

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN PROSTITUTION



ECPAT International is a global network of civil society organisations working together to end the sexual exploitation of children (SEC). ECPAT comprises member organisations in over 100 countries who generate knowledge, raise awareness, and advocate to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation.

Key manifestations of sexual exploitation of children (SEC) include the exploitation of children in prostitution, the sale and trafficking of children for sexual purposes, online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) and some forms of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM). None of these contexts or manifestations are isolated, and any discussion of one must be a discussion of SEC altogether.

Notably, these contexts and manifestations of SEC are becoming increasingly complex and interlinked as a result of drivers like greater mobility of people, evolving digital technology and rapidly expanding access to communications. Now more than ever, the lines between different manifestations of SEC are blurred and children may be victimised in multiple ways.

The ECPAT Summary Papers explore each of these five manifestations but should be considered a set addressing this complex problem. This Summary Paper focuses attention on the exploitation of children in prostitution.

The exploitation of children in prostitution has previously been commonly referred to as ‘child prostitution’ in both international legal instruments (see for example [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#) and the [Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse ‘the Lanzarote Convention’](#)), national laws, policies and programmes as well as in mass media. Over time, it has been recognised that the use of this older term can lead to misinterpretation, as it implies that this form of sexual exploitation of children is merely a sub-type of prostitution¹ and fails to recognise that the child or adolescent is a victim of sexual exploitation by suggesting that they could conceivably provide consent.²

- 1 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). 30.
- 2 ECPAT International. (2019). [Explanatory Report to the Guidelines Regarding the Implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of Children, child prostitution and child pornography](#). 62.

ECPAT International holds that no child can ever consent to their own exploitation.

This definition also leaves children vulnerable to being criminalised for their involvement in prostitution in contexts where prostitution is illegal. It is crucial that moves are made to ensure terminology reflects that *any* child involved in prostitution is a victim of sexual exploitation. In the new [Guidelines Regarding the Implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography \(OPSC Guidelines\)](#) adopted by the Committee on the

Rights of the Child in September 2019, it is recommended that the term 'child prostitution' no longer be used in legislation and policies as it insinuates children are consenting to their exploitation and switches the blame onto the child.³

ECPAT International recommends using the expression 'exploitation of children in prostitution.'

TRANSACTIONAL SEX

Another complex term commonly used in the discourse around sexual exploitation of children in prostitution is 'transactional sex'.⁴ The OPSC Guidelines highlight how the term refers to commodified relationships in which sexual acts are exchanged for cash, goods or benefits, often linked to survival, but also for other benefits like educational achievement or elevated social status. It is argued that 'transactional sex' differs somewhat from sexual exploitation of children in prostitution as it may involve "agreement or predetermined payment, form part of a broader set of social obligations, is often embedded in an emotional relationship, and is generally not perceived by communities as a form of prostitution or sexual exploitation."⁵ The reality is not so black and white, there are a range of complex nuances at play and ECPAT International holds the concepts of sexual exploitation of children in prostitution and transactional sex are not mutually exclusive. However, it can be said that whenever adults⁶ are exchanging sex for anything with children, it always constitutes child sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, 'transactional sex' may in fact be 'survival sex', where sexual services are exchanged for basic necessities such as food, clothing or shelter. In instances of survival sex, one party is exploiting another's need for basic necessities, and is taking advantage of the power they have to provide these necessities in return for sexual acts.⁷ When the parties involved include adults obtaining sex from children, ECPAT International again clearly considers this to constitute child sexual exploitation.



³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁶ Older children or children with power over others can also sexually exploit other children, though this can be more complex to define.

⁷ De Haan, I & Thorburn, N. (2014). [Children and survival sex: A social work agenda](#).

A form of 'transactional sex' is sex for non-essential items or social status, sometimes known as the 'sugar daddy' or 'sugar mommy' phenomenon.⁸ In these instances, the sexual exchange is often not for survival but for a range of other reasons (from educational opportunities, to social status or expensive gifts). Again, regardless of perceptions of the child's active engagement, when the parties involved include adults obtaining sex from children,

ECPAT International considers this a clear form of child sexual exploitation. While the relationship may appear to suggest more agency on the child's part given the motivation is not survival, the fact remains that an adult is taking advantage of imbalances of power to prompt the child's acquiescence to their sexual demands.⁹ No child can ever consent to their own exploitation. The responsibility to protect children lies with adults.

EXCHANGING SEX FOR THINGS OTHER THAN MONEY

While it's commonly understood that children may be pushed to exchange sex to cope with economic hardships, research illustrates that this is not the only reason why children may actively engage in their own exploitation.

One trend seen in educational settings is children exchanging sex with teachers and others in authority in the school system in exchange for grades.¹⁰ While these circumstances may be presented as if children are actively engaging, and may even not break laws regarding age of sexual consent, when teachers, tutors or anyone responsible for taking care of children misuses their power to engage children in sex, it constitutes exploitation. Countries are increasingly altering laws to consider these circumstances with adults in positions of power or authority as a more serious or 'aggravated' offence (see for example the Thailand Criminal Code).¹¹

Research has also illustrated examples of children not facing financial hardship, including in developed nations, actively exchanging in sex with adults that they commonly don't view as prostitution.¹² They cite influencing factors like boredom, desire for gifts or items and peer pressure.¹³

In South Africa, research documented how 'sugar daddies' were exchanging sex with some young women and underage girls who reported they did so not out of necessity, but as a way to acquire particular gifts and items associated with a comfortable or successful lifestyle.¹⁴

In Italy, in 2013, the '*baby squillo*' case (adapted recently into a Netflix TV show) received widespread national attention as it exposed middle-aged professionals – including the husband of an Italian member of the European Parliament – who exploited two adolescent girls from wealthy families living in one of Rome's most exclusive neighbourhoods.¹⁵

In Japan, children from all echelons of society are vulnerable to being exploited in what is known as compensated dating - 'enjo kosai' – where older Japanese men offer money or luxurious gifts to young girls in return for companionship, which is often also associated with sexual contact or activity.¹⁶

8 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*. 33.

9 Josenhans, V; Kavenagh, M; Smith, S; Wekerle, C. (2019). *Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys*. 2.

10 ECPAT International. (2016). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity*. 15.

11 Criminal Code B.E 2499 (1956) (as amended by the Amendment to the Criminal Law No. 24 of 2015) Section 285.

12 Krisch, M., Averdijk, M., Vandebenoit, S. & Eisner, M. (2019). *Sex Trade Among Youth: A Global Review of the Prevalence, Contexts and Correlates of Transactional Sex Among the General Population of Youth*. *Adolescent Research Review* 4, 115-134.

13 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*. 32.

14 Ranganathan et al. (2018). 'It's because I like things...it's a status and he buys me airtime': Exploring the role of transactional sex in rural South Africa. *Reproductive Health* (15)1.

15 ECPAT International. (2018). *ECPAT Country Overview: Italy*. 8.

16 ECPAT International. (2018). *ECPAT Country Overview: Japan*. 8.

When general social attitudes – and those of authorities and welfare providers – perceive children’s active engagement in their own sexual exploitation as conveying consent or complicity, there are a range of serious implications. Children may internalise the supposed responsibility and thus not view themselves as victims. This then limits their likelihood to seek help, and may even mean authorities and welfare services don’t support them if they do. In the worst case scenario, children may even be prosecuted for prostitution when laws fail to explicitly protect children from being prosecuted.¹⁷

It is crucial to understand different contexts that the exploitation of children in prostitution occurs.

Historically, work to end sexual exploitation of children had a strong focus on establishment-based prostitution. Children were, and continue to be sexually exploited within or parallel to the adult sex industry,¹⁸ sometimes including in licensed brothels where adults sell sex.¹⁹ However, sex work occurs in a wide range of establishment-based settings beyond the clearly defined spaces of brothels (licensed or otherwise). All over the world, sex can be bought in a range of establishments; like massage parlours, nightclubs, dance cafés, clubs and bars. Particularly where prostitution is illegal, evidence indicates that children continue to be exploited in prostitution in these settings.²⁰ In some cases, the blurred lines in these spaces can also serve as a vehicle to gradually introduce children into exchanging sex.²¹ They may start out waiting tables, but soon find themselves in situations of exploitation – by requirement, necessity or active engagement.²²

Street-based contexts for sexual exploitation of children in prostitution have also been a traditional focus of attention. Street-based exploitation is typically less controlled than establishment-based settings, with children living in street situations often faced with limited options but to engage in survival sex.²³ Furthermore, unlike children

exploited in establishments who tend to be perceived as coerced, or trafficked (often certainly true), children engaging in survival sex in street-based prostitution are often perceived by society and authorities as doing so by choice, and therefore seen as delinquents.²⁴

The widespread availability of Internet and information and communication technologies globally has dramatically disrupted the way sex is bought and sold. While the above settings continue to endure as contexts where exploitation of children in prostitution occurs, the visibility of children in these settings has also reduced as these crimes move to being conducted in clandestine spaces provided by the Internet. Perpetrators use social media or dating apps to identify children actively engaged in their own exploitation.²⁵ Advertisements of children exploited in private settings or even temporary apartment rentals can then be found online without the risks of being identified approaching children in the street or at establishments.²⁶

In the above-mentioned contexts, there is the potential for both preferential and situational child sex offending. Preferential offenders may explicitly seek out children to exploit in prostitution, whereas situational offenders who may not explicitly seek out children, but may (knowingly or not) purchase sexual services from adolescents simply because they were available in these settings,²⁷ or out of a “disregard for the person they seek for prostitution, and cultural and socio-economic conditions sanctioning such behavior.”²⁸ However, it is important to highlight that these categorisations of offenders are not mutually exclusive “because an offender who is motivated predominately by deviant sexual needs, does not mean he cannot also be motivated by some nonsexual needs. Offenders can demonstrate both situational and preferential motives and behaviour patterns, but with usually one more dominant.”²⁹

17 Shields, R. T., & Letourneau, E. J. (2015). *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and the Emergence of Safe Harbor Legislation: Implications for Policy and Practice*. Current Psychiatry Reports, 17(11), 2.

18 ECPAT International. (2016). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity*. 15.

19 BBC News. (2019). *Inside the world’s largest licensed brothels*.

20 ECPAT International. (2016). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity*. 15.

21 *Ibid*.

22 Thailand Boys Report. (Forthcoming publication). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

23 J. Frederick. (2010). *“Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys in South Asia- A Review of Research Findings, Legislation, Policy, and Programme Responses.”* Innocenti Working Paper (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre).

24 De Haan, I & Thorburn, N. (2014). Children and survival sex: A social work agenda. 16-17.

25 ECPAT International. (2019). *ECPAT Country Overview: Greece*. 8.

26 ECPAT International. (Forthcoming Publication). ECPAT Summary Paper – Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism.

27 ECPAT International. (2016). *Offenders on the Move: Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*. 15.

28 ECPAT International. (2016). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity*. 37.

29 Lanning, K. V. (2010). *Child Molesters: A Behavioral Analysis*. United States: National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. 32.



The following section outlines the latest developments and key challenges in the fight against the exploitation of children in prostitution, and highlights trends relating to the context of exploitation of children in prostitution, offender and victim patterns and specific contexts that make children vulnerable to exploitation in prostitution. Following that are three priority areas for work in this context.

KEY CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

The exploitation of children in prostitution has always, and will continue to evolve. There is no typical victim, nor is there a typical offender. However, certain situations and circumstances do make some children more vulnerable.

The exploitation of children in prostitution often operates on the fringes of adult prostitution. For example, research in Nepal indicated that the exploitation of children in prostitution was taking place alongside the prostitution of adults in ‘entertainment venues’ (see box below).³⁰ When adult prostitution is criminalised, and law enforcement pursue those involved in it, prostitution is forced underground, creating circumstances more dangerous to children.³¹ Furthermore, in these circumstances, both adults selling sex and children being exploited in prostitution will avoid reporting to authorities for fear of being prosecuted for prostitution offences.³² Even if they do report or seek help, children exploited in prostitution are often subject to “the same dismissive attitude reserved for adults in prostitution.”³³ Research in South Africa highlighted that the decriminalisation of adult sex work would create a safer environment for adult sex workers to report the exploitation of children in prostitution,³⁴ and raises an interesting argument that adult sex workers are well placed to spot and help authorities in cases of exploitation of children in prostitution.³⁵

While not outright legalising sex work, the ‘Nordic Model’ towards adult prostitution is often proposed,

which focuses on the decriminalisation of selling sex, but criminalises the act of purchasing any sexual service. The Nordic Model aims to protect anyone selling sex, viewing these individuals as victims of exploitation,³⁶ which would of course include children. However, critics say the Nordic Model can force prostitution into becoming more hidden from view as those purchasing sexual services aim to evade authorities.³⁷ While the effectiveness of the Nordic Model is open to debate, it does prevent children actively engaging in their own exploitation from being prosecuted, which is a prerequisite for them to come forward and report their exploitation. On the other hand, it may drive prostitution underground, opening up risks with children being involved within or alongside *illegal* adult sex services.

While debates around the legalisation of adult prostitution are a separate argument, it is important to highlight that adult prostitution, whether criminalised, decriminalised and/or regulated, has effects on the exploitation of children in prostitution.

30 The Freedom Fund. (2019). [Prevalence of minors in Kathmandu’s adult entertainment sector](#). 1.

31 ECPAT International. (2019). [ECPAT Country Overview: Czechia](#). 6.

32 ASIJKI. (2016). [ASIJKI: Children and Sex Work Factsheet 2016](#). 1.

33 ECPAT International. (2016). [Power, Impunity and Anonymity](#). 13.

34 ASIJKI. (2016). [ASIJKI: Children and Sex Work Factsheet 2016](#). 2.

35 *Ibid.*

36 ECPAT International. (2016). [Power, Impunity and Anonymity](#). 61.

37 *Ibid.*

NEPALI ENTERTAINMENT VENUES

'Entertainment' venues in Nepal such as dance bars, massage bars, snack bars, and cabin-style restaurants comprising of private compartments are known to be venues where the exploitation of children in prostitution, primarily girls, is facilitated.³⁸ A 2019 study completed by The Freedom Fund of the Kathmandu valley (Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur), showed that the population of minors engaged in the entertainment industry was approximately 1,650 as of April 2019.

Since these establishments are registered as entertainment venues, they are not allowed to offer sexual services within their premises. This has encouraged the practice of euphemistic payments of a 'bar fine' or 'early work release' where customers pay a price in advance to take children away from the premises for sexual purposes.³⁹

The Freedom Fund study found that over 60% of the workers aged 17 and under (270 out of 600) experienced flirting, groping, performing sexual massages and engaging in sexual acts.

Gender norms in many countries continue to limit women and girls' access to key resources, perpetuating gender inequality in the home, school and employment. While in 1995, the Beijing Declaration attempted to commit the world to achieving gender equality; there is still a long way to go. Women and girls remain significantly more vulnerable to poverty, with 330 million women and girls living on less than US\$1.90 a day, 4.4 million more than men.⁴⁰ Girls face serious barriers to education: 15 million girls will never get the chance to learn to read or write in primary school.⁴¹ These factors seriously increase girls' vulnerability to engaging in prostitution as they simply reduce girls' other options in life.

In Malawi, limited opportunities for educational attainment and independent income generation were common reasons reported by underage girls engaged in prostitution.⁴² This is further reflected by the fact that despite being aware they were experiencing abuse and exploitation, girls in Malawi

would continue to engage, as "it seemed to offer the only way of assuring survival."⁴³

Further, traditional, patriarchal views on girls' virginity also exacerbate girls' vulnerability to exploitation in prostitution, with men paying high prices to exploit girls who are virgins in prostitution.^{44,45} For example, the practice of the exploitation of virgin girls in prostitution continues to be a problem in Cambodia,⁴⁶ where men are known to travel to the country to exploit girls in the 'virgin trade', in the belief that having sex with a girl who is a virgin will enhance their virility.⁴⁷

Research finding girls in New Zealand,⁴⁸ and Mauritius⁴⁹ provide all too common examples of girls being exploited in prostitution. In Mauritius, a study found that teenage pregnancy was a contributing factor to children engaging in forms of survival sex.⁵⁰ Underage mothers, facing a lack of family support and decreasing work opportunities sought informal employment that did not require

38 ECPAT International. (2019). *ECPAT Country Overview: Nepal*. 7.

39 *Ibid.*

40 UN Women. (2018). *Turning Promises Into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Global Factsheet.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Charnley, H & Nkhoma, P. (2018). *Child Protection and Social Inequality: Understanding Child Prostitution in Malawi*.

43 *Ibid.*

44 ECPAT International. (2020). *ECPAT Country Overview: Turkey*. 12.

45 ECPAT International. (2018). *ECPAT Country Overview: Cambodia*. 8.

46 UNICEF. (2018). *A Statistical Profile of Child Protection in Cambodia*. 19.

47 The Borgen Project. (2014). *Cambodia's Virginity Trade*.

48 De Haan, I & Thorburn, N. (2014). *Children and survival sex: A social work agenda*. 14-21.

49 Ballet, J & Bhukuth, A. (2019). *Prostitution and Survival in Mauritius*. In: Ballet, J & Bhukuth, A. (eds). *Child Exploitation in the Global South*. Palgrave Macmillan. 157-171.

50 *Ibid.*

them to leave their children alone for long hours, with prostitution often seeming like the only viable alternative.⁵¹

While exploitation in prostitution overwhelmingly and disproportionately affects girls, boys being victims of exploitation in prostitution is gaining attention. Previously, boys as such victims had not received adequate attention due to a range of social and legal implications in reporting.⁵² When attention has been afforded to boys in discussions on exploitation in prostitution, they are often discussed either as exploiters, pimps and buyers of sex or as active and willing participants in sex work.⁵³

Despite these misconceptions, across all regions, boys are increasingly being identified as victims of exploitation in prostitution. For example, in the Philippines, frontline service providers interviewed in an ECPAT study on the recovery and reintegration of victims of SEC published in 2017 reported a perceived increase in the exploitation of males in prostitution.⁵⁴ In Quebec, Canada, a 2010 study found that of 815 high school students surveyed, 2% of males indicated that they had sold sexual services.⁵⁵ In Uganda, boys have been seen to be exploited by ‘sugar mummies’.⁵⁶ In South Asia,

boys are afforded greater freedom of movement than girls, and they are observed in street-based prostitution.^{57,58} Masculine norms can also lead to boys’ negative attitudes towards help seeking,⁵⁹ affecting their perception of whether they consider themselves a victim. For example, in Honduras, in a study on boys between the ages of 18 and 24 who experienced sexual violence in childhood, 49.2% of males surveyed did not seek services or support, as they did not consider it to be a problem.⁶⁰

A trend of concern in relation to exploitation of children in prostitution is noted in the different circumstances that lead to ‘children on the move’ - internal displacement and refugee migration caused by conflict or humanitarian crises. Research in countries with high populations of refugees such as Lebanon,⁶¹ Greece⁶² and Turkey⁶³ has identified the occurrence of survival sex among child refugee populations – both girls and boys. It’s been noted that in the European migrant crisis, unaccompanied minors were almost exclusively boys,⁶⁴ likely as a result of the gendered belief that young men and boys can ‘handle themselves’.⁶⁵ As with girls, these boys are therefore at a range of risks of exploitation also (see box below).

51 *Ibid.*

52 Josenhans, V; Kavenagh, M; Smith, S; Wekerle, C. (2019). [Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys](#). 4-5.

53 Davis, J & Miles, G. (2014). [“I Want to be Brave”: A Baseline Study on the Vulnerabilities of Street-Working Boys in Sihanoukville, Cambodia](#). 10.

54 ECPAT International. (2017). [Casting Light on the Care, Recovery and \(Re\)integration Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children](#). 102.

55 Lavoie, F., Thibodeau, C., Gangné, M.-H., & Hébert, M. (2010). [Buying and Selling Sex in Québec Adolescents: A Study of Risk and Protective Factors](#). 1147-1160.

56 ECPAT International. (2019). [ECPAT Country Overview: Uganda](#). 10.

57 ECPAT International. (2016). [Power, Impunity and Anonymity](#). 22.

58 ECPAT International. (2016). [Offenders on the Move: Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism](#). 40.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Government of Honduras. (2019). [Honduras Violence Against Children Survey](#). 16.

61 ECPAT International. (2020). [Regional Overview: Sexual Exploitation of Children in The Middle East and North Africa](#). 26.

62 ECPAT International. (2019). [ECPAT Country Overview: Greece](#). 8.

63 ECPAT International. (2020). [ECPAT Country Overview: Turkey](#). 7.

64 ECPAT International. (2019). [ECPAT Country Overview: Greece](#). 8.

65 Global Citizen. (2015). [Five Reasons Why the Majority of Refugees Reaching Europe are Men](#).

BOYS ENGAGING IN SURVIVAL SEX IN THE EUROPEAN MIGRANT CRISIS

Facing inadequate humanitarian financial support and a lack of employment opportunities, combined with traditional attitudes to work and gender, refugee boys are under significant pressure to provide for not only themselves but their families as well, pushing them to exploitative conditions where they have to engage in survival sex.^{66,67}

Research completed by the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights on migrant children in Greece highlighted the prevalence of boys engaging in survival sex to earn money either to survive or to pay smugglers for their onward journeys. Children interviewed in the study reported of networks explicitly engaged in facilitating the exploitation in prostitution of migrant children.

The main cause reported for this exploitation was children's lack of financial resources, however other contributing factors highlighted in the study were prolonged exposure to inhumane living conditions and a protracted and overly burdensome path to legal status. The prevalence of migrant boys being exploited in prostitution in Greece has also been highlighted in a report published by CARE, interviewing young boy refugees. All boys interviewed reported that they had either been directly approached or know friends who had been asked by men for sex.

Expanding access to information and communication technologies, and the rise of mobile devices such as smartphones have created more avenues for child sex offenders to access children they can exploit in prostitution. For example, research has established how dating apps make it easier for children to engage in their own exploitation in prostitution,⁶⁸ allowing for plans with perpetrators to be made efficiently and undetected.⁶⁹

While the misuse of mobile apps and social networking platforms may facilitate the exploitation of children in prostitution, the online facilitation of exploitation of children in prostitution can also be far more explicit, with websites designed for advertising adult prostitution and escort services being used to advertise minors for sexual services, posing a new and significant threat to children. In the US, the website 'Backpage' was known to advertise underage or barely of legal age girls for sexual services,⁷⁰ generating US\$26 Million a year in

revenue from advertisements alone⁷¹ before it was shut down in 2018. In the UK, criminals involved in human trafficking and modern slavery are moving to adult service websites, such as 'VivaStreet' to enable their criminality.⁷² In 2015, three men were arrested in the UK for forcing a 14-year-old girl into prostitution, after advertising her on 'VivaStreet' as an 18-year-old girl and profiting off 20 men paying to sexually exploit her.⁷³ While these websites are not designed for advertising children to be exploited in prostitution, a lack of regulation and monitoring on these sites is allowing perpetrators to subtly advertise children for exploitation in prostitution. This issue is part of the wider problem of the complex relationship between the adult sex industry and the exploitation of children in prostitution.

With these trends and challenges in mind, the following section highlights three priority actions that ECPAT International considers effective measures to tackle the exploitation of children in prostitution.

66 ECPAT International. (2019). *ECPAT Country Overview: Iraq*. 9.

67 UNHCR. (2017). *Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. 33.

68 ECPAT International. (2019). *ECPAT Country Overview: Greece*. 8

69 *Ibid.*

70 ECPAT International. (2016). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity*. 47.

71 *Ibid.*

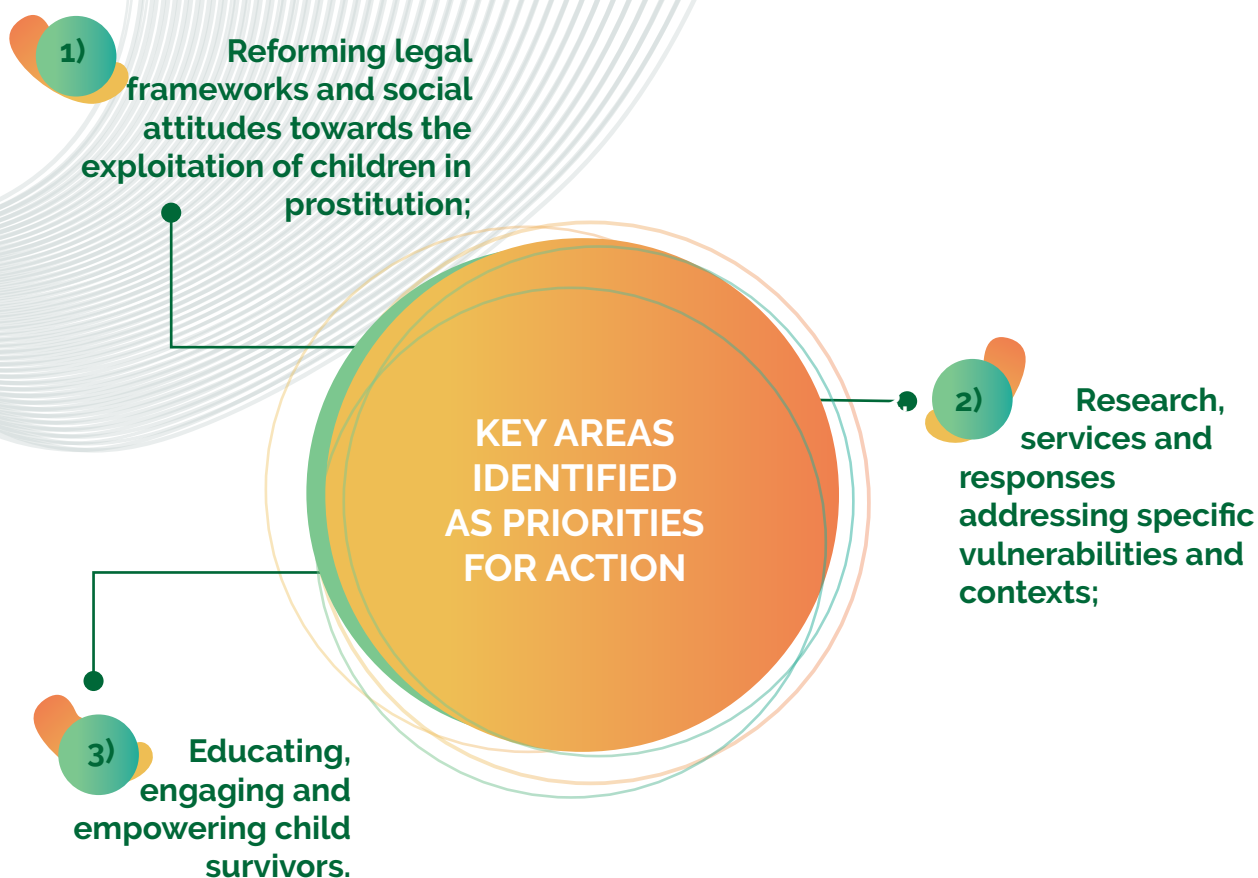
72 Wired. (2018). *Under the threat of new laws, British sex workers fear for their websites and their safety*.

73 BBC News. (2017). *Men who drugged and prostituted girl, 14, are jailed*.

PRIORITY ACTIONS

Ending the exploitation of children in prostitution requires a comprehensive, child rights centred, gender-sensitive and multi-

stakeholder approach. Further, legal shortcomings must be addressed to protect children. Three key areas have been identified as priority for action:



REFORMING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND SOCIAL ATTITUDES ON THE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN PROSTITUTION

We know that while international, regional and domestic legislation often criminalises the purchasing and profiting of sexual services from minors, children are still sometimes viewed as responsible for their own exploitation. Both legal frameworks and social attitudes require reform in order for all children who are exploited in prostitution to be viewed as victims, to be protected from prosecution, and to have easy access to relevant support services.

Many countries have national laws that prohibit the exploitation of children in prostitution, punishing both those committing the physical offence, and those facilitating the exploitation.

ECPAT calls for the criminalisation of any form of transaction to obtain sexual services from a child, even when the adult is unaware of the child's age, in compliance with the provisions of the OPSC.

In countries where prostitution, of both adults and children, is illegal, inconsistencies between laws can, and do, result in children being held responsible for engaging in prostitution. For example, although

Albanian legislation prohibits both the selling and purchasing of sex,⁷⁴ it makes no distinction between adults and children. This omission has resulted in the prosecution of child victims of exploitation in prostitution.⁷⁵ Children in these circumstances fear reporting due to the threat of being prosecuted, and thus the crime is often underreported, and children therefore do not access necessary support services.

'Safe Harbor' laws are an effective remedy to the issue of children being prosecuted for prostitution offences. The core idea behind 'Safe Harbor' is that all children involved in prostitution are victims, and that their involvement in prostitution should never be criminalised.⁷⁶ Further, 'Safe Harbor' laws provide children with access to social services such as counseling and rehabilitation.⁷⁷ While 'Safe Harbor' laws exist in many states in the US,⁷⁸ they do not exist in many countries,⁷⁹ meaning children may be prosecuted for engaging in prostitution, like in the Albanian example mentioned above.

74 Republic of Albania. (1995). [Criminal Code](#). Article 113.

75 See e.g. Centre for Legal Civic Initiatives. (2017). [Position of victims of trafficking in human beings and exploitation of prostitution in court proceedings in Albania](#). 2.

76 Shields, R. T., & Letourneau, E. J. (2015). [Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and the Emergence of Safe Harbor Legislation: Implications for Policy and Practice](#). *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 17(11), 3.

77 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

78 *Ibid.*, 1-7.

79 Josenhans, V; Kavenagh, M; Smith, S; Wekerle, C. (2019). [Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys](#). 5.

Every child needs to be protected, by law, from prosecution for any offence relating to prostitution. Enacting 'Safe Harbor' laws, decriminalising the involvement of children in prostitution, are a good approach to do so.

Furthermore, legislative reforms need to ensure legislation that relates to exploitation of children in prostitution specifically extends to protect boys too. In countries such as Afghanistan⁸⁰ and Pakistan,⁸¹ legislation protecting children from exploitation in prostitution only protects girls, making no mention of boys. This includes ensuring that age of sexual consent laws are applicable to boys as well as girls.

National legislation must be amended to protect boys as well as girls from exploitation in prostitution.

Beyond reforming the legal frameworks to better protect children is the more complex issue of pervasive societal attitudes that often view children exploited in prostitution as complicit in their own exploitation. While children who are forced into prostitution through means such as child trafficking may garner sympathy and compassion from society,⁸² those who appear to engage in their own exploitation are condemned and viewed as delinquents, making them less likely to access services.⁸³

This commonly held social attitude has extensive implications, including influencing children's own understanding of their situation – they often internalise this assignment of responsibility and are reluctant to therefore view themselves as victims. This further enables the minimising of responsibility of the perpetrator.⁸⁴

The demand side of SEC is too often neglected, and it is the responsibility of law enforcement and authorities to target the perpetrators of these crimes, rather than viewing children who actively engage in their own exploitation as responsible for the crimes committed by adult offenders.

THE UK MODERN SLAVERY ACT

A concrete example of good practice is the [UK Modern Slavery Act](#). Passed in 2015, section 45 of the Act outlines specific provisions protecting any child who is a victim of sexual exploitation who has committed any criminal offence, stating:

"The person is not guilty of an offence if the person is under the age of 18 when the person does the act which constitutes the offence."

This protects any child under the age of 18 from prosecution if engaging in prostitution, but also goes further, protecting all children who are victims of any manifestation of SEC for any criminal offences committed while being exploited.

80 ECPAT International. (2017). [Regional Overview: Combatting the sexual exploitation of children in South Asia](#). *Evolving Trends, Existing Responses and Future Priorities*. 101.

81 *Ibid.*, 103.

82 ECPAT International. (2018). [ECPAT International Strategic Framework July 2018 – June 2021](#). 7.

83 *Ibid.*

84 ECPAT International. (2014). [The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in East and South-East Asia](#). 16.

RESEARCH, SERVICES AND RESPONSES ADDRESSING SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES AND CONTEXTS

We know that there are a variety of different contexts of exploitation of children in prostitution; street-based, establishment based and increasingly, online based. Further, we know there are specific vulnerabilities children face; unaccompanied migrant and refugee children are particularly vulnerable to engaging in survival sex and gender norms affect boys and girls differently. Responses and services need to address these specifics of the exploitation of children in prostitution, and need to be guided by research.

While this paper has highlighted that the issue of exploitation in prostitution predominantly affects girls, it is important to recognise that perceptions of gender norms are contributing to a lower recognition of boys' victimisation than may in fact be the case.⁸⁵

Societal views on gender affect perceptions of both boys' and girls' victimisation in this issue and increased awareness raising at the individual, institutional and societal levels on the influence of gender norms is an essential strategy for prevention and identification of the problem.

Global, regional and national campaigns are needed to raise awareness about how societal norms relating to gender affect the identification of male and female child victims of exploitation in prostitution.

While awareness raising and educational campaigns around eradicating the stigma attached to child sexual exploitation are essential, it is also crucial that systems are in place to support those who are identified as experiencing child sexual exploitation. Research on access to recovery and reintegration for children experiencing sexual exploitation published in 2017 by ECPAT International specifically identified that there are very few support structures in place, which urgently needs to be addressed.⁸⁶

Drop-in centres have proven to be effective mechanisms for improving access and beginning to provide support - key to helping children exit exploitation circumstances. Drop-in centres can provide children who are engaged in prostitution with safe places to eat and sleep, but are also sources of support from professionals, places for friendships to develop and can provide a sense of belonging for survivors of exploitation in prostitution.⁸⁷ In the Philippines, outreach workers go out at night and encourage girls who are involved in prostitution to go to drop-in centres for the night, ensuring they have a proper meal as well as access

85 Josenhans, V; Kavenagh, M; Smith, S; Wekerle, C. (2019). *Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys*. 6.

86 ECPAT International. (2017). *Casting Light on the Care, Recovery and (Re)integration Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children*. 150-151.

87 *Ibid.*, 128.

to bathing facilities and recovery related services in the morning.⁸⁸ It is essential that these services are available to all children (either as mixed or gender-specific services), and outreach workers should be trained to identify children of all genders who are engaging in prostitution.

Training must be provided to outreach workers to identify male and gender-diverse victims of child exploitation in prostitution.

Further, services need to address specific contexts of the exploitation of children in prostitution, such as survival sex. Research in New Zealand has highlighted how street outreach programmes are the most effective services available for children engaging in survival sex,⁸⁹ and outreach work can also extend to reach children in the entertainment sector and brothels.⁹⁰ It is essential that street outreach programmes are adequately funded and prioritised as a response to support children being exploited in prostitution. Further, in regards to establishment based exploitation, civil society organisations can work with legitimate entertainment establishments to spot the signs of children being exploited in prostitution, and to raise standards of their own establishments so the exploitation of children in prostitution cannot be facilitated there.

Services and responses also need to adapt to the evolving threat of the exploitation of children in prostitution being facilitated online, and it is essential that private companies such as Internet Service Providers and social media companies engage in the issue. Preventive efforts can have a greater impact if there is proactive engagement and strong collaboration from the private sector.

These companies have a responsibility to identify how their platforms are used to facilitate the exploitation of children in prostitution, and identify how to disable these practices. For example, matchmaking and dating apps and websites must have, or introduce, stringent age checks to avoid perpetrators being able to easily contact children through them.

Internet and communication companies and social media platforms must identify how their products are used to facilitate the exploitation of children in prostitution, and implement measures to protect children.

Websites used to advertise adult sex work and escort services also need to implement strict monitoring procedures on adverts placed on their site to ensure that no children are ever advertised. It's also crucial these websites implement reporting procedures to the police if a child is identified in an advertisement. National governments should also introduce strict penalties for any website offering these services that fails to implement strict monitoring and reporting procedures.

While all measures outlined above are crucial, it is essential that research and services are *proactive* rather than *reactive* to the issue. Research needs to be done to establish what viable alternatives there are for children who are exploited in prostitution. All entities: NGOs, local and national governments and law enforcement share a responsibility to address the structural vulnerabilities driving the exploitation of children in prostitution.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ De Haan, I & Thorburn, N. (2014). *Children and survival sex: A social work agenda*. 14-21.

⁹⁰ ECPAT International. (2017). *Casting Light on the Care, Recovery and (Re)integration Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children*. 123.

EDUCATING, ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING CHILD SURVIVORS

We know that a key vulnerability for many children exploited in prostitution is that they have no other alternative for income, being driven to engage in their own prostitution. This is further complicated by children often not perceiving themselves to be victims, and actively engaging in their own prostitution. Educating children about their rights, equipping vulnerable groups with skills so they can source income through means rather than 'survival sex' and including the voices of survivors in drawing up responses is a key way to both prevent the exploitation of children in prostitution and empower survivors.

As has been highlighted frequently in this paper, one of the key issues relating to the identification of victims and the prevention of the exploitation of children in prostitution, is the fact that children often do not see themselves as victims. Bombarded by advertising linking success to ownership of consumer goods and wealth,⁹¹ children and adolescents face significant pressure to obtain these things any way they can. When considering that some children will receive significant financial compensation or luxury items in return for sex, it may not be surprising that some children actively engage in their own prostitution. Convincing children who feel they are 'achieving' as a result of financial gain or receiving consumer goods that they are in actual fact victims of exploitation in prostitution is hugely challenging. To combat this, educational campaigns directed at children understanding their rights, and what constitutes exploitation of children in prostitution should be adopted.

National governments should initiate national level campaigns directed at children explaining their rights and what constitutes child exploitation in prostitution.

Good practice can be highlighted by the work of Sanlaap India, an ECPAT member, who run a 'Child Protection Programme', offering education, health services and opportunities for developing skills and creativity in the red light areas of Kolkata.⁹² Programmes such as this equip children who are vulnerable with skills for employment, reducing the risk of them falling into circumstances where they feel they have to engage in their own prostitution.

While equipping children with skills to prevent exploitation in prostitution is essential, just as important is empowering survivors. In 2019, the [Explanatory Report to the Guidelines Regarding the Implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#) established that "the best way to ensure a solid and comprehensive legal, policy, prevention and protection system is to include children's own voices in the drafting process of legislative and policy measures."

The empowerment of survivors can take different forms. Part of the recovery process for survivors of exploitation in prostitution can be through undertaking vocational training in fields that will lead to work. While of course, this provides child survivors with skills for employment, a Nepali survivor of exploitation in prostitution highlighted that what mattered most was the dignity that came with earning money through vocational

91 ECPAT International. (2018). [ECPAT International Strategic Framework July 2018 – June 2021](#). 7.

92 Sanlaap India. Programmes.

means, rather than in prostitution.⁹³ Furthermore, education and skill training for groups who are known to be vulnerable to exploitation in prostitution will open avenues for non-exploitative work and prevent their engagement in prostitution in the first place.

Public stakeholders should provide human and financial resources for vocational training courses for children who are survivors of exploitation in prostitution.

Further, children and adolescents can be effectively involved in raising awareness among peers, facilitated through peer support groups and leadership programmes. In the US, the Girls, Educational and Mentoring Service (GEMS) run the 'National survivor Leadership Institute', providing community, professional development and support and leadership opportunities to girls who are victims of sexual exploitation.⁹⁴ Girls involved in GEMS' victim, survivor, leader programme co-wrote and helped pass New York State's 'Safe Harbor for Exploited Youth Act', the first bill in the US to stop

the criminalisation of victims of sexual exploitation of children.⁹⁵ In examples such as this, survivors can become important role models for other children who are victims, and be positive role models to their peers. This could be crucially important to address the underreporting and lack of help seeking of male victims, as if they see peers who have experienced success after accessing support programmes, they may be more willing to access support themselves.

People should work to create leadership programmes aimed at empowering all victims of sexual exploitation of children. These programmes should be funded by government, and empower children to engage in discussions and debates on policies and legislation about sexual exploitation of children.

93 ECPAT International. (2017). [Casting Light on the Care, Recovery and \(Re\)integration Needs of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children](#). 253.

94 Girls, Educational and Mentoring Service. (n.d). [Survival Leadership](#).

95 Girls, Educational and Mentoring Service. (n.d). [Our Mission](#).

CONCLUSION

Perpetuated by gender norms, weak legislation, technological evolution and globalisation, children remain extremely vulnerable to exploitation in prostitution. As technology advances, the crime of exploitation of children in prostitution has evolved from predominantly perpetrated in establishments and on the street to being arranged via the Internet using new avenues to facilitate exploitation.

Further, societal attitudes towards different contexts of the exploitation of children in prostitution,

such as children actively engaging in survival sex, continue to hold prejudice, affecting the responses offered to vulnerable children. Similarly, much national legislation fails to protect children who may be actively engaging in their own exploitation. It is essential that both societal attitudes and legal frameworks reform.

If the ambitious objective of ending sexual exploitation of children is to be achieved, addressing the exploitation of children in prostitution is essential.

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