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The safeguarding capability of adults in Catholic Church ministries: A global perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the wake of historical sexual abuse across the Catholic Church globally, the Church continues to develop policies and processes to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse, including supporting the skills, knowledge, and confidence of members of the Church.

Objective: We investigated the safeguarding capabilities of a range of people with different roles within Catholic Church ministries in various countries.

Participants and setting: Our 184 participants included lay people, religious men and women, school staff, safeguarding officers and tertiary students associated with the Catholic Church. Data were collected across seven different countries.

Methods: We measured the awareness, confidence, attitudes, and knowledge of participants and examined differences between participants in different roles within the Church and different countries through General Linear Models.

Results: We found varying levels of awareness, confidence, attitudes, and knowledge regarding sexual abuse prevention and safeguarding. We pinpointed the significant differences in three of these domains (confidence, attitudes, and knowledge) both between people with different roles in the church worldwide, but also between the countries from which participants came from.

Conclusions: We found that people in various countries and roles within the Church are at different stages of their safeguarding journey. Some are still understanding their roles (attitudes), some are still learning about how it is operationalised (awareness), and others are acquiring skills that will prepare them for enacting safeguarding policies and practices (confidence).

1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual abuse in faith-based organisations

Faith-based institutions around the world work to support children's social, emotional, and spiritual needs, including providing them with a sense of belonging to community, a network of trusted peers and adults, and a system through which to navigate life's challenges. Although many children engage with religious institutions without issue, sexual abuse in faith-based settings continues to

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dominate headlines and has been cause for wide-scale inquiries in countries including Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia. Almost all major religions have come under scrutiny and condemnation for leaders' knowledge of and covering up of child sexual abuse (CSA) to varying degrees. Although various denominations of Christianity—including the Catholic Church, which is the largest denomination globally—have received most of the focus, sexual abuse perpetrated by representatives of other religions including Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and other religious leaders have also faced investigation in the recent past (Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2022).

In every institutional context, there are specific contributing factors that enable abuse (Kaufman et al., 2016). In sports, for example, it is the dependence on coaches and managers who form close relationships as part of their mentoring of individuals and teams. In schools, there is a dependence on teachers, since they are the ones who assess students' skills and support educational achievement. In the context of religion, Catholic Church leaders are believed to represent God or the Absolute. This often results in a trust that is unconditional, which renders potential victims particularly vulnerable to abuse, as they attribute absolute power, a godlike status, and impunity to perpetrators. According to Keenan (2022), the sense of superiority and impunity, which also shows a lack of accountability, go hand in hand and contribute to the creation of a culture that is more focused on the hierarchy and the structure than on the true meaning of priesthood. Moreover, within the Catholic Church, there are yet other elements that have contributed to a mentality that allowed abuse to proliferate, such as doctrines on several aspects regarding sexuality and the role of clergy in maintaining a mentality that is impenetrable (Zollner, 2022).

Prevalence data on CSA occurring within the context of the various religious organisations is challenging to acquire due to insufficient data collection systems at the institutional and national level (Keenan, 2011). Different researchers have examined prevalence through different lenses. One Dutch study reported a prevalence of 1.7 % of the population as having experienced abuse within the Church. The prevalence was higher among men than it was in women (Langeland et al., 2015). A study in Germany found that between 1946 and 2014, 4.4 % of all clerics were alleged to have committed sexual abuse (Dressing et al., 2021). Bajos et al. (2023) estimated that 213,000 people were victims of abuse in the Catholic Church in France since 1950.

Another challenge to accurate abuse recording within religious organisations involves the 'veil of silence' culture (Keenan, 2011), a term that has been used to describe the explicitly and implicitly encouraged and socially internalised view that abuse should be dealt with 'in-house' and not reported to external bodies such as police. This led to severe testing" both of the trust of Church members and the public's esteem for the Church (Rinaldi & Zollner, 2022) paving the way for the now-common reflection on whether the institutions and their (clergy and laity) leadership in the church are accountable enough to properly face the abuse crisis.

Finally, persistent stigma experienced by victims, particularly for men who represent a higher proportion of religious-based sexual abuse victims is another reason for the underreporting of CSA in religious contexts (Finkelkhor, 1984; Tang et al., 2008). In Spain, victims tended to disclose abuse in adulthood with official reports more likely addressed to the Church than police officers of the legal system (Pereda & Segura, 2021).

Unlike intrafamilial child sexual abuse (where girls are more often abuse victims), in religious organisations, boys are more likely than girls to be abused (McPhillips et al., 2022). Research highlights that as well as the mental health—internalising and externalising problems and suicidal thoughts—and social problems (including sexual problems) associated with experiencing CSA in or out of a religious context, abuse by Catholic or other religious authorities is associated with a loss of faith and decline in belief in God, which influences the severity of mental health and social problems. Findings from a study with female CSA survivors by clergy in the Catholic Church in Poland identified interpersonal, intrapsychic, and struggles with their relationship with God as three specific ways they were affected, highlighting a need for spiritual healing in therapeutic and restorative justice work (McGraw et al., 2019; Pereda et al., 2022). Evidently, robust procedures for the prevention of—and appropriate therapeutic response to—CSA is necessary within all religious organisations.

1.2. Sexual abuse in Catholic institutions – inquiries

Globally, the Catholic Church is involved in a variety of ministries such as parish services including mass, Sunday school and pastoral care within a local diocese, as well as a range of work in other sectors such as provision of education, health, youth development and aged care services. This ranges from pastoral or spiritual care in services operated by others, through to actual delivery of those educational and care services (i.e., running hospitals and schools). During the early 1990s, an influx of reports of historical cases of sexual abuse by members of Catholic institutions surfaced, predominantly in Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Since then, countries from almost every continent have reported child sexual abuse cases within Catholic-run institutions including ministry settings, schools, residential out-of-home care, and hospitals (Al Jazeera, 2021). As a result, various independent inquiries around the world have investigated reports of wide-scale abuse, including abuse within the Catholic Church, and delivered landmark reports (see: Cahill & Wilkinson, 2017). These include the Canadian Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by Members of the Clergy (1990), the Boston Globe Spotlight investigation (2002), the two Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigations in Ireland (2009–2011), the English Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (2017), the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (2017), the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia (2017), the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church in France (Schofield, 2021), the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and in the Care of Faith-based Institutions, and the German Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

The issue of CSA within the Catholic Church remains an issue that warrants urgent and ongoing implementation of prevention and safeguarding measures that ensure children—and vulnerable adults—are kept safe when engaging with the Church, its members, and the wider church community. Achieving this requires an understanding of the training needs of the entire church community from

bishops to priests, seminarians to religious men and women, from teachers in Catholic schools to staff in Catholic-run residential care homes, and even the laity. Once training needs have been identified, change at both the individual and community level can begin. Pope Paul VI stated how development as a process happens both within communities and individuals highlighting how the development of a culture of safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone within the Church:

Development of the individual necessarily entails a joint effort for the development of the human race as a whole [...] We also urge men to explore concrete and practicable ways of organizing and coordinating their efforts, so that available resources might be shared with others (Paul VI, 1967, p. 43).

1.3. Responses by the Catholic Church

An examination of the evolution of the approach to safeguarding in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales identified multiple areas for continued development in line with recommendations across multiple reports including: the establishment of an independent child safeguarding agency, securing canonical recognition for child safeguarding structures from the Holy See, issues regarding clergy and Bishops holding power and the barriers created through poor resourcing and the voluntary nature of safeguarding work within the church (Rashid & Barron, 2019). However, efforts have been made in relation to improving response when abuse has occurred, and in ensuring CSA prevention and safeguarding strategies and policies are implemented. A theoretical framework to support Catholic entities in their communication regarding CSA response, and to a lesser extent prevention efforts, has been developed (Carroggio, 2021). In the US, changes to the screening of applicants to clergy training programs and seminaries has contributed to reductions in abuse but, like all prevention strategies, must be continually reflected upon and improved as things change (Isacco et al., 2020). Work in this space is not limited to western countries or to preventing abuse that occurs only within churches' activities. Kpalam and Ahiataku (2023) identified numerous practical recommendations relating to how pastoral ministry of safeguarding could prevent CSA in Ghana.

In 2019, the Vatican released *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, an apostolic letter (issued *Motu proprio*) outlining the new “concrete and effective” procedures that all those in the Church must follow in order to properly investigate reports of sexual abuse. It sent a clear message to all Catholic dioceses around the world, reminding them of their responsibility to put in place robust systems for reporting abuse and preventing attempts to conceal abuse. According to the 2023 version of *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*,

Except for when a cleric learns of information during the exercise of ministry in the internal forum, whenever a cleric or a member of an Institute of Consecrated Life or of a Society of Apostolic Life learns, or has well-founded motives to believe, that one of the acts referred to in art. 1 has been committed, that person is obliged to report it promptly to the local Ordinary where the events are said to have occurred or to another Ordinary” (art. 3; Pope Francis, 2023).

In 2023 Pope Francis updated *Vos Estis Lux Mundi* to extend its coverage to include lay leaders of international associations as responsible for following the same procedures and others within the Church. The updated version also covered “vulnerable adults” as victims to report abuse of, in addition to children.¹ The document also recommends for academic, interdisciplinary, international reflection on the sense of vulnerability in children and adults (Fleming et al., 2023).

Human systems are often a result of the (unbalanced) relationship between two or more people. A growing number of scholars consider safeguarding to be explicitly a “systemic issue”: Vulnerability develops in a relationship and within a context or a system where the culpability for potential abuse is on the abuser, but the responsibility to contribute to a safer “system” is everyone's responsibility (Fleming, 2019). Vulnerability comes from objective elements, like age, norms, and roles, and subjective elements, such as trust and fear: a vulnerable person is someone who cannot say “no” to something he or she feels uncomfortable with or freely consent to something. This is also a matter of debate among scholars. If a person is a victim of grooming, he or she is led to be subjugated to a manipulative relationship with the groomer. It starts with many seemingly good things like gifts, compliments, and particular attention and develops into a relationship of dependence through manipulation, social isolation, and control imposed by the groomer, who abuses his or her power to keep the victim under his or her influence.

Past inquiries and direct Papal instructions have resulted in Catholic institutions in various countries taking up new measures to prevent, investigate and mitigate the impacts of CSA. The Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited (ACSL; <https://www.acsltd.org.au>) recently released the second edition of the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards, which creates a framework for Catholic entities—including churches, schools, health and welfare services, and youth-development organisations—across Australia to promote the safety of children and adults at risk (Australian Catholic Safeguarding Limited, 2022). ACSL also provides training and a range of other learning and development resources for Catholic Institutions specifically focused on child safeguarding practices. In the United Kingdom, the Catholic Safeguarding Standards Agency (CSSA), a professional standards body for Catholic Institutions (<https://www.catholic safeguarding.org.uk/>), conducts regular audits of Church bodies in line with the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards. To support safeguarding efforts, the CSSA has devised an audit self-assessment tool and a variety of other practice guidance for institutions of all contexts, sectors, and levels to ensure they meet the highest safeguarding standards. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (<https://www.usccb.org/topics/catholic-safeguards>) adopted the Charter for Protection of Children and Young People in 2002 and established a Committee on the Protection of Child and Young People to support the enactment of the charter. The

¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20230325-motu-proprio-vos-estis-lux-mundi-aggiornato.html.

USCCB reports annually on the implementation of the Charter within diocese across the country. In the 2021 report, over 99 % of priests and deacons were reported to have been trained in child protection practices (Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, 2022) and a series of other resources were provided to the Catholic community to protect children, young people, and vulnerable adults.

Similar initiatives focused on safeguarding operate in several other countries in which Catholic institutions provide service including the National Safeguarding Centre of India (<https://www.tutelaminorum.org/indian-church-opens-national-safeguarding-centre/>) which first commenced operation in 2021, the Catholic Safeguarding Institute for the Catholic Church in Asia and the Pacific Nations (<https://www.catholicsafeguarding.net/>), and the introduction of the Child and Vulnerable Adult Safeguarding Policy in South Sudan in 2023.

Most of the safeguarding material developed by such organisations outlines the expectation of good practice in accordance with a variety of child-focused rights and values. However, what is less evident in these Catholic safeguarding initiatives is the required capabilities of leaders, clergy, practitioners, and the Church communities to effectively implement the practice guidance and procedural standards and better safeguard children, young people, and vulnerable adults from CSA.

1.4. Capabilities of those within church to prevent abuse and support victims

Children and young people have broadly identified four issues impacting their safety in Church-run activities. These issues include: Concerning behaviour of adults and peers that impact their sense of safety, fear of being judged by adults or peers within the Church community, a lack of power such as the ability to say no to adults asking them to do something they are not comfortable doing, and the level of familiarity – that is knowing people who can keep them safe, but equally not having people become overly familiar and making them feel uncomfortable to unsafe (Russell, Stewart and Higgins, 2023).

Although Catholic entities around the world have put in place a range of policies, training, and direct guidance to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse, little has been reported on the outcomes of these strategies. There are limited data on the success of programs or strategies designed to safeguard children within Catholic settings. Specifically, we know very little about the impact that such strategies have had on building the capabilities of adults to prevent and respond to abuse. Nurse (2017) evaluated the impact of participating in a child sexual abuse prevention program on the knowledge and behaviour of over 500 adults working across education, ministry, and social care services offered by the Catholic Church. She reported increase in knowledge, which was maintained at the 6-month post training point and an increase in discussing child sexual abuse with their own children and other adults. Considering the dearth of research in this space, small-scale studies investigating baseline characteristics, or pilot studies investigating the feasibility of implementing specific interventions or strategies are an important first step before scaling up.

To appropriately evaluate CSA prevention within any church entity, it is first essential to establish baseline data on the safeguarding capabilities of adults who are in contact with and responsible for the safety of children as part of their role. By establishing the gaps in capabilities and needs of these adults within Catholic institutions, we are better equipped to develop targeted training, policies, and strategies suitable to the Catholic context and appropriate to the specific roles and countries of recipients of strategies.

The aim of our research study was to understand the capabilities of clergy and laity across a variety of Catholic Church entities in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. We were guided by the following questions:

1. Which safeguarding capabilities are strengths within the Catholic Church entities and which are most in need of improvement?
2. Are there any differences between countries in the capabilities of those who minister across a variety of Catholic entities?

Table 1

Participant numbers per country and across role groups.

Analysis Groups	N	Gender [†]		%
		M	F	
Roles within the Catholic Church				
Clergy	58	46	12	31.5 %
Tertiary students	63	38	25	34.2 %
Lay People	28	9	19	15.2 %
School staff and safeguarding officers	35	12	23	19.0 %
Countries where ministries are based*				
Philippines	31	8	23	16.8 %
United Kingdom	35	21	14	19.0 %
Ghana	24	17	7	13.0 %
India	26	24	2	14.1 %
Poland	28	9	19	15.2 %
Australia	9	9	0	4.9 %

[†] No participants identified as a gender other than male or female.

* NB: An additional 36 participants recruited in Italy were attending a Diploma and Licentiate (master's degree) course in Safeguarding. They came from the following countries: Ghana, USA, Brazil, Malawi, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Zimbabwe, South Korea, Madagascar, Ukraine, Pakistan, Malta, Poland, Senegal, Indonesia, Zambia, Mexico, Swaziland, Germany, and Uganda. Their data are only used in analysis of the whole sample and the role within the Church.

3. Are there differences between the capabilities of those in different roles within Catholic entities (e.g., clergy, lay people, and students studying for specialist safeguarding roles)?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Design

We used a cross sectional design to investigate the capabilities of Church-related individuals in a range of Catholic entities globally. Using the Safeguarding Capabilities Survey (Russell & Higgins, 2020), we measured participants' beliefs about the organisational culture of safeguarding and awareness of policies and procedures (awareness), confidence to act (confidence), attitude to prevention and agency of children/young people (attitude), and situational prevention knowledge and education (knowledge).

2.2. Participants

Participants for the study were drawn from six different countries, as well as an international tertiary institution providing post-graduate safeguarding training for people from a range of countries and regions. Participants all worked or interacted with the Catholic Church in a range of different roles. As countries varied on the specific titles of participants groups, we categorised each countries participants into four, thematically relevant groups: Clergy, tertiary students, lay people, and school staff and safeguarding officers (see Table 1).

2.3. Materials

To measure capability in safeguarding, we used the Safeguarding Capabilities in Preventing Child Sexual Abuse scale ("Safeguarding Capabilities Survey"; Russell & Higgins, 2020). It has 73 items across four domains that measure the capabilities of adults and young people aged 16 and older to prevent and respond to grooming and sexual abuse. Table 2 outlines the details of the four domains, example items, reliability in an Australian sample (including Catholic and other religious and secular workers across a variety of youth-serving sectors).

Items are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale with the first and last anchor points labelled 'strongly disagree' and 'strongly agree' respectively, and the remaining three points unlabelled. 26 items (of which 15 make up the entire attitudes domain) are reverse scored.

2.4. Procedure

Ethics approval was granted by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (Grant no. 2018-222H). We used a convenience sample by recruiting through Catholic organisations, institutes, and Dioceses. These were selected by members of the Global Safeguarding Alliance, an alliance of academic, teaching, and research institutions, as well as practice-oriented professionals that promotes safeguarding. They used their knowledge of the context of the Catholic Church in their relevant country to invite individuals to participate. The survey was delivered using the online survey platform Qualtrics. The average time for participants to complete the survey was 15 min. Participation was voluntary, and participants completed the online survey on their own. The survey included instructions on how to answer the questions. Participants could skip questions if they chose, and could stop at any

Table 2
Safeguarding Capabilities in Preventing Child Sexual Abuse scale domains.

Domain	Description	Example items	Internal reliability (α)
Organisational culture and awareness of policy and procedures (Awareness)	Awareness of the safeguarding policies, procedures and practices that they are expected to follow to safeguard children and young people. Ranging from policies that affect them directly, to expectations of leadership to help create an organisational culture of safety.	My organisation makes sure I am aware of things that our organisation can do to protect children and young people from sexual abuse	($\alpha = 0.95$)
Confidence to act (Confidence)	The degree to which staff and volunteers feel confident to implement safeguarding strategies such as: providing support, approaching colleagues, and responding to and supporting young people if something were to happen.	I feel confident talking in developmentally appropriate and safe ways with children and young people about their peer relationships	($\alpha = 0.91$)
Attitudes to prevention and agency of children and young people (Attitude)	Workers' attitudes towards activities needed to support prevention of child sexual abuse and their sense of personal responsibility for prevention activities.	It is solely the parents' responsibility to teach their child(ren) how to stay safe in different situations	($\alpha = 0.79$)
Situational prevention knowledge and education (Knowledge)	Staff and volunteers' knowledge of situational prevention strategies (i.e., how to modify environmental factors to reduce opportunities for grooming and abuse to occur), and the education of children and young people.	An important step in preventing sexual abuse is the design of rooms, buildings and play areas to enable observation and eliminate blind spots	($\alpha = 0.68$)

time, without penalty. All participants who completed the survey were given information on accessing support if they felt distressed or needed to discuss a child's safety.

2.5. Statistical analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29. Descriptive analyses were performed for the mean scores of responses to the four domains within the survey by each country and by participant role within Church ministries. Mean scores range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We ran two multivariate tests of group variance (MANOVAs); one focused on differences between participants in different countries and one on participants' role within the Church. We then created two General Linear Models with planned contrasts between roles within the Church and between countries to identify differences between participants in the two sets of groups (role in the Church and country). Given that none of the items within the survey were mandatory and participants were able to skip any of the items within a given domain, we only included responses that met an inclusion threshold. To determine the inclusion threshold, we calculated the mean number of items per domain that had been skipped. We then excluded from analyses regarding each domain any responses that fell two standard deviations outside the mean number of missing items.

3. Results

A total of 184 participants completed the Safeguarding Capabilities Survey between August 2022 and May 2023. They were recruited from six countries, alongside 36 who were completing a postgraduate safeguarding course in Italy who came from 21 different countries. Due to some incomplete data, 171 participants met inclusion threshold for the attitude domain, 170 for the knowledge domain and 167 for both the awareness and confidence domains. Using data from all the participants who met inclusion threshold, regardless of country or role within the Church, the knowledge domain had the highest mean score (4.30 from a maximum potential score of 5) representing the highest scoring domain. The awareness domain had the lowest mean score (3.84). The overall mean scores per domain provide a comparison point for subgroup analysis, see [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Domain mean scores, standard errors, and 95 % confidence intervals per country and Church role groups.

	Attitude			Awareness			Confidence			Knowledge		
	M	SD	95 % CI	M	SD	95 % CI	M	SD	95 % CI	M	SD	95 % CI
Overall mean scores for all participants	4.07	0.67	3.96 to 4.17	3.84	0.74	3.73 to 3.95	3.95	0.65	3.85 to 4.05	4.30	0.44	4.23 to 4.36
Roles within the Church												
Clergy	4.21	0.75	4.01 to 4.40	3.99	0.63	3.82 to 4.17	3.91	0.55	3.76 to 4.06	4.33	0.47	4.21 to 4.45
Tertiary students	4.06	0.53	3.92 to 4.20	3.81	0.75	3.61 to 4.01	4.16	0.66	4.34 to 4.21	4.34	0.36	4.24 to 4.44
Lay People	3.67	0.74	3.37 to 3.96	3.53	0.89	3.18 to 3.88	3.68	0.78	3.38 to 3.98	4.18	0.45	4.00 to 4.36
School staff and safeguarding officers	4.17	0.56	3.96 to 4.37	3.89	0.70	3.63 to 4.16	3.87	0.57	3.66 to 4.09	4.26	0.52	4.07 to 4.45
Countries												
Philippines	3.76	0.59	3.54 to 3.98	3.64	0.93	3.28 to 4.00	3.69	0.79	3.40 to 3.99	4.28	0.44	4.12 to 4.44
United Kingdom	4.61	0.26	4.51 to 4.71	4.05	0.63	3.82 to 4.28	3.89	0.51	3.70 to 4.08	4.47	0.37	4.34 to 4.60
Ghana	3.79	0.77	3.45 to 4.14	3.82	0.72	3.50 to 4.15	4.25	0.56	4.01 to 4.50	4.15	0.48	3.93 to 4.37
India	3.57	0.75	3.25 to 3.88	3.95	0.64	3.67 to 4.24	4.09	0.53	3.86 to 4.32	4.13	0.48	3.93 to 4.33
Poland	4.00	0.52	3.80 to 4.20	3.80	0.79	3.48 to 4.12	3.98	0.59	3.74 to 4.21	4.34	0.50	4.14 to 4.54
Australia	4.67	0.30	4.44 to 4.91	4.26	0.28	4.04 to 4.47	3.51	0.63	3.02 to 4.00	4.25	0.46	3.89 to 4.60
Other*	4.25	0.49	3.93 to 4.58	3.91	0.75	3.41 to 4.42	4.18	0.90	3.58 to 4.78	4.33	0.35	4.10 to 4.57

* Participants were recruited in Italy attending a postgraduate course in safeguarding. Due to this, these participants were not included in the country sub-analysis and were coded as missing data in the covariate variable of 'country' in the role in Church analysis.

3.1. Differences between role groups

We conducted a MANOVA, using role within the Church as the independent variable and the four domains as the dependent variables. There was a statistically significant difference in safeguarding capabilities based on the participants' role within the Church, $F(12, 461) = 2.91, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.824, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$. We conducted four follow-up General Linear Models with planned contrasts to investigate any differences in domains between participants in different roles within the Church. We include country as a covariate due to the different training opportunities and stages individual countries are at, both for the Church and in general, in relation to safeguarding practice. Below we present results of the General Linear Models alongside any significant differences as found in the planned contrasts.

Awareness. There was a significant effect of role within the Church $F(3, 159) = 3.45, p = .018, \eta_p^2 = 0.061$ on awareness scores. The country a participant came from was a significant covariate in relation to participants' awareness scores $F(1, 159) = 6.12, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = 0.037$. Lay people had significantly lower awareness than all other roles: clergy ($F(1,159) = 10.04, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$), tertiary students ($F(1,159) = 5.97, p = .016, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$), and school staff and safeguarding officers ($F(1,159) = 5.10, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$).

Confidence. There was an effect of role in the Church, $F(3,159) = 4.51, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$. Planned contrasts analysis identified that tertiary students scored significantly higher than clergy ($F(1,159) = 6.10, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$), lay people ($F(1,159) = 12.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.08$), and school staff and safeguarding officers ($F(1,159) = 5.54, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$). Country was not a significant covariate regarding participants' confidence scores.

Attitudes. There was a main effect of role in the Church on attitudes, $F(3,163) = 4.09, P = .008, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$. Planned contrasts identified that compared to lay people, both clergy ($F(1,163) = 10.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$) and school staff and safeguarding officers ($F(1,1643) = 7.53, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$) had significantly higher scores on attitudes towards safeguarding. Country was not a significant covariate on participants' attitudes towards safeguarding.

Knowledge. There was no significant effect of role in Church $F(3,162) = 1.54, p = .51$ or for the covariate of country on participants' knowledge scores.

3.2. Differences between countries

We conducted a MANOVA using country as the independent variable and the four domains as the dependent variables. There was a statistically significant difference in safeguarding capabilities based on participants' country, $F(20, 459) = 5.70, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.479$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.17$. As with role in the Church, we conducted four follow-up General Linear Models, with planned contrasts to test for differences between each country. We included role in the Church as a covariate due to the different training opportunities and stages individuals from countries might have across different church roles.

Awareness. There was no significant effect of country $F(5,139) = 1.48, p = .20$ or for the covariate of role in the Church on participants' awareness scores.

Confidence. There was a main effect of country on participants' confidence towards safeguarding, $F(5,139) = 2.85, P = .018, \eta^2 = 0.09$. However, there was no effect of role in the Church as a covariate. Planned contrasts analysis identified that participants from Ghana scored significantly higher than those from the Philippines $F(1,139) = 8.14, p = .005, \eta^2 = 0.06$ and Australia $F(1,139) = 7.79, p = .006, \eta^2 = 0.05$. Participants from India also scored significantly higher than participants from Australia, $F(1,139) = 5.03, p = .027, \eta^2 = 0.04$.

Attitude. There was an effect of country on attitudes, $F(5,139) = 14.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.35$. There was no effect of role in the Church as a covariate. There were 10 significant differences identified within the planned contrasts. These are detailed in [Table 4](#) below.

Knowledge. There was no effect of country on participants' knowledge scores, $F(5,138) = 1.77, p = .123$. Role within the Church was a significant covariate in regard to participants' knowledge scores, $F(1,138) = 4.55, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = 0.032$.

4. Discussion

We investigated the safeguarding capabilities of a range of people in different roles within Catholic Church ministries across

Table 4
Planned contrasts between countries in mean score on the Attitude domain.

Higher country	Lower country	Statistic
UK	Ghana	$F(1,139) = 24.96, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.15$
UK	India	$F(1,139) = 52.15, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.27$
UK	Poland	$F(1,139) = 15.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.10$
UK	The Philippines	$F(1,139) = 26.28, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16$
Australia	The Philippines	$F(1,139) = 10.10, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$
Australia	Ghana	$F(1,139) = 10.86, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$
Australia	India	$F(1,139) = 26.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.16$
Australia	Poland	$F(1,139) = 6.17, p = .014, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$
Philippines	India	$F(1,139) = 4.56, p = .035, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$
Poland	India	$F(1,139) = 11.18, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.07$

different countries. We found varying levels of awareness of policies and procedures and a belief in a culture of safeguarding, confidence to prevent and respond appropriately to sexual abuse, attitudes towards the prevention of abuse and knowledge regarding situational prevention and the agency of children and young people.

Compared to average scores across the domains from a larger sample of secular and faith-based organisations in Australia that have invited participants to complete the Safeguarding Capability Survey (Russell & Higgins, 2024), the participants in this study of different roles in Catholic ministries from six countries scored higher in their knowledge and confidence, but lower in their attitudes and awareness. Our findings could reflect how the Church has worked to improve the knowledge of clerics, professionals working in a range of ministry areas, safeguarding specialists, and other lay members of the Church such as through the creation of national bodies (i.e., ACSL in Australia; CSSA in the UK) to train, support and audit Dioceses and other Catholic entities, through support for how to implement directives such as *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, and through efforts to embed safeguarding culture within the Church and that with this knowledge has come a confidence to safeguard children. However, we lack the longitudinal data to understand whether these domain areas have changed recently or over a longer period and whether specific strategies, policy implementation, or training interventions may have played a role in these comparatively higher levels (more robust research methodologies would be needed to evaluate this). The comparatively low scores on awareness and attitudes are worth investigating further as having positive attitudes towards the safeguarding of children and to children's right to agency in this space is often seen as a foundation for effective safeguarding.

There is likely a range of reasons for the less positive attitudes to the need for safeguarding in this global study. One reason could be that people who are not directly challenged by the realities of child sexual abuse within the Church in those (many) parts of the world where abuse is still not perceived as an urgent and widespread reality, tend to see safeguarding as connected to something very uncomfortable and something to be considered and worked on by 'others' - often 'those in charge'. Alternatively, the lower scores could reflect the reality of the need for improvement in communication about the importance of children, their right to safety, and the role that church ministries have in prioritising and supporting actions to keep children safe. The lower scores in awareness of policies and procedures and the culture of safeguarding could be an effect of the constant highlighting of the Church's failings in the past to protect children from sexual abuse. Such persistent messaging may be, either positively or negatively, affecting the ability of individuals within the Church to believe safeguarding has become part of the Church's culture. Similarly, despite policies and procedures being introduced within Dioceses and organisations such as schools and care facilities, individuals may still feel that enough has not yet been done. Alternatively, the lower awareness scores could simply be that policies and procedures to safeguard children are not being introduced as quickly or communicated as effectively as they are in other organisations and that this should be a focus of Catholic entities globally.

We were able to identify significant differences across three of these domains (confidence, attitudes, and awareness) between people with different roles across Church ministries globally, and in two domains (attitudes and confidence) between the countries from which participants came, as discussed below.

4.1. Role differences

Although there was no significant difference in safeguarding knowledge based on role, there was a trend towards lay people having the lowest scores on this domain (as well as in every other domain). The generally lower scores for lay people suggest that safeguarding initiatives globally need to focus not only on church leaders and designated safeguarding leads, but also on lay people in churches and church-run ministries for there to be widespread acceptance and culture change. In relation to attitudes, awareness, and knowledge, the role that scored the highest was clergy. This suggests that strategies, policy reform, and communication across the Church may have been largely targeted at clergy, who are seen as leaders in the Church, and thus have benefitted from the Church's safeguarding reforms.

Out of the four domains measured with the Safeguarding Capabilities Survey, the confidence domain most commonly has the lowest score, indicating a lack of confidence to act and implement preventive strategies to keep children and young people safe. In contrast to what is usually reported, tertiary students in this study reported high levels of confidence that were significantly higher than clergy, lay people and catholic school staff and safeguarding officers. This is likely due to the self-selected nature of students studying safeguarding, theology and philosophy at the under- and postgraduate level, and their level of dedication to the topic (and most likely, leadership and experience in the area in their ministries in their home countries). This finding highlights how continuing professional development particularly through ongoing seminary learning for Bishops and Priests and Provincial leaders regarding safeguarding would be an opportunity to leverage similar learning activities for those already working with and providing ministry to children.

4.2. Country differences

Some participants in our study came from countries (Australia and the UK) that have had inquiries into institutional child sexual abuse. Our results indicate that participants from these countries have more positive attitudes towards the importance of safeguarding than other countries, where such national inquiries have not yet occurred. In contrast, participants in other countries, such as Ghana and India, score higher on their level of confidence to prevent and respond appropriately to CSA. However, perceived confidence—if it is not aligned to knowledge and skill—may not be a good indicator of safeguarding capability.

One potential reason for these findings is that high levels of awareness and knowledge regarding, and attitude towards the importance of safeguarding children and young people, may be unrelated to the confidence to be able to prevent abuse and in having

the skills and ability to respond when abuse occurs may drop. Research by [Walsh et al. \(2012\)](#) found that while levels of policy and knowledge were related to past reporting of CSA by individuals (school teachers), they were not related to anticipated future reporting of CSA. Along similar lines, it may be that as levels of knowledge and awareness regarding safeguarding increases confidence in being able to protect children may decrease. Whether or not the same lack of relationships or decrease in confidence applies to other CSA prevention behaviours beyond reporting CSA exist would need to be tested.

Another consideration of our findings is that countries that have high confidence tend to have lower scores on awareness or attitudes towards safeguarding. This could mean that although people in those countries within the Church are confident considering their level of knowledge, this may not include some of the more difficult aspects of applying safeguarding policy and practice.

Within the Church, the safeguarding capabilities that our study identified as strengths were the level of knowledge in clergy and tertiary students, and the attitudes and awareness of policies and a culture of safeguarding in countries where broad inquiries into secular and religious institutions have been conducted. The areas most in need of improvement include the safeguarding capabilities of the laity across most countries, improving knowledge and awareness in countries the Church works in where no governmental inquiries have supported safeguarding improvement, and in the confidence of individuals within the Church who have either a lack of awareness and/or knowledge, or whose levels of knowledge and awareness may prevent them from feeling confident to safeguard children.

4.3. Limitations

Our data are some of the first data to identify the capabilities of people across the Church globally to know, be aware of, have positive attitudes towards and confidence in safeguarding children. Our recruitment process was not designed to be representative of all Church ministries and entities in each participating country and includes only a small number of countries globally and a small number of participants in each category across each country. Potential bias may have affected our results due to the convenience sampling used and the limited number of participants across each category, which differed across each country. A larger study with each country recruiting similar samples in relation to the categories of role within the Church but larger numbers of participants would help build upon this foundational work. Also, our data are cross-sectional, and we are unable due to the methodology we applied to make any causal conclusions. Further research is required to understand whether particular strategies, policies, directives, or communications have improved safeguarding in the Church. Further research is needed using randomly selected recruitment to have participants who are representative of a broader range of countries and ministries of the global Catholic Church. However, the fact that differences were found (between countries, and between different roles) suggest that there is variability in safeguarding capability across the Church globally that could be addressed through improved education and culture-change strategies.

4.4. Conclusions and implications

The higher level of capabilities found in countries in which there have been significant inquiries, awareness of abuse, and reforms (both secular, and/or religious) suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to the capabilities of clergy and laity in countries where such inquiries have not yet occurred. Similarly, greater attention may need to be paid to addressing particular domains of safeguarding

Table 5

Practical recommendations for improving safeguarding in the Church.

Role within the Church	Recommendations
Clergy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equip clergy on preparation training and ongoing formation with knowledge and implementation of situational prevention strategies, even where there might be high levels of confidence to act. Build awareness and knowledge of how to identify and mitigate risks, based on situational or contextual prevention strategies, as outlined in Morley and Higgins (2018) and Rayment-McHugh et al. (2024). Encourage ownership and acknowledgement of the church's record of past failures to create safe environments for children.
Tertiary students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equip ministries and build their capacity to keep children safe Develop awareness of safeguarding issues within ministries and have high positivity to the responsibilities of safeguarding as part of their role.
Lay People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be prepared and confident to address disparities people's capability in the various ministries they take up. Build capacity to report inappropriate behaviour and situations, grooming, and abuse. Develop awareness of policy and procedures, attitudes to prevention and agency of children and young people, and their role in building a positive organisational culture of safeguarding.
School staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure confidence to act is matched with adequate awareness of safeguarding issues, and positive attitudes for the need for implementing strategies. Support new and existing staff to be involved in the development and implementation of safeguarding policies, codes of conduct, and reporting procedures. Build a culture of awareness and positivity to the safety of children and the responsibility of adults to create safe environments, be attuned to (and mitigate) risk, is essential for actions to be aligned to good practice.
Safeguarding officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt strategies to increase knowledge and awareness, especially in countries where major secular inquiries have not yet occurred. Build awareness of safeguarding responsibilities by creating a collaborative network to increase positive attitudes to safeguarding practices across roles. Improve communication about the importance of children, their right to safety, and the role that church ministries have in prioritising and supporting actions to keep children safe.

capability - namely: organisational culture and awareness of policy and procedures (awareness) and attitudes to prevention and agency of children and young people (attitude), particularly among the laity. Achieving culture change across Catholic entities globally, requires those with whom they minister – particularly in local parishes – to be brought along the journey by addressing their understanding, attitudes, and ability to take preventive action to keep children safe. Bringing the laity along on this journey is an important next step as the laity is an essential building block to constructing a culture of children's right to safety, and the role that church ministries have in prioritising and supporting actions to keep children safe. Close attention should also be paid to where the level of confidence to act may be high but is not well aligned to knowledge of situational prevention strategies, and there is poor organisational culture and awareness of policies/procedures, and/or poor attitudes to children's rights and their agency and the importance of prevention.

Similarly, investment in safeguarding capability is an important opportunity to address our findings. Our data suggest that across different countries and roles within Catholic Church globally, people are at different stages of their safeguarding journey. Some are still understanding the importance and their role (attitudes), some are learning about how it is operationalised (awareness) and others are still learning skills regarding how to enact policies and practices (confidence). [Table 5](#) outlines some practical recommendations for each role category across the domains noting that this should be done within each individual country's context as appropriate to the safeguarding knowledge and skills presently being used.

We look forward to sharing these implications with relevant Catholic bodies across the countries from which participants came (as well as other countries) to support Church leadership in the development of training, policies, and strategies to tackle CSA in the Church. More information regarding professional development in this space can be found at <https://globalsafeguardingalliance.org/>.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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