporting; case management; inter-agency standards
Liability	Criminal Code; Code of Administrative Responsibility; 2026 amendments	Deterrence and accountability, including for child marriage

Source: compiled by the author.

[20] Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Further Improvement of the System for Ensuring the Guarantees of the Rights of the Child" of 9 August 2021, No. PF-6275; see: Children's Ombudsman to be established in Uzbekistan // Kun.uz. 12 August 2021. URL: https://kun.uz/en/news/2021/08/12/childrens-ombudsman-to-be-established-in-uzbekistan.

[21] Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the United Kingdom. Decree on additional measures to improve the system of protection of children's rights. URL: https://uzembassy.uk/news/499.

[22] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (Children's Ombudsman)" of 29 February 2024, No. ZRU-917.

[23] Human Rights Council. Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Uzbekistan. 2023. URL: https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g23/251/61/pdf/g2325161.pdf.

[24] Uzbekistan considers life sentences for sexual crimes against children // Kun.uz. 26 January 2026. URL: https://kun.uz/en/news/2026/01/26/uzbekistan-considers-life-sentences-for-sexual-crimes-against-children.

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Discussion

Compliance with international standards: The new framework corresponds in several key respects to General Comment No. 13. First, it adopts a comprehensive definition of violence that includes bullying and covers all settings, reflecting the principle that no violence against children is justifiable.[26,27] Second, case management and inter-agency standards respond to the Committee's call for an integrated child protection system rather than fragmented sectoral responses.[28] Third, the explicit duty to ensure reporting mechanisms responds to a long-standing gap: children and adults often did not know where to turn, and institutions had no clear obligation to act on reports.

The establishment of a Children's Ombudsman corresponds to General Comment No. 2, which encourages states to establish independent institutions for the promotion and monitoring of the Convention, either as a separate body or as a specialised unit within a broader human rights institution.[29] The parliamentary model, with an annual report to the Oliy Majlis, provides a channel for systemic oversight.

Challenges of implementation: (1) Workforce capacity: Case management requires a qualified social service workforce. The WHO INSPIRE framework identifies response and support services as one of the seven strategies for ending violence against children, alongside implementation and enforcement of laws, norms and values, safe environments, parent and caregiver support, income and economic strengthening, and education and life skills.[30] Without enough trained social workers at district level, the case management model risks remaining on paper.

(2) Coordination: Protection from violence involves education, health, internal affairs, social protection, justice bodies and mahalla institutions. The inter-agency standards envisaged by the Law must clearly assign lead responsibility for each case and establish information-sharing rules that respect the child's privacy.

(3) Child-friendly complaint mechanisms: General Comment No. 2 stresses that independent institutions must be directly accessible to children.[31] The Ombudsman and the reporting system should offer channels that children actually use: free telephone lines, messengers and school-based contact points, with confidentiality guarantees and age-appropriate information.

(4) Independence and resources of the Ombudsman: The Paris Principles require a broad mandate, pluralism, adequate funding and independence from the executive.[32] The effectiveness of the Children's Ombudsman will depend on whether it has its own budget, staff in the regions and the power to conduct inquiries and visit institutions without prior notice.

[26] Pinheiro P.S. World Report on Violence against Children. Geneva: United Nations, 2006.
[27] Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 13 (2011) on the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence. UN Doc. CRC/C/GC/13, 18 April 2011.
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[29] Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 2 (2002): The role of independent national human rights institutions in the promotion and protection of the rights of the child. UN Doc. CRC/GC/2002/2, 15 November 2002.
[30] World Health Organization. INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence against Children. Geneva: WHO, 2016.
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[32] United Nations General Assembly. Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (Paris Principles). UN Doc. A/RES/48/134, 20 December 1993.

(5) Data: Reliable data are a precondition for prevention. A unified child protection information system with data disaggregated by age, sex, form of violence, setting and outcome would allow the Ombudsman, Parliament and researchers to evaluate whether the reforms reduce violence.
(6) Balancing punishment and prevention: Stricter penalties signal that violence against children is unacceptable, but research shows that sustainable reductions in violence come mainly from prevention: parenting support, safe schools and changes in social norms.[33] Punishment of parents may also harm the child if it deprives the family of income; this is why INSPIRE combines law enforcement with family support and economic strengthening.
Interpretation: Taken together, Uzbekistan has moved from a declaratory model based on general guarantees to an operational model with a dedicated law, procedures and an independent oversight body. The next stage is implementation: building the workforce, procedures and data systems that will make the framework a working child protection system.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Laws No. ZRU-917 and No. ZRU-996 created the core of a modern child protection system in Uzbekistan: a comprehensive definition of violence, including bullying, a case management model, inter-agency standards, reporting mechanisms and an independent Children's Ombudsman. The 2026 strengthening of liability, including for child marriage, completes the framework. The answer to the research question is that the legal design largely meets international standards, while its effectiveness will depend on implementation. The following measures are proposed:
1. Adopt a national strategy to end violence against children for 2027–2030, structured around the seven INSPIRE strategies, with measurable indicators and budget allocations.
2. Develop a qualified social service workforce for child protection: professional standards, university training programmes and sufficient case managers in every district.
3. Establish a unified child protection information system with disaggregated data and publish annual statistics.
4. Create child-friendly reporting channels for the Children's Ombudsman and child protection services, including a free helpline and online channels, with confidentiality guarantees.
5. Guarantee the independence of the Children's Ombudsman through a separate budget line, regional representatives and the power to make unannounced visits to institutions.
6. Combine liability with prevention: positive parenting programmes, anti-bullying programmes in schools and economic support for vulnerable families.

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