

## An Exploration on the Effects of External Factors on the Sexual Exploitation of Male Children.

### Summary:

This report aims to give an overview on external factors that lead to increases in child exploitation, specifically focusing on the experiences of male children by looking at various global case studies. The external factors that will be considered in this report are; conflict, migration to urban areas, disasters/ emergencies (these include natural and man-made disasters, COVID-19 and climate change) and displacement. These are being considered as, whilst any child can potentially be affected by sexual exploitation, external factors cause children to be in vulnerable situations which can lead to them being more susceptible to sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>. The research involved included non-binary children, however, there is a significant lack of data here and so this report aims to draw attention to the need for data collection and research on the causes of sexual exploitation of non-binary children in order for protection and prevention to strengthen. Although research shows that girls make up the majority of victims of child sexual exploitation, there is a lack of research on boys and non-binary children. This lack of representation can exasperate protection problems, whether within the legal framework<sup>2</sup> or within child services programmes. The number of boy and non-binary victims of sexual exploitation may be underrepresented in some of the research that does exist, either because data has not been disaggregated into gender groups or because these victims were not identified. The main limitation of this report therefore is the lack of information on male and non-binary children due to them being less likely to be identified<sup>3</sup>, which includes self-identifying (due to cultural norms and societal notions of masculinity boys may be less likely to be seen as victims by themselves and others)<sup>4</sup>. This lack of information is exasperated by events that cause difficulty in monitoring sexual exploitation, such as; conflict, areas suffering poverty where children may not be registered, the chaos of emergencies such as natural disasters disrupting research, the seclusion of some children (for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic). Despite the limitation, the aim of the report is to show that external factors increase the sexual exploitation of boys, even if they may not make up the majority of victims, and that there is a lack of representation in the research, whilst not comparing or discounting the experiences of girls.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys in South Asia; A Review of Research Findings, Legislation, Policy and Programme Responses' (2010) J. Frederick, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

<sup>2</sup> A 2020 report which has examined child rape laws in 60 countries found that just over half of them (33) lacked legal protection for boys, or do not make such information explicit and/or available. The report also found that support services such as shelters and legal aid tended to be geared towards women and girls. The report includes that the LGBTQ+ community may be particularly vulnerable. Data from: 'Out of the Shadows: Shining Light on the Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation; a 60-country benchmarking index' (2020), The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited.

<sup>3</sup> A recent report on Scotland records boys are less likely than girls to be recognised as victims. The report found that 80% of boys that were identified by the research team as likely victims of sexual exploitation were not identified in official reports as victims, compared to 25% of girls. Non-binary children do not appear to have been included. Data from: 'Sexual exploitation of children involved in the Children's Hearings System' (October 2020) G. Henderson, I. Kurlus, R. Parry, N. Baird, D. Dagon and M. Kirkman, Scottish Children's Reporter Administration and Barnardo's Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> A 2019 Report on Modern Slavery in Pakistan noted that young boys being sexually exploited by older men was a taboo subject. This same report also recorded LGBTQ+ boys being victims of commercial sexual exploitation. 'Modern Slavery in Pakistan', (August 2019), Dr F. Murray, S. Themimulle, N. Mustaq and S. Fazli, DAI.

### Definitions:

'Child' or 'minor' will refer to anyone who is under the age of 18<sup>5</sup> and a victim of child sexual exploitation will refer to anyone who was under 18 when the exploitation occurred. 'Child sexual exploitation' is used in this report to refer to a situation in which an individual takes unfair advantage of an imbalance of power between themselves and a person who is under the age of 18 in order to sexually use them<sup>6</sup>, this can include, but is not limited to the sale of children, the trafficking of children, sexual violence, commercial sexual exploitation and rape. The report also refers to non-binary and SOGIESC diverse children. Non-binary is used as an umbrella term to refer to gender identities that are neither male or female and SOGIESC refers to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. The term LGBTQ+ is used as an umbrella term.

### Conflict:

Children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation during and after conflict. Research has shown that girls are particularly vulnerable to rape, especially when used as a tactic by soldiers and as a way to access food, water and shelter from soldiers- this appears to be especially prevalent in camps for civilians displaced by conflict. Boys are particularly vulnerable to being forced into child soldiering, even after the implementation of the treaty banning their use<sup>7</sup>. It is estimated that thousands of children are currently serving as soldiers in armed conflict globally despite the use of children in armed conflict being a violation of child rights and international humanitarian law<sup>8</sup>, although the Secretary-General's annual report on children and armed conflict covering 2020 will be published in June 2021 and it is thought likely that the COVID-19 pandemic will have increased the vulnerability of children in war zones<sup>9</sup>. In 2019 7,747 children were verified as having been recruited and used<sup>10</sup>. It has been estimated that although both boys and girls are used as child soldiers, it appears that boys make up the majority with them accounting for around two-thirds in some countries such as; Nepal, Sri Lanka and Uganda<sup>11</sup>. Girls face rape and are given to military and armed group commanders as 'wives'. Boys also face sexual exploitation when being used as child soldiers, although this area of child exploitation is less researched than other areas, this report aims to look at what is known about the sexual exploitation of male child soldiers (where and when possible this report strives to include the experiences of non-binary children, although unfortunately, no information was found on the potential experiences of non-binary children during armed conflict). The data indicates that girl soldiers are at a higher risk of sexual exploitation than boy soldiers, however, it is possible that boys are underrepresented. Data from 1990 and 2001 confirmed reports of sexual exploitation of girl soldiers having occurred in all 17 of the countries

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<sup>5</sup> The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines a child as any person under the age of 18 and given its global status, this is the definition that will be used in the report.

<sup>6</sup> 'Sexual Exploitation of Child Soldiers: an exploration and analysis of global dimensions and trends' (December 2001), Dr. Lisa Alfredson, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict' was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the General Assembly resolution A/RES/54/263 on the 25th of May 2000, and was entered into force on the 12th of February 2002. The treaty states under Article 1 that 'State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a direct part in hostilities' and under Article 2 that 'State Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces'. The treaty has 130 Signatories and 171 Parties (status as at 09/05/2021).

<sup>8</sup> 'Children Recruited by Armed Forces; Thousands of boys and girls are used as soldiers, cooks, spies and more in armed conflicts around the world', UNICEF

<sup>9</sup> 'Ending the Recruitment and use of Child Soldiers by 2025' (7th May 2021) V. Gamba, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict'.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 'Facts About Child Soldiers' (2008) Human Rights Watch.

where sexual exploitation was reported. Although a greater number of countries use boy soldiers only four confirmed reports of the sexual exploitation of boy soldiers<sup>12</sup>. It is likely that incidences of sexual exploitation were higher for both girls and boys as monitoring child soldiers during conflict is difficult. There may also be a lack of research in countries not in conflict but still engaging in sexual exploitation, for example hazing rituals involving humiliating sexual practices<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, boys seem less likely to be self identify as victims of sexual exploitation due to societal stereotypes of masculinity and the reluctance of many boys to report sexual violence. The ways in which boys are affected can also make it harder to identify victims- when suffering sexual exploitation girl soldiers are usually the targets and the perpetrators are usually male. With boy soldiers it can be a bit more complicated which can lead to some victims not being identified. While some boys are the targets many are either forced perpetrators or forced witnesses, for example, in Sierra Leone boys were often forcibly recruited by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) then forced to either commit or witness atrocities that included sexual violence<sup>14</sup>. This report does not wish to compare the experiences of girl and boy soldiers but merely aims to show that many boy soldiers may be victims of sexual exploitation that have not been considered so. Research does show that while girl soldiers are more likely to be the target of sexual exploitation boy soldiers are also targets but their needs are less likely to be addressed. A 2009 report on the sexual exploitation of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo records that girls and boys reported being sexually exploited by their commanders or other soldiers in the armed group and that the rape of young boy soldiers is sometimes accompanied by acts of extreme violence, such as bayonet or gunshot wounds to their genitals. Few boys have given detailed accounts of their experiences but have sought treatment from centres that assist victims of sexual violence<sup>15</sup>. During armed conflict generally, sexualised violence against men and boys was reported to have occurred in 25 armed conflicts globally, including; rape, sexual torture, mutilation of the genitals, sexual humiliation, forced incest, forced rape and sexual enslavement<sup>16</sup>. It seems clear therefore that male victims of sexual exploitation including children need to be represented in research and policy.

### Migration to Urban Areas:

Rural and urban areas can put children in different vulnerable situations. From the research available it seems there is a trend of boys and non-binary children migrating from impoverished rural areas to urban areas in search of work which can put them at risk of sexual exploitation<sup>17</sup>. This report will focus on two case studies, one from Pakistan and the other from Thailand. In Pakistan, a 2019 report found that children are engaged in commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking<sup>18</sup>. This report also found that child labourers, especially boys are frequently subjected to sexual exploitation at their places of work which include; factories, mines, workshops or whilst scavenging on the streets. This sexual exploitation sometimes occurs so that the boys can keep their jobs or for accommodation. The city of Kasur in the Punjab Province is considered to have the highest numbers of sexual exploitation amongst children with 90% of working children under the age of 14 having been sexually harassed or exploited<sup>19</sup>. The

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Lisa Alfredson, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 'The Sexual Exploitation of Child Soldiers in the DRC: A Victim- Centred Approach Utilising Human Trafficking Principles' (2009), J. Nann Madsen, St. Thomas University, School of Law Miami, Florida.

<sup>16</sup> 'Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys', W. Russell, 2007, Gender and Security.

<sup>17</sup> 'Sexual Exploitation of Boys in Times of Crisis: What can we learn from existing research, and what is still unknown?' (28th April 2020), C. Cappa, N. Petrowski, L. Cordisco Tsai and R. Azner Daban, UNICEF.

<sup>18</sup> '2019 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Pakistan' (2019), Bureau of International Labor Affairs.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

practice of *bacha bazi* in which boys are forced to provide social and sexual entertainment to older men is thought to be common in Pakistan. Human traffickers also seem to target boys, promising them entry into Afghani religious schools only to sell them to Afghan security forces to be sexually exploited<sup>20</sup>. Other research has shown that there has been a trend of boys living in poverty being sent by their families to the mining town of Shahrag, in the Harnai district of Balochistan. The town is populated by workers from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Afghanistan as well as local and Baloch, including from the Marri tribe. Despite the diverse community the town is cut off from the rest of Balochistan. This may account in part for the reports of boys who are sent to work in the mines being victims of sexual exploitation<sup>21</sup>.

A 2021 report conducted by ECPAT International identified a trend of young people, after working low-wage jobs, migrating to cities such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok to make more money. This report focused on SOGIESC diverse individuals and found that almost half of the respondents were under the age of 18 when they first exchanged sex for money, goods, protection, shelter and/or status<sup>22</sup>. It appears that poverty was one of the factors behind the respondents exchanging sex, although some did report that they were forced into sex work. One of the respondents, a young man who identified as gay, stated that he had been exchanging sex from the age of twelve and that it was either for sexual desire or money. Another respondent, who identified as being outside of the gender binary reported being forced to have sex with customers whilst working at a karaoke bar<sup>23</sup>.

### Disasters/Emergencies:

As with conflict, poverty and urban migration and disasters can lead to children being in vulnerable situations which can put them at greater risk of sexual exploitation. Emergencies and natural disasters can increase the vulnerability of children as they disrupt and weaken protection systems, services and preventive mechanisms<sup>24</sup>. They also lead families into weaker economic situations which can cause sexual exploitation to rise. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has likely lead to a rise in children being exploited as they are more isolated and spending more time online. The full impact of the pandemic is still unknown and so some of the research may be conjecture. However, when looking at past pandemics, such as the 2014-2015 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, research found that vulnerable girls, including those who had lost relatives to the disease, were forced to turn to exchanging sex for food. Other research also supports the notion that children are more likely to face poverty after disasters which can leave them vulnerable to sexual exploitation<sup>25</sup>. This can also intersect with existing vulnerabilities faced by non-binary children which may put them at a higher risk of being sexually exploited. Non-binary children may have less access to services that take their needs into account and may be even less inclined than others to identify as a victim. Research from the United Kingdom shows that government enforced lockdowns which were put into place to protect people from the virus created an environment that lead to many children being exposed to sexual exploitation. The National Crime Agency (NCA) estimates that 300,000 people were at risk of committing physical or online child abuse in 2020, more than double than was recorded in 2019 (140,000)<sup>26</sup>. More vulnerable children are more likely to be coerced and groomed online into sharing graphic images of themselves, a problem that has increased as children have spent more time online and with fewer adults, such as teachers, who may be able to spot abuse as well as longer periods being isolated with potential abusers if they are part of the family/live with

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> 'Shahrag, the Pakistani town where boys aren't safe from men' (17th February 2019) M. Akbar Notezai, Dawn.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Global Initiative to Explore the Sexual Exploitation of Boys: Thailand Report, ECPAT International, (2021), Bangkok: ECPAT International.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 'Child Abuse in Natural Disasters and Conflicts: A Systematic Review', H. Seddighi, I. Salmani, M. Hossein Javadi and S. Seddighi, (2021) *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*.

<sup>25</sup> C. Cappa, N. Petrowski, L. Cordisco Tsai and R. Aznar Daban, (2020).

<sup>26</sup> 'Sharp increase in UK child sexual abuse during pandemic', J. Staufenberg, (8th July 2020), The Guardian.

them. Furthermore, the tech industry has not been able to have as many human moderators working to check their platforms for illegal content<sup>27</sup>. A report from ECPAT in 2020 showed that as children are spending more time online they are vulnerable to being groomed and that the perpetrators may travel to them when the pandemic is over- the report found a trend in Greece of perpetrators grooming young boys online and then travelling to meet them, a trend which is anticipated to have been exasperated by COVID-19<sup>28</sup>. The ECPAT report also recognises that sexual exploitation affects girls, boys and non-binary children.

### Displacement:

Climate change and environmental events such as natural disasters are recognised as factors that drive and exasperate migration and displacement. Events such as ice melting, heavy rains, floods and droughts can force people to migrate and can lead to food insecurity, lack of healthcare and safe water and lack of access to sanitation services. In 2018 the International Organisation for Migration recorded 36.1 million children were international migrants and at least 17 million children were internally displaced<sup>29</sup>.

The aforementioned situation in Greece appears to be part of an ongoing trend of male child sexual exploitation, that whilst likely made worse by COVID-19 was already happening before the pandemic. Greece was hit by an economic crisis in 2009 which left many vulnerable and without government social services. Then in 2015 due to a humanitarian crisis many migrants were stranded in Greece, some were trapped in detention centres and some were left homeless<sup>30</sup>. This has left many children vulnerable, particularly unaccompanied child migrants. As of November 2019 boys made up for 93.1% of unaccompanied child migrants and yet are not prioritised as a group in many protection programmes<sup>31</sup>. These unaccompanied minors are forced to exchange sex for survival and/or to continue their journey through Europe. Whilst girls are also affected it appears that boys, specifically boys from Afghani origin make up the majority of these children who are being sexually exploited. This may be due to a greater social tolerance of sexual exploitation amongst boys rather than girls in some areas of Afghanistan<sup>32</sup>. The unaccompanied minors are not only from Afghanistan with anecdotal evidence showing some are from; Iran, Iraq, Syria and Bangladesh<sup>33</sup>.

Conflict is another factor that can drive migration and was cited by a 2019 report as one of the reasons people left home countries across West, Central and East Africa, as well as the Middle East and South Asia to travel the central Mediterranean route to Italy via Libya (Libya was reported to have had widespread incidences of sexual violence occurring towards migrants and refugees<sup>34</sup>). Other factors cited were; insecurity, family strife, political, ethnic and/or religious persecution, a lack of education and economic opportunities and a desire for a higher standard of living<sup>35</sup>. Sexual violence, including sexual exploitation and trafficking is known to be common amongst women and girls although there appears to be less research on sexual violence against boys despite a large number of boys travelling the route unaccompanied- in 2019 an estimated 87.5% of refugees and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> 'Why children are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation during COVID-19', (April 7th 2020), ECPAT International.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Sale & Sexual Exploitation of Children: Migration', UNICEF, Office of Research-Innocenti

<sup>30</sup> 'Greece: Homeless children at high risk of sexual exploitation have nowhere to go', 4th December 2019, ECPAT International.

<sup>31</sup> 'ECPAT Country Overview: Greece; a report on the scale, scope and context of the sexual exploitation of children', (December 2019), ECPAT International.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> "'More Than One Million Pains": Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys on the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy', (March 2019), Women's Refugee Commission.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

migrants who entered Italy via the Mediterranean route since 2016 were men and boys<sup>36</sup>, although the majority were men boys largely travelled unaccompanied<sup>37</sup> which put them at risk of sexual exploitation. When broken down by year and disaggregated by gender and age; in 2016 16% of new arrivals in Italy were children, of those 93% were boys, in 2017 15% of new arrivals in Italy were children, 93% again were boys. Disaggregated data from 2018 was not available but it is thought that the majority of children who arrived in Italy were boys. It is thought that sexual violence, including exploitation and trafficking is commonplace amongst women, men, boys, girls and persons with diverse SOGIESC<sup>38</sup>. Sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence and sexual abuse within the family, is cited as one of the reasons that boys flee their home countries. As with the case of child soldiers previously mentioned, the experiences of sexual violence encountered can be different for boys and girls- it has been found that men and boys are forced to witness and participate in sexual violence against women and girls. Women are also forced to perpetrate sexual violence against men and boys. The research does not mention girls being forced to commit acts of sexual violence<sup>39</sup>. In Italy the extent to which refugee and migrant boys and non-binary children are being sexually exploited is unknown as attention has not been focused here. Furthermore, the legislation Law 132/2018 may have lead to more refugees and migrants being vulnerable to homelessness which could leave them open to sexual exploitation<sup>40</sup>.

### Findings:

The research on the sexual exploitation of boys and especially on non-binary children is lacking. Although girls do seem to be most likely to be victims of sexual exploitation, further research is clearly needed on the experiences and needs of boys and non-binary children. This report has looked at several case studies and identified some areas in which external factors lead to an increase in the sexual exploitation of boys. The exploitation of non-binary children has been even less documented and so one of the main limitations of this overview is the lack of an account of their experiences. This report also only gives an overview in order to identify key areas in which children may be exploited, it is not to say that other external factors do not lead to an increase in child sexual exploitation.

The main findings of this report are that boys are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and when this intersects with conflict, migration to urban areas, poverty, disasters (whether man-made such as economic crisis or natural such as the COVID-19 pandemic) and displacement they become increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. It is deemed necessary that the research gap is filled and that protection is given to all children. Humanitarian actors need to address the needs of male and non-binary victims as well as female victims.

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<sup>36</sup> Data taken from: 'Refugee and Migrant Children—including Unaccompanied and Separated Children—in the EU: Overview of Trends in 2016' (April 2017), UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM. 'Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe: Overview of Trends 2017' (2018) UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM. 'Operations Portal: Mediterranean Situation'—Italy (2019), UNHCR.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

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