News
Social Justice

Emma Medalla Santillan, director of the Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children in Cebu, facilitates a child rights and safeguarding formation session for young participants. (Courtesy of Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children Cebu)

by Oliver Samson

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

August 3, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

After completing a child rights formation program in her parish, a 13-year-old girl was approached by a classmate carrying a secret. The classmate confided that she was being sexually abused at home.

Instead of remaining silent, the teenager accompanied her friend to their school principal and later helped alert local authorities. For child protection advocates, this incident shows how education can empower children not only to recognize abuse but also to seek help.

"These children become our eyes and ears in the communities," said Sr. Ruth S. Baguinon, executive director of Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children (SPCC) and member of the Sisters of the Divine Savior.

Since its founding in 2001, the program has reached more than 5,000 children and trained over 3,000 child protection advocates nationwide, including children, youth and adults, according to Baguinon.

But long before children were reporting abuse and advocating for their peers, the sisters first had to confront difficult realities within the communities they served.

Before partnering with a parish, SPCC conducts social investigations to identify the most pressing concerns affecting children. Those assessments repeatedly revealed a pattern: sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect and large numbers of unregistered children.

"The child's first right is to have a name," Baguinon said.

Without birth registration, many children face barriers to education and other basic services. According to Baguinon, the problem was not limited to remote communities but was also present in major urban centers, including Metro Manila and Cebu.

When the program expanded to Cebu in 2005, workers encountered many of the same concerns.

Community members gather for a child safeguarding session conducted by the Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children Cebu. (Courtesy of Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children Cebu)

"Corporal punishment was very normal among parents as a form of discipline," said Emma Medalla Santillan, SPCC's Cebu program director and lay social worker. "We also saw verbal abuse that humiliated children, negligence and a lack of parental care."

Santillan recalled seeing children left unsupervised in hazardous areas, including shorelines and busy roads, while others showed signs of neglect.

The experiences convinced the sisters that children needed more than occasional assistance. They needed to understand their rights, recognize abuse and know where to seek help.

In response, SPCC developed formation programs focused on child rights, protection and advocacy. Children learned through reading programs, summer congresses and

parish-based formation sessions. Separate modules were also developed for youth and adults.

Over time, the ministry began producing a new generation of advocates.

Baguinon recalled one child who first joined a reading program and later became a child rights advocate after receiving additional formation. Another beneficiary eventually studied social work and later joined the organization's staff.

The sisters' impact extended beyond individual participants.

Santillan said two former youth beneficiaries were inspired by SPCC's advocacy work to pursue degrees in social work. Today, both work in organizations serving children in need of special protection.

In another parish, two former participants eventually entered religious life in a congregation whose ministry is dedicated to children.

Their journeys reflect one of the program's long-term goals: helping communities develop their own advocates who will continue protecting vulnerable children.

The sisters' ministry has also influenced how parents relate to their children.

Baguinon said that many parents who participated in formation programs gradually moved away from corporal punishment and became more aware of the harm caused by verbal abuse. Some learned to apologize after humiliating or verbally hurting their children.

While such changes did not happen overnight, they reflected growing recognition that children possess rights and dignity deserving of protection.

Yet even as awareness has improved, child protection advocates warn that new threats have emerged.

Among the most pressing concerns is the rise of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Digital technology has expanded educational opportunities and communication, but it has also created new avenues for abuse.

Sr. Ruth S. Baguinon, who leads the Salvatorian Pastoral Care for Children, is pictured at the Sisters of the Divine Savior convent in Quezon City. (Oliver Samson)

Baguinon recalled cases that shocked even experienced child protection workers. In one instance, she said, a mother facilitated the online sexual exploitation of her infant child, believing that no abuse had occurred because there was no physical contact involved.

The case underscored a dangerous misconception that continues to place children at risk.

Santillan said many children now have access to smartphones and the internet, while parents often lack the digital literacy needed to monitor online activities.

"Many children know more about devices and the internet than their parents," she said.

As a result, children can become vulnerable to cyberbullying, inappropriate content and online grooming by predators.

"Children do not realize they are already being groomed," Santillan said.

She also pointed to the emotional consequences of social media, where constant comparison with others can contribute to low self-esteem and mental health challenges.

To address these concerns, SPCC trains parents, parish workers and community members to recognize warning signs of abuse.

Among the indicators they monitor are sudden behavioral changes, social withdrawal, fearfulness, secrecy, unexplained injuries and aversion to physical contact.

Yet safeguarding advocates say abuse is not confined to homes, schools or online spaces.

Baguinon recalled one case involving a minor parish youth leader who disclosed a relationship with a priest during a child rights formation session. According to Baguinon, the girl acknowledged that she had fallen in love with the priest, but the case illustrated how grooming can confuse a child's understanding of abuse and exploitation.

In another case, several female choir members disclosed allegations involving a priest and a religious brother during formation sessions. Baguinon added that the children described receiving special attention, invitations to outings and movies, and inappropriate touching.

Advertisement

Santillan said she personally handled complaints involving clergy and described her initial reaction as one of shock.

"At first, I could not believe it," she said.

She said some cases involving clergy and vulnerable adults remain the subject of ongoing canonical and civil proceedings.

For child protection advocates, such experiences reinforce the need for safeguarding mechanisms, accountability and support systems within church institutions.

Despite growing awareness of safeguarding, convincing parishes to adopt child protection programs remains a challenge.

According to Santillan, some church leaders prioritize liturgical activities, spiritual programs or infrastructure projects over safeguarding initiatives. Financial concerns and limited personnel can also discourage participation.

"There are times when child protection is not seen as a priority," she said.

Even so, the ministry has continued to expand.

Today, SPCC works with more than 100 parishes nationwide, according to Baguinon. The organization has developed partnerships with dioceses and archdioceses, including Cebu, Manila and Novaliches.

Some local churches have become sufficiently established to continue the work independently, allowing the sisters to focus on new areas.

Baguinon hopes to further expand the ministry, particularly in Mindanao, where child protection needs remain significant.

She believes protecting children requires collaboration among families, schools, communities, government agencies and church institutions.

For Santillan, safeguarding is not an optional ministry but a core expression of the church's mission.

"It is an essential part of the church's mission. It is not optional," she said. "We have the responsibility and accountability to ensure children's dignity, safety and well-being."

Twenty-five years after the ministry began, advocates say the need remains as urgent as ever. Whether confronting abuse in homes, online spaces, communities or church institutions, they believe every child deserves adults willing to listen, protect and act.