

Research on the Sexual Exploitation of Boys:

Findings, ethical considerations
and methodological challenges

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INTRODUCTION

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) guarantees that children have the right to live free from all types of violence. The sexual exploitation of children is a grave violation of children's rights with devastating long-term consequences. Research on this subject is growing. However, most of it centres on girls, neglecting the needs, experiences and perspectives of boys as well as youth who identify outside the gender binary (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Cockbain et al., 2017; Hebert, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017). The lack of data on the sexual exploitation of boys reflects a dearth of research on all experiences of sexual violence against boys. Expanding the scope of this research is a critical step in ensuring that all children's rights can be protected.

To strengthen the existing evidence base, this literature review examines: (1) the magnitude, causes, risk factors and consequences of the sexual exploitation of boys and (2) ethical and methodological challenges that pervade research on this topic. Eligible studies included quantitative and qualitative research published in English from 1999 to March 2020. As discussed in later sections, a wide range of terms are used by researchers to describe the sexual exploitation of boys, complicating the process of conducting a comprehensive literature review. Given challenges regarding terminology, multiple search terms were used, including sexual exploitation, commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Studies focusing exclusively on male minors were prioritized. However, due to the paucity of research, the report includes studies involving youth more broadly and/or that speak to the experiences of male victims, which sometimes included those over the age of 18. The review does not claim to synthesize all of the available literature on this complex topic, but rather to highlight key issues that should be considered when conducting research on the sexual exploitation of boys.

Defining sexual exploitation

Clarity regarding the definition of sexual exploitation itself also presents challenges to research on this topic. When defining sexual exploitation, the CRC should be referenced. Article 34 states that children should be protected from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and that States should take measures to prevent: "(a) The inducement or coercion of a

child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; (b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; (c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials" (UN General Assembly, 1989). Article 2 of the CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography prohibits the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, providing definitions of each (UN General Assembly, 2000).

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation, otherwise known as the Lanzarote Convention, echoes the CRC and its optional protocol. Articles 18–23 prohibit engagement in sexual activities with children; recruitment or coercion of children into prostitution; production, distribution, procurement or possession of child pornography; recruitment or coercion of children into pornographic performances; corruption of children through witnessing sexual activities or abuse; and solicitation of children for sexual purposes (Council of Europe, 2007). The Lanzarote Convention details the measures that Member States of the Council of Europe should apply nationally, and provides a monitoring mechanism.

The Convention also recommends that researchers refer to the CRC in defining sexual exploitation and properly distinguish sexual exploitation from other forms of violence. However, a recent systematic review of the global literature in English on the sexual exploitation of boys found that the CRC conceptualization of sexual exploitation has not been consistently used. As mentioned in later sections in relation to terminology, other terms are sometimes used to refer to experiences that would be classified as sexual exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2017). Furthermore, some researchers do not explicitly define exploitation in their published research and/or do not adequately differentiate sexual exploitation from sexual abuse (Cockbain et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018). Additionally, there is overlap between the concept of sexual exploitation referenced in the CRC and other categories of abuse. For example, the CRC definition of sexual exploitation intersects with other concepts, such as human trafficking (Mitchell et al., 2017). The exploitative use of children in prostitution,

Definitions of child sexual exploitation in legally binding instruments

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – Article 34 prohibits: “(a) the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; (b) the exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; (c) the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.” (UN General Assembly, 1989)

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999) – Article 27 references sexual exploitation, defined as: “(a) the inducement, coercion or encouragement of a child to engage in any sexual activity; (b) the use of children in prostitution or other sexual practices; (c) the use of children in pornographic activities, performances and materials.” (Organization of African Unity, 1999)

Convention on the Rights of the Child Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2000) – Article 3 refers to child sexual exploitation and Article 2 refers to the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, defined as: “(a) sale of children means any act or transaction whereby a child is transferred by any person or group of persons to another for remuneration or any other consideration; (b) child prostitution means the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration; (c) child pornography means any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.” (United Nations General Assembly, 2000)

The Lanzarote Convention (2007) – Articles 18-23 prohibit practices that constitute child sexual exploitation and child abuse, including engagement in sexual activities with children; recruitment or coercion of children into prostitution; production, distribution, procurement, or possession of child pornography; recruitment or coercion of children into pornographic performances; corruption of children through witnessing sexual activities or abuse; and solicitation of children for sexual purposes. (Council of Europe, 2007)

as referenced in the CRC, would be considered both sexual exploitation and human trafficking, as defined by the UN Palermo Protocol (2000). ECPAT International has defined the sexual exploitation of children as follows: “A child is a victim of sexual exploitation when she/he takes part in a sexual activity in exchange for something that either they or third parties receive (such as the perpetrator)” (ECPAT International, 2019a). Consistent with this definition, child sexual exploitation is distinguished from other forms of child sexual abuse due to the underlying element of exchange and the fact that a person is profiting from the abuse of the child. Remuneration may be monetary, but can also include other kinds of benefits, such as food, accommodations, safety/security, drugs, alcohol, gifts, affection or the promise of these benefits. Nonetheless, there is considerable overlap between

child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse, since many forms of the latter also involve some kind of exchange to ensure silence, such as small gifts, affection and attention (Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016). While clear and consistent definitions of sexual exploitation are critical in strengthening research on this topic, the overlap between sexual exploitation and concepts such as human trafficking and child sexual abuse remains (Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016). The lack of a consistent definition of sexual exploitation continues to pose a key challenge in strengthening the quality of research on this topic (Cockbain et al., 2017; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017).

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Magnitude

Estimating the magnitude of sexual exploitation of boys is also difficult. Many barriers exist in attempting to quantify the scope of the problem, including underreporting, definitional ambiguities and inconsistencies, misconceptions about the abuse of boys, social stigma and, simply, a lack of research on the experiences of sexually exploited boys (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Hebert, 2016; Hounmenou, 2017; Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017; Tadele, 2009). In 2018, Moynihan and others conducted a systematic review of the state of the English literature on the sexual exploitation of boys internationally. Specifically, they searched for studies that: used a definition of sexual exploitation consistent with the one they used in their review,¹ involved male participants, included a majority of participants under the age of 18, drew upon empirical data, were peer reviewed, and were published in English after 1 January 1990. They found a substantial funneling effect in which thousands of articles were identified for potential review, but only 42 representing 33 unique datasets met their criteria. With such limited information, it is difficult to understand the unique aspects of boys' experiences and the ways in which their rights can be protected (Mitchell et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018).

Global prevalence rates on the sexual exploitation of boys have yet to be determined (Cockbain et al., 2017). Much of the existing research on this topic has taken place in Europe, North America and Southeast Asia (Hounmenou, 2017). Evidence from Western countries indicates that boys constitute a significant portion of sexually exploited children (Edwards et al., 2006; Homma et al., 2012; Lavoie et al., 2010; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Among school-based probability samples in Canada, Sweden and the United States, the prevalence of sexual exploitation among boys ranges from 1.7 to 4.8 per cent (Edwards et al., 2006; Fredlund et al., 2013; Homma et al., 2012; Svensson et al., 2013). School-based probability

samples are, however, likely to underestimate the magnitude of the problem given the exclusion of some of the most vulnerable populations, such as homeless and runaway youth. Questions relating to sexual exploitation were also included in the Baltic Sea Regional Study on Adolescents' Sexuality, which was conducted between 2003 and 2004 (Goran-Svedin, 2007). The study was carried out on nationally representative samples of adolescents in secondary and vocational schools in Estonia, Lithuania and Poland and on representative samples from large cities in Northwest Russian Federation, Norway and Sweden. Participants were asked whether they ever offered sexual services for pay. The highest proportions of 18-year-old boys who reported that they exchanged sexual services for pay at least once were found in Poland (22 per cent) and the Northwest Russian Federation (10 per cent).

Estimates of the magnitude of sexual exploitation of boys in low- and middle-income countries are limited; data that may be relevant must be carefully interpreted given that sociocultural norms do not always recognize the sexual exploitation of boys as a concern (Hounmenou, 2017). Moreover, these estimates may cover only some forms of sexual exploitation, since they may use different questions to elicit children's experiences or only address such questions to a subset of the male population of children and adolescents.

Adjei and Saewyc (2017) analysed data from the 2004 National Survey of Adolescents, which was conducted on nationally representative samples in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi and Uganda. The surveys included a question on whether adolescents aged 12 to 19 who had sexual intercourse within the previous 12 months received gifts or money from their last sex partner in exchange for sex. Those who answered in the affirmative were coded as having traded sex. The question was only asked of boys (and girls) who were not married at the time of the survey and who reported having sex more than once in the year preceding the survey. The proportion of children who met these criteria and reported trading sex for something in return was 3 per cent among boys aged 12 to 17 compared to 8 per cent of girls of the same age.

¹ Moynihan et al. (2018) defined sexual exploitation as "any person under the age of 18 who engaged in trading or exchanging sex or sexual activities (i.e., stripping, exotic dancing, pornographic video-recording), for drugs, food, shelter, protection, other basics of life, and/or for money" (p. 441).

Many of the Violence against Children Surveys (VACS) included questions on respondents' involvement in 'transactional sex', commonly defined as sex in exchange for money, gifts, food or favours. In the 2010 VACS conducted in Kenya, 6 per cent of males aged 18 to 24 who experienced sexual violence before age 18 reported receiving money for sex; 4 per cent reported receiving gifts, food or favours in exchange for sex. In the VACS conducted on mainland United Republic of Tanzania in 2009 and in Rwanda in 2015, only a few cases of boys aged 13 to 17 said they received money or goods in exchange for sex at least once in their lifetime, and stable prevalence estimates could not be produced. In the 2011 VACS in Zimbabwe, among males aged 18 to 24 who reported physical, sexual or emotional violence prior to age 18, 3 per cent said they received gifts, food, favours or money in exchange for sex. In the 2017 VACS in that country, however, there were no reported cases of transactional sex in childhood among males aged 18 to 24 who had ever had sex. These proportions were 4 per cent in Uganda (2015) and 1 per cent in Botswana (2019). In the VACS conducted in Malawi in 2013, 1 per cent of males aged 18 to 24 who had experienced childhood violence said they received money, goods or favours in exchange for sex. Among all males aged 18 to 24 years, 7 per cent in Haiti (2012) reported having transactional sex prior to age 18; the proportions were 1 per cent in Nigeria (2014) and Zambia (2014), 0.2 per cent in Lao People's Democratic Republic (2014) and 0.1 per cent in Cambodia (2013).

Non-probability samples of vulnerable populations show higher rates of sexual exploitation. For example, a study of a centralized case management system in the United Kingdom found that one third of users of services related to child sexual exploitation (which included sexually exploited children, as well as those at risk for exploitation and those exploiting peers) were boys (Cockbain et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies estimated that 40 per cent of boys in Lahore, Pakistan live or work on the streets (Towe et al., 2009) and 45 per cent of homeless boys in Ghana have experienced sexual exploitation (Oppong Asante, 2015). While these studies are based on non-probability samples and cannot be used to estimate prevalence, they speak

to the vulnerability of specific subpopulations.

Causes and risk factors

The causes of sexual exploitation are multiple and complex. Whether or not an individual child is exploited is influenced by an interplay of individual, family, community and societal factors (Radford et al., 2016). At a societal level, risks include social norms condoning violence, values surrounding the status of children in society, cultural beliefs around masculinity and sexuality, homophobia, sexual entitlement among perpetrators, insufficient child protection systems, weak legal sanctions, poverty and economic inequality, discrimination, armed conflict, and humanitarian crises, among others (Berelowitz et al. 2012; Radford et al., 2016). Additionally, reluctance of community stakeholders to acknowledge the sexual exploitation of boys places them further at risk (Tadele, 2009). Furthermore, law enforcement and service providers are less likely to identify boys than girls as victims of sexual exploitation (Berelowitz et al., 2012; Hounmenou, 2017). Boys who experience sexual exploitation may be viewed as criminals in the community, which can diminish the support they receive (Miller, 2011). And when boys who have experienced sexual exploitation report discrimination and violence by the police, it makes them more vulnerable (Dank et al., 2015; Hounmenou, 2017).

Research has consistently demonstrated that primary risk factors for sexual exploitation include a history of experiencing prior physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Hounmenou, 2017; Lavoie et al., 2010; Moynihan et al., 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014a; Svedin & Priebe, 2007; Svensson et al., 2013; Wilson & Widom, 2010). At the family level, a history of parental substance abuse heightens the risk for sexual exploitation among boys (Hilton, 2008; Reid & Piquero, 2014a). A lack of familial support, poor parent-child relationships, and feeling unwanted or unloved by family members all increase the risk for exploitation (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Fredlund et al., 2013; Hallett, 2016; Kebede, 2015; Moynihan et al., 2018; Reid & Piquero, 2014a).

Poverty in the family also places boys at risk for exploitation. Research has found a relationship



[NAMES CHANGED] An eight-year-old girl and her six-year-old brother chat outside their new home – a shelter in the Philippines. They and their older sister, Rosalyn, are among seven siblings who were rescued during a cybercrime police raid six years ago. Their parents were caught forcing the two oldest girls to participate in live streaming of child sexual abuse in their home.

between boys' experiences of sexual exploitation and lower parental employment, limited employment opportunities, family financial needs, including family financial dependents, and pressure to meet basic needs in the family (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Fredlund et al., 2013; Hilton, 2008; Hounmenou, 2017; Miller, 2011; Moynihan et al., 2018; Svedin & Priebe, 2007). Boys' parents may, in fact, encourage them to enter sexually exploitative relationships, not necessarily seeing these relationships as harmful (Davis & Miles, 2014; Frederick, 2010; Hilton, 2008; Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016; Ricardo & Barker, 2008). Research in Southeast and South Asia has shown that boys who migrate from rural, impoverished communities in search of employment in urban centres are vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Davis & Miles, 2014; Frederick, 2010; Hilton, 2008). Boys may exchange sex for shelter, food, clothing and other basic needs (Chynoweth et al., 2017; Embleton et al., 2015; Frederick, 2010; Kudrati et al., 2008; Moynihan et al., 2018; Tadele, 2009). Lower educational attainment has also been identified as a risk factor for exploitation (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Reid & Piquero, 2014a).

Populations who experience other vulnerabilities are also at risk, including children who have disabilities (Chynoweth et al., 2017), boys involved in foster care or out-of-home care (Hallett, 2016), and homeless, runaway and street-involved youth (Dank et al., 2015; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2006; Homma et al., 2012; Hounmenou, 2017; Kebede, 2015; Svensson et al., 2013). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth are vulnerable to societal and familial rejection and discrimination, discriminatory treatment and abuse from law enforcement and service providers, poverty and lack of employment, homelessness, and familial and community violence – all of which heighten their likelihood of engaging in survival sex (Dank et al., 2015). Unaccompanied youth are also vulnerable to sexual exploitation, a problem that has reached new levels of urgency since the number of registered unaccompanied children in the European Union has risen dramatically in recent years (Chynoweth et al., 2017; Freccero et al., 2017). In 2016, adolescent

boys comprised 89 per cent of the population of unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in the European Union (Chynoweth et al., 2017). Although rigorous research with unaccompanied boys is limited, service providers in Greece have reported that such boys experience sexual exploitation during migration and upon arrival in destination countries in the European Union (Freccero et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2016).

Boys who are engaged in other high-risk behaviours also have heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation. For example, boys involved in using and/or selling drugs are more likely to be sexually exploited (Edwards et al., 2006; Reid & Piquero, 2014b; 2014a), and boys may sell sex in exchange for drugs (Embleton et al., 2015; Kudrati et al., 2008). Research in the United States has found that involvement in the juvenile justice system is a significant risk factor for youth sex trafficking (Fedina et al., 2019). Sexually exploited boys are more likely to have a criminal record, be engaged in delinquent behaviour, and be arrested prior to being exploited (Reid & Piquero, 2014b; Towe et al., 2009). Sexual exploitation and juvenile criminal activity may be the result of shared environmental risk factors, or boys may meet perpetrators through involvement in criminal activity (Chynoweth et al., 2017). Peer networks also influence the risk for exploitation, with research in the United States showing that youth are at times recruited by peers who have also been exploited (Edinburgh et al., 2015). Research in multiple contexts has shown that early sexual initiation, prior sexual experiences with peers, and seeing peers engaged in transactional sex all increase the risk for exploitation (Miller, 2011; Wilson & Widom, 2010).

Consequences

When reviewing research regarding the consequences of sexual exploitation, limitations in the available evidence should be noted from the outset. While substantial research exists regarding the consequences of child sexual abuse, less research has been conducted on the consequences of sexual exploitation specifically (Selvius et al., 2018). Risk factors for exploitation often overlap with the consequences of exploitation. Due to the cross-sectional nature of available data, determining

what places boys at risk for exploitation and/or the consequence of exploitation can be complicated. Researchers have called for better temporally ordered data in light of this concern (Cockbain et al., 2017; Selvius et al., 2018).

Sexual exploitation can have severe immediate and long-term psychological, physical, social and economic consequences for victims (Mitchell et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018). Boys who have experienced sexual exploitation report poorer overall mental health (Moynihan et al., 2018; Svensson et al., 2013). And that experience can lead to depression, anxiety, hopelessness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Freccero et al., 2017; Homma et al., 2012; Moynihan et al., 2018; Nodzanski et al., 2019; Selvius et al., 2018). For example, a recent study with youth participating in post-trafficking assistance services in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam found that over one third of boys were symptomatic of anxiety and depression, and over one quarter were symptomatic of PTSD (Nodzanski et al., 2019). Children who have been sexually exploited report low self-esteem and self-harm (Berelowitz et al., 2012), with boys reporting higher rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempted suicide (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Freccero et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018; Svensson et al., 2013; Towe et al., 2009). A study in Pakistan found that 52 per cent of male children who lived and/or worked on the street and who exchanged sex for money, drugs or goods reported having cut themselves, in comparison to 22 per cent of male street-involved children who did not report incidents of sexual exploitation (Towe et al., 2009).

The experience of sexual exploitation is also associated with complex trauma (Cole et al., 2016). Complex trauma refers to chronic exposure to traumatic events, often interpersonal in nature, that begins early in a child's life (Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013). In fact, a significant proportion of trafficked youth have already experienced complex trauma prior to trafficking (Fedina et al., 2019; Hopper & Gonzales, 2018). Research in the United States has found that pre-existing complex trauma is intensified through the experience of sexual exploitation. Complex trauma has a wide range of effects. It can disrupt emotional regulation and lead

to a range of behavioural and mood impacts, such as withdrawal, aggression, compulsiveness, hostility, mood swings, inability to self-soothe and attention problems (Barnert et al., 2017; Hopper & Gonzales, 2018; Palines et al., 2019). Complex trauma can lead to slow language development, somatic complaints, attachment problems, disorganized memories and an altered sense of meaning (such as feelings of hopelessness or loss of faith) (Cole et al., 2016; Hopper & Gonzales, 2018). The symptoms of complex trauma often overlap with those of many mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety, complicating diagnoses for this population (Palines et al., 2019).

Research with boys who have experienced sexual exploitation across a variety of contexts has consistently found high rates of substance use, particularly drug use (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Freccero et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Selvius et al., 2018; Towe et al., 2009). Additionally, boys who have experienced exploitation report elevated risk for HIV and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections. They are more likely to have multiple sex partners and report low condom use (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Edwards et al., 2006; Freccero et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018; Selvius et al., 2018; Towe et al., 2009). In addition, boys commonly experience physical violence during the

exploitation process, leading to physical injuries (Berelowitz et al., 2012).

Sexual exploitation can be associated with conduct problems and criminal activity such as aggression, theft and destruction of property, among others (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003; Selvius et al., 2018). Perpetrators may instruct children to engage in criminal behaviour, or the child may engage in the offending behaviour as a result of his or her abuse (such as self-medicating with drugs or destroying property due to anger) (Berelowitz et al., 2012). Experiencing exploitation can lead to disruptions in boys' education, with increased absences from school (Berelowitz et al., 2012). Boys facing family financial pressures and vulnerability may drop out of school and find themselves in sexually exploitative situations due to a need to provide financially for the family (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Hounmenou, 2017; Selvius et al., 2018). Children who are exploited often become socially isolated from family and friends, and increasingly dependent upon those who are abusing them (Berelowitz et al., 2012). Boys who have experienced sexual exploitation report an absence of trusting relationships, feeling unseen/invisible or lonely, lacking someone to talk to and diminished social connectedness (Fredlund et al., 2013; Hallett, 2016; Pedersen & Hegna, 2003).



Boys play football during a break from a UNICEF-supported Leadership and Communicators Network meeting at the Amigos del Volcán School in Santa Tecla, El Salvador. The group promotes online safety, protection and prevention of sexual violence and exploitation of children, and monitoring of cases of gender-based violence in schools.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

A multitude of methodological and ethical challenges pervade the research landscape on the sexual exploitation of children, especially when it involves the participation of children themselves. Given the limited amount of research that has been conducted on the sexual exploitation of boys specifically, it is critical to expand the scope of research on this topic, strengthen the rigour and appropriateness of methods used, and establish strong ethical guidelines for learning more about this highly vulnerable population. Much of the literature that does exist on methodological and ethical considerations in data collection centres on girls. Researchers studying sexual exploitation can draw from protocols that have been developed from decades of research on child sexual abuse. However, research pertaining to sexual exploitation involves unique complexities that are different from those encountered when studying child sexual abuse generally. For example, studies in the United States have shown that sexually exploited youth, on average, experience more severe post-traumatic stress symptoms and are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system than children whose sexual abuse does not involve exploitation (Rothman et al., 2018). Below are a number of methodological and ethical challenges researchers are likely to encounter when studying the sexual exploitation of boys, including those that impact the research landscape generally as well as issues confronted when conducting research on this sensitive topic.

Methodological issues

Terminology

Inconsistent use of terminology to describe sexual exploitation poses significant hurdles to research and hampers efforts to protect children experiencing exploitation. A variety of terms have been used to refer to sexual exploitation, such as commercial sexual exploitation of children, transactional sex involvement, cross-generational sex, child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, youth selling sex/engaged in survival sex, child sexual abuse, online child sexual abuse, childhood maltreatment, solicitation of children for sexual purposes, human trafficking, child sex tourism, and the sale of children, among others (Dank et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2017; Weissman et al., 2006). Some of these terms (such

as child prostitution and child sex tourism) are inappropriate and should be avoided (Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2016; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019). But even when the same terms are used, there is disagreement among stakeholders regarding their meaning, further deepening confusion. Data pertaining to child sexual exploitation may also be embedded in research on other categories of violence, such as human trafficking, child maltreatment and child sexual abuse, making it difficult to disentangle data specific to sexual exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018).

In 2016, the Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children released *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, otherwise known as the Luxembourg Guidelines. They represent an important step in clarifying the lexicon of terms frequently used in relation to this subject. The Luxembourg Guidelines aim to build consensus on key concepts to gain conceptual clarity, strengthen the accuracy and quality of data collection, and improve coordination in addressing the sexual exploitation of children.

Sampling

Youth who have experienced sexual exploitation are often a hidden and hard-to-reach population (Rothman et al., 2018). For example, it is common for such youth to be highly transient. As noted earlier, homeless, runaway, street-involved and unaccompanied boys are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, making them difficult to access through most common sampling techniques (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2006; Embleton et al., 2015; Freccero et al., 2017; Hounmenou, 2017; Kudrati et al., 2008; Svensson et al., 2013). Much of the existing research with youth who have experienced sexual exploitation involves recruiting participants from foster care, shelter programmes or service programmes for street-involved youth (Edinburgh et al., 2015). Recruiting subjects through partnerships with service providers can be one of the safest ways of identifying participants with a sexual exploitation history (Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016; Tyldum, 2010). But while it is common for

researchers to partner with service providers when conducting research with sexually exploited girls, the dearth of programmes specific to exploited boys makes this recruitment strategy more challenging. In comparison to girls, far fewer services are available for sexually exploited boys (Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020; Hounmenou, 2017; Nodzinski et al., 2019).

As discussed in the section pertaining to disclosure, gendered social norms might discourage boys from reporting sexual exploitation. Boys are less likely to be identified as victims, and community stakeholders may lack understanding that boys can be harmed by sexual abuse. The sexual abuse of boys may be downplayed, perceived as normal male sexual experimentation, or seen as a rite of passage or 'gaining experience' (Family for Every Child, 2018). Boys may be applauded for sexual prowess and encouraged to have multiple sexual partners (Ricardo & Barker, 2008). Service providers and communities may also attribute more agency to boys than to girls – for example, exploited boys are sometimes perceived as 'prostituting themselves' rather than as victims (Chynoweth et al., 2017; Dennis, 2008; UNICEF, 2016). As discussed in the section on the identification of victims, boys may not perceive themselves as victims, limiting disclosure (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Hounmenou, 2017). Even if boys do report or seek help, the lack of services for boys means that, in practice, they are often an invisible population, affecting sampling.

Moreover, even when services do exist, they have generally not been designed in ways that are boy-friendly, or with the specific needs of boys in mind (Family for Every Child, 2018). Boys are less likely than girls to seek services, making it difficult to connect them with any existing services (Chynoweth et al., 2017; Hounmenou, 2017). In the literature on child sexual abuse, barriers to accessing services among boys have been documented, including stigma associated with male victimization, female-centric risk assessment tools, and fear of homophobia. These have not yet been clearly documented for sexual exploitation, though it is plausible that the same barriers would apply (Chynoweth et al., 2017). Service providers may also be unsure where

to refer boys, even when awareness exists about boys' vulnerability and needs (Chynoweth et al., 2017).

When it is possible to reach boys through social service systems, other problems may present themselves. Recruitment through service providers positions agencies as institutional gatekeepers, limiting the diversity of voices that are heard. This sampling approach restricts research to those already connected to services, a population whose experiences cannot be generalized to those outside of service delivery systems (Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016). Children involved in social service systems have presumably already been asked about their exploitation experiences by service providers, leading to question-answering fatigue and possible over-interrogation of children (Rothman et al., 2018). Additionally, when research is conducted in collaboration with agencies serving exploited youth, attention needs to be directed to ensuring that the study does not create a burden on staff who are likely already overworked, since this could impede service delivery (Rothman et al., 2018).

A more diverse range of sampling approaches is therefore warranted. Researchers can consider sampling techniques that have been used with other hard-to-reach populations, such as respondent-driven sampling, time-location (space) sampling, indigenous field worker sampling, and targeted sampling (Shaghghi et al., 2011). School-based probability samples can produce more reliable prevalence estimates, but may exclude some of the most vulnerable subgroups, such as homeless, runaway or street-involved youth. Given the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by exploited boys, interviews must be conducted in locations that are accessible and safe for this hidden population (Horning & Paladino, 2016). Flexibility is also required in research protocols regarding the scheduling of interviews, since it is common for participants not to show up or to need to reschedule in light of chaotic circumstances in their personal lives (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Rothman et al., 2018). Understanding the life circumstances, comfort level, preferences and concerns of boys themselves is necessary when engaging this population in research.



[NAMES CHANGED] Eleven-year-old Kamran is a sex worker in a poor neighbourhood of Karachi, Pakistan. Kamran had his first sexual experience at age 8 and was raped soon afterwards by a man who then paid him. He has never been to school. Kamran recently moved with his mother into the apartment of an 'uncle', Amjad, who was also raped as a child and became a sex worker at age 12. Amjad and another man run a massage business that is a front for soliciting customers for sex with them and the four or five children who work for them, including Kamran. Amjad says children can secure more than three times the price paid for sex with adults.

Study design

In order to generate estimates of the prevalence of sexual exploitation among boys, quantitative studies using population-based probability samples are needed. However, quantitative studies on this topic are rare, particularly those using representative samples (Cockbain et al., 2017). The generalizability of data collected is often limited due to sampling techniques, small sample sizes and study designs focusing on specific subpopulations or vulnerable groups (Mitchell et al., 2017; Selvius et al., 2018). And concerns about ethics and retraumatization often prevent sexual exploitation from being included in broader samples. Furthermore, the majority of quantitative studies utilize a cross-sectional design, meaning that it is difficult to understand causality (Dayal et al., 2018; Moynihan et al., 2018; Selvius et al., 2018). Careful, temporally ordered data (such as that collected in longitudinal studies) are helpful in beginning to understand cause and effect (Cockbain et al., 2017). Numerous researchers have called for more longitudinal studies pertaining to sexual exploitation, particularly in light of the challenges

involved in building trust with this population (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Easton & Matthews, 2016; Yea, 2016). However, longitudinal designs and/or designs involving multiple interviews involve a variety of practical challenges. Among them is the fact that they are often very labour- and resource-intensive, especially when they involve working with an inaccessible and transient population (Rothman et al., 2018).

Trust-building

Building trust is a key challenge in research with children who have experienced exploitation (Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020). The very nature of the exploitation process suggests that trust, on some level, has already been betrayed (Garg et al., 2019; Lefevre et al., 2017; Yea, 2016). In fact, boys who have experienced sexual exploitation commonly report not having anyone they can trust (Hallett, 2016). Children whose feelings, sense of safety and well-being have been discounted have less trust that others will care about them, believe them or act in their best interest (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015).

A lack of trust can lead to reluctance to participate in research as well as hesitations about speaking honestly and openly about one's experiences. The trust-building process can take a significant amount of time with youth who have experienced sexual exploitation (Hemmings et al., 2016). Given the challenges involved in the trust-building process, researchers have recommended the use of research designs involving multiple interviews, so that data can be collected gradually over time at the child's own pace (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Cordisco Tsai et al., 2020; Easton & Matthews, 2016; Yea, 2016).

Barriers to disclosure

Numerous barriers have been observed among boys in disclosing experiences of sexual exploitation. Among them are stigma, which reduces the likelihood that all victims will disclose (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Rothman et al., 2018). Sociocultural norms pertaining to masculinity and sexuality can also dissuade boys from reporting sexual violence, including sexual exploitation (Family for Every Child, 2018). Typically, boys are discouraged from displaying vulnerability or emotions, which may be perceived as a sign of weakness or effeminate behaviour (UNICEF, 2017). In contrast, social norms often dictate that boys should embody self-reliance and resilience (Frederick, 2010; Chynoweth, 2017). Research in Cambodia has shown that male victims may be feminized – that is, perceived as being like women, and regarded as weak or flawed (Hilton, 2008). And, like girls, boys may be blamed for experiencing abuse. Prior to engaging with researchers, boys may have had experiences of not being believed or being silenced by family members or service providers (Hilton, 2008). Families, communities and stakeholders may lack recognition that boys can be harmed by sexual violence, with the sexual exploitation of boys being downplayed. As mentioned previously, sexual abuse of boys may be perceived as sexual experimentation or a rite of passage (Family for Every Child, 2018). Such norms inhibit disclosures, making the sexual exploitation of boys more invisible and contributing to misunderstanding about boys' victimization.

Additionally, sociocultural taboos regarding homosexuality can prevent boys from disclosing out of fear of stigmatization, rejection and

discrimination (Tadele, 2009; Ricardo & Barker, 2008). Experiencing sexual exploitation by male perpetrators may lead boys to fear being labelled as gay (Mai, 2011). In some contexts, boys may be criminalized for their experiences of abuse. In certain countries in West and Central Africa where homosexuality is illegal, for example, boys can be punished by law for being victimized (M'jid, 2008). When homosexuality is forbidden by law, boys are in danger of arrest, removal from their families and/or placement in juvenile detention centres (Family for Every Child, 2018; Chynoweth, 2017).

In research pertaining to sexual exploitation of youth, boys have not consistently been believed, even when they have revealed that they have been exploited sexually. For instance, some researchers have excluded data on boys who disclosed receiving money or gifts for sex under the assumption that they had misunderstood the question, while assuming that girls understood the question (Adjei & Saewyc, 2017; Moore et al., 2007). Prior experiences of not being believed create ongoing barriers to disclosure. It is common for children who have been sexually exploited, including boys, to have an emotional attachment to the perpetrator, and therefore to be hesitant to speak ill of this person (Edinburgh et al., 2015). Victims may also be intimidated into not disclosing their experiences (Rothman et al., 2018). Boys may self-censor because they are concerned about reprisals or hesitate to open up because they fear criminalization for engagement in sex work, drug-related or other illicit activities (Boyd & Bales, 2016). To protect children from potential stigma and retribution from perpetrators, rigorous guidelines for maintaining privacy and confidentiality are vital (Dayal et al., 2018).

Use of administrative data

When making decisions about children's participation, ECPAT International guidelines recommend that six criteria be met before involving children in research: (1) no data exist that can already answer the research question, (2) there is no other way to collect data apart from asking children, (3) children will not be burdened by their participation, (4) there will not be risk of physical harm for participation, (5) children will not experience unreasonable psychological distress, and (6) child-

centred, trauma-informed services are available as a support for participants (ECPAT International, 2019b). World Health Organization guidelines stipulate that interviewing survivors of sexual violence should only be conducted when all other options have been explored (WHO, 2007). Researchers can consider if there are other mechanisms for accessing data apart from interviewing boys. When such mechanisms exist, administrative data can be utilized, reducing both costs and the burden of boys participating in additional interviews. For example, ECPAT International collaborated with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) to analyse data from the International Child Sexual Exploitation Database housed at INTERPOL to understand patterns of offending, as well as demographic data regarding the children involved. This analysis revealed that, among the cases for which the gender of the victim was identified, approximately 30 per cent of victims were boys, with an additional 4 per cent of images depicting both boys and girls. Images featuring boys were also more likely to show severe abuse (INTERPOL & ECPAT, 2018). Despite its advantages, one limitation of using administrative data is that researchers are constrained by the design of the data collection system and, sometimes, by a plethora of missing data (Cockbain et al., 2017).

Age-related issues

Another challenge encountered by researchers is low confidence in the validity of self-reported age data (Mitchell et al., 2017). Out of a desire to protect themselves and perpetrators, children may present themselves as younger or older than they actually are. While qualitative research has found that youth often present as being older, research with migrant boys in the European Union has found that boys may claim to be younger when dealing with institutions in order to access services or receive lighter measures for committing offenses (Mai, 2011; Kudrati et al., 2008). Children who have experienced sexual exploitation may have missed developmental milestones due to adversity and chronic stress and may have difficulty responding to questions in a way that generates reliable data (Rothman et al., 2018). As discussed in the section relating to informed consent, guidelines on this issue may also differ depending on the exact age of the child.

While younger children may be more vulnerable to coercion, the exclusion of younger victims denies children the opportunity to participate and leads to skewed data. Data collection procedures need to be adapted to the child's specific age, which may necessitate a variety of procedures for the same study (Rothman et al., 2018).

Lack of disaggregation

Another common challenge faced by researchers studying the sexual exploitation of boys is the lack of disaggregated data. When available data are not disaggregated by gender, it limits the opportunity to understand more about the specific experiences of boys (Mitchell et al., 2017; Njue et al., 2011). As is the case with women and girls, data on boys may also lack disaggregation by age, and be combined with data pertaining to sexually exploited youth and young adults. Furthermore, published research sometimes fails to differentiate between youth who sell and buy sex, or it separates buying and selling sex by gender, making the erroneous assumption that boys are always the ones who purchase sex and are the perpetrators and girls sell sex and are the victims (Cockbain et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, the experiences of sexually exploited children are sometimes not disaggregated from those of children experiencing other forms of sexual abuse, making it difficult to understand dynamics that are unique to sexual exploitation (Mitchell et al., 2017). Whenever possible, disaggregation of study data according to key variables is recommended in order to interpret findings with greater clarity and specificity.

Ethical considerations

The principles of non-maleficence and beneficence require that researchers do no harm and protect the well-being of children who participate in research. Researchers should avoid causing physical, social, psychological and economic harm through acts of omission or commission. In all research decisions, promoting the best interest of the child should be the governing principle (ECPAT International, 2019a). Included below are ethical challenges that may emerge when conducting research on sexual exploitation among boys. Recommendations are provided to help researchers honour these guiding principles.


Children's right to be heard

A rights-based framework demands that children have a voice in decisions that affect them. Children possess valuable knowledge and insights about their own experiences that can inform the development of more effective interventions. Due to the vulnerability of the study population and sensitivity of this topic of inquiry, research pertaining to the sexual exploitation of boys requires extra attentiveness and caution above and beyond ethical considerations of conventional research. However, protection concerns that arise should not cause a child's right to be heard to be overlooked or set aside. If implemented carefully, boys' participation in research can be empowering and protective and may, in fact, have important therapeutic benefits. Providing boys with an opportunity to speak about their experiences on their own terms can also help to break a culture of silence about abuse and test adult assumptions against the lived experiences of boys (ECPAT International, 2019a).

Boys should also have a voice in providing feedback on research methods used to ensure that they are sensitive to their experiences. When conducting research with sexually exploited populations, it is advisable to have survivors as members of research advisory teams (Rothman et al., 2018). The formation of youth advisory boards can give young people an opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences (Havlicek et al., 2016). Youth advisory boards can help researchers ensure that the research process is a safe and positive experience for boys who participate. Participatory research methods and peer-to-peer methods can amplify the voices of youth and address concerns related to trust, as discussed earlier (Dank et al., 2015).

Defining who is a 'victim'

Legal and research categories developed to define sexual exploitation offer definitional boundaries, but do not always correspond to the ways in which children perceive their own experiences. Children often do not self-identify as victims of sexual exploitation (Boyd & Bales, 2016; Horning & Paladino, 2016; Easton & Matthews, 2016; Edinburgh et al., 2015; Goździak, 2008; Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016; Rothman et al., 2018). Whereas the



[NAME CHANGED] Tobias, 13, stands by an open window at a shelter that assists sexually abused children in a working class neighbourhood in one of Colombia's largest cities. Tobias is one of six children from a very poor family. At the age of 9, he was dressed 'like a girl' and sold to a man for sex by a male friend of his mother. After running away, he began to sell sex in order to survive, including dressing in women's clothing in order to earn more.

researcher or practitioner may classify the child's experience as sexual exploitation, the child himself may reject this label (Boyd & Bales, 2016; Cordisco Tsai et al., 2018; Horning & Paladino, 2016; Rothman et al., 2018). Boys may see their involvement in exploitative acts as beneficial – that is, as a way to earn money or foster their independence (Edinburgh et al., 2015; Hounmenou, 2017; Mai, 2011; Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016). Gendered social norms also impact boys' perceptions of their identity as a victim, as discussed earlier. Children who have been exploited often express a deep ambivalence about their own experiences, fluctuating between a sense of agency and victimhood. They may simultaneously see themselves as victims, active agents, and perpetrators or recruiters of their peers (Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016).

When conducting research with boys who have been sexually exploited, researchers need to be careful with the terminology used, since language that presents them as victims may turn them away (ECPAT International, 2019a). Researchers should use language that does not make children feel like victims, or feel that their behaviours have been inappropriate (ECPAT International, 2019b). Additionally, many narratives about sexually exploited children present a one-dimensional perspective, focusing on children's victimization, which again may not be consistent with children's views of their own experiences (Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016). In addition to estimating how many boys have experienced exploitation according to agreed-upon definitions, it is also important for researchers to explore how boys perceive their own experiences. Boys' voices should be represented in the research process to ensure that interventions resonate with their lived experiences.

Informed consent

Power issues in research can be magnified when participants are children (ECPAT International, 2019a; Ricard-Guay & Denov, 2016). When conducting research with youth who have experienced exploitation, the concept of informed consent may be unfamiliar to them (Duong, 2015). Exploited children have a history of others using them to get what they want. In research pertaining to sexual exploitation, there may be no direct benefits to

boys for their participation (Rothman et al., 2018). Attention must be paid to both verbal and non-verbal communication from the researcher and boys' capacity to say no. Children should be able to make a truly informed decision about their participation; in other words, it should be made clear that they are allowed to say no and/or to withdraw at any time (ECPAT International, 2019a; 2019b). Providing verbal examples of how to decline consent can be a helpful practice (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019).

The permission of parents or guardians is often required for children's participation in research. However, obtaining parental permission may endanger boys who have experienced sexual exploitation, since parents may be abusive, may have facilitated the exploitation, may not know that their children were exploited, and/or may be separated from the child. Guardianship may vary depending upon the circumstances of the child (ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018). And requiring the consent of a parent or guardian can substantially limit study enrolment (Abrams, 2010). In the United States, institutional review board (IRB) guidelines for informed consent may differ depending on the exact age of the child. For instance, research institutions may allow youth aged 14 years and older to sign assent forms on their own behalf. However, victims of sexual exploitation are often younger than 14, necessitating parental consent (Rothman et al., 2018). Consent by a parent or legal guardian can be waived in research related to child abuse given the risks to the child. This said, alternative mechanisms must be put in place to protect children when guardian consent is waived (Dayal et al., 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018). Even if legal guardians consent to children's participation, researchers should also obtain assent from child participants (ECPAT International, 2019b).

Mandatory reporting

In some contexts, researchers have a legal obligation to report child abuse and exploitation disclosed during the research process (ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018). While mandated reporting systems are in place for the protection of children, such reporting can also heighten the risks for the child under some circumstances. For instance,

mandated reporting can lead to inappropriate intervention from improperly equipped authorities, perpetrator retribution, heightened survivor stigma and, ultimately, harm to the child (Dayal et al., 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a). If mandatory reporting is required, participants must be informed of the reporting processes prior to seeking their consent or assent (ECPAT International, 2019b). When deemed appropriate, certificates of confidentiality can be obtained that exempt researchers from legal requirements (ECPAT International, 2019a). Researchers must consider the best course of action in each context, with the safety and well-being of the boys involved as the highest priority.

Selection and training of study team members

Given the sensitivity of conducting research on this topic, properly trained research teams are essential. A thorough screening of staff should be conducted during the recruitment process. Interviewers should have prior experience with trauma survivors (ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018). And research team members should also be trained in research ethics, minimizing retraumatization, the dynamics of abuse, safety and legal considerations in research on sexual exploitation, non-judgemental and respectful communication, rapport-building, management of disclosures, crisis management and referrals to support services, among other topics (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Dayal et al., 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a, 2019b). Within each cultural context, the age and gender of interviewers should be carefully considered to ensure that the match is comfortable for boys. When possible, the use of interpreters should be minimized. Research teams should also consider who needs to be present during interviews, striving to respect the wishes and comfort level of boys (ECPAT International, 2019a). In addition to making all forms and materials understandable to children, staff must be sufficiently trained to help boys feel safe expressing if and when they need a break during the interview process, and/or do not want to answer specific questions (ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018).

Responding to adverse events

Given the vulnerability of boys who experience sexual exploitation and the sensitivity of conducting

research on this topic, researchers should be prepared for adverse events that may emerge during the process. Proper protection procedures should be in place in case of emergencies, or if a child becomes distressed (ECPAT International, 2019a). When researchers who are not properly trained intervene in crisis situations, their interventions, even if well-intentioned, can cause additional harm to the child (Horning & Paladino, 2016; Kelly & Coy, 2016). It is therefore important for both researchers and boys themselves to be extremely clear regarding the boundaries of researchers' roles (Cordisco Tsai, 2018). Procedures should be instituted for reporting adverse events and facilitating referrals to support services. It is recommended that researchers prepare scripts for interviewers to use when children ask for help (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Rothman et al., 2018). Researchers should also be prepared to implement safety planning procedures (Duong, 2015). Emergency on-call procedures, regular team debriefings, consistent supervision of field researchers in regard to emergency situations, the appropriate use of referrals, and maintaining proper boundaries in the researcher-participant relationship are all essential in preventing and responding to adverse events (Cordisco Tsai, 2018). Regular team debriefings provide staff an opportunity to discuss concerns with direct supervisors and ascertain whether follow-up is required.

Support structures

As mentioned in the previous section, research teams should be prepared to facilitate referrals to support services for participants when needed, including counselling and medical services, among others (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019; Dayal et al., 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a, 2019b). Language regarding sexual violence should be omitted from referral forms to reduce stigmatization and adverse consequences (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019). However, in some contexts, few providers exist and/or services are of poor quality, raising concerns about whether boys can be safely and ethically referred for services (Horning & Paladino, 2016; Surtees & Brunovskis, 2016). While this concern applies to research with any vulnerable population, it is particularly pertinent in research with exploited boys given the dearth of programming for this population (Cordisco Tsai et al., 2018; Hounmenou,

2017). The lack of appropriate community services in times of need raises questions about whether or not research should be conducted with children if no support services are in place. At the same time, research may be needed in order to advocate for new programmes for this underserved population.

In prior research projects with exploited youth, researchers have found that it is not uncommon for young people and their family members to ask interviewers for assistance that is outside the boundaries of their role. In addition to facilitating referrals, researchers need to be properly prepared to manage their own emotional distress and to not overstep boundaries, as noted above (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Rothman et al., 2018; Yea, 2016). Along with proper referral systems, it is important for all parties to be clear about the role of the researcher and for researchers to revisit expectations and boundaries with participants as regularly as is needed (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a; Surtees & Brunovskis, 2016).

Retraumatization

When research related to traumatic experiences is conducted, concerns arise about the possibility that involvement may be retraumatizing or at least emotionally distressing for participants (Legerski & Bunnell, 2010). These concerns are compounded when conducting research with children. Especially if participants do not self-identify as victims before the interview, questions pertaining to sexual exploitation may lead the child to experience emotional distress (Boyd & Bales, 2016). Research with adolescents, however, has also found that interview questions pertaining to sexuality and sexual abuse do not lead to obvious signs of discomfort for certain participants (Priebe et al., 2010). Some evidence suggests that children may find it beneficial to talk with interviewers about their experiences, since it can provide a safe environment for them to open up to adults about what has happened to them, sometimes for the first time (ECPAT International, 2019a).

Even so, to ensure the protection and safety of child participants, a trauma-informed approach to data collection is essential. General principles

of such an approach include attention to physical and emotional safety, transparency, choice, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, and sensitivity to cultural, gender and historical issues (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). When applied to research, examples of a trauma-informed approach include actions such as staying attuned to and monitoring non-verbal signs of distress, integrating stopping points in interviews, providing choices about where to sit, offering opportunities to skip questions, and incorporating safeguards to prevent oversharing (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019; ECPAT International, 2019a; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010; Rothman et al., 2018). Protocols can be developed to help interviewers recognize signs of distress during interviews and to know how to respond accordingly (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019). When possible, consideration should be given to where the child is within the therapeutic process in determining the extent of his participation. Children should be consulted throughout the research process and modifications should be made, as needed (ECPAT International, 2019a).

Participant compensation

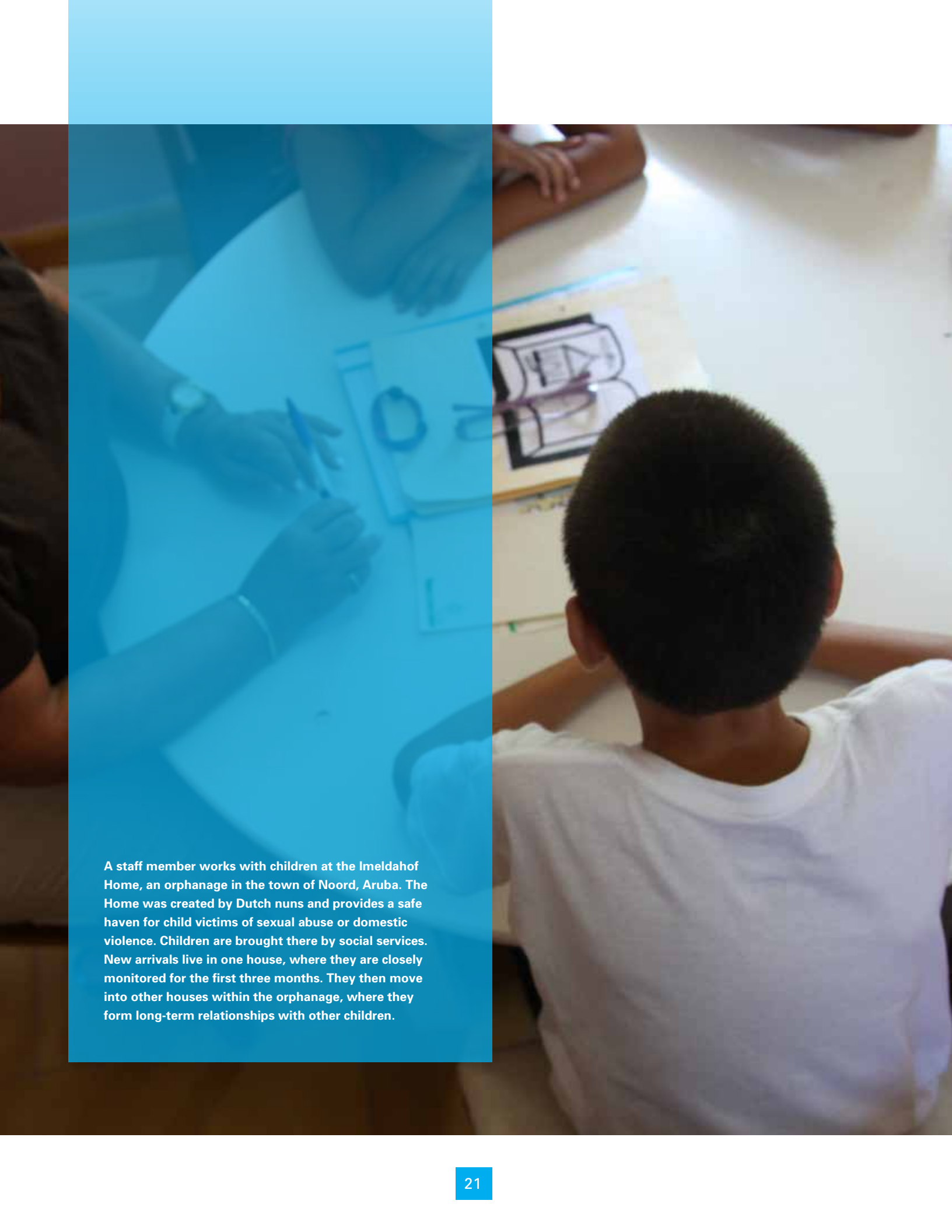
Researchers studying the sexual exploitation of boys need to decide how to handle participant compensation. General ethical standards caution against using incentives to induce children to participate in research (Dayal et al., 2018). This risk is particularly pertinent for research with children who have experienced sexual exploitation, since such children have a history of being used by others. Moreover, children may be exploited due to pressure to meet their basic needs (Moynihan et al., 2018; Rothman et al., 2018; Tadele, 2009). As a result, many questions remain about how to provide adequate compensation in a way that does not coerce or improperly persuade children to participate (Boyd & Bales, 2016; Horning & Paladino, 2016). However, reimbursement for expenses such as travel to research sites should be provided. It is recommended that researchers consult with local partners and key stakeholders when making decisions about other forms of compensation, which may include in-kind items, to ensure that any remuneration is appropriate given involved risks (ECPAT International, 2019a, 2019b).

Ethics review processes

Another practical challenge in conducting research on the sexual exploitation of boys pertains to obtaining ethics review – or institutional review board (IRB) – approval. An ethics review refers to an independent review of a research study to ensure that it follows ethical standards and that research participants' safety, welfare and rights are protected. Obtaining ethics review approval is a vital step in the research process (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019). Institutional review boards exist to protect the rights of study participants and to ensure that research maintains ethical standards. However, it can be very difficult to obtain ethics review approval for research on sensitive subjects with children. Moreover, IRBs may be underprepared to properly evaluate research protocols pertaining to sexual exploitation of children (ECPAT International, 2019a; Rothman et al., 2018). As a result, considerable delays in the review of sensitive projects are common, along with inconsistencies in IRB decisions and significant costs related to study delays and investment of human resources (Silberman & Kahn, 2011). While ethical processes must be in place to protect children, it is also recommended that review processes are not unnecessarily delayed or restricted because the topic of inquiry is new or sensitive (Adams et al., 2017). In some locations, formal review boards for social research do not exist. Researchers should consider establishing informal ethics review committees with local researchers and protection experts, collaborating with community advisory boards, and convening global advisory boards that can also review protocols (Adams et al., 2017; Chynoweth & Martin, 2019; ECPAT International, 2019a, 2019b).

Secondary and vicarious trauma

Engaging in research about the sexual exploitation of boys can lead to secondary and vicarious trauma for research staff (Boyd & Bales, 2016; Chynoweth & Martin, 2019; Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Easton & Matthews, 2016; Rothman et al., 2018). Secondary trauma refers to psychological symptoms mimicking PTSD that are acquired through exposure to trauma experienced by another person. Vicarious traumatization refers to profound, harmful changes that occur in professionals' views of themselves, the world and others due to ongoing exposure to traumatic material (Baird & Kracen, 2006). It is vital for researchers to be proactive in preventing and responding to vicarious traumatization of research team members for the benefit of both researchers and involved boys (Easton & Matthews, 2016). Strategies for preventing secondary and vicarious trauma include sufficient screening of research team members for prior experience working with traumatized populations, proper supervision and debriefings, facilitation of a supportive working environment, strengthening team-building and peer-support systems, and educating staff regarding secondary or vicarious trauma, among others (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Funding to prevent and address secondary trauma should be incorporated into research budgets (Cordisco Tsai, 2018; Dayal et al., 2018; ECPAT International, 2019a; Kelly & Coy, 2016; Rothman et al., 2018). In some cases, referrals to counselling and other professional services may be necessary when researchers exhibit symptoms of secondary or vicarious trauma.

A photograph showing a staff member and children working together at a table. The staff member is pointing at a drawing on the table, and the children are looking at it. The drawing appears to be a floor plan or a diagram of a house. The scene is set in a bright, well-lit room.

A staff member works with children at the Imeldahof Home, an orphanage in the town of Noord, Aruba. The Home was created by Dutch nuns and provides a safe haven for child victims of sexual abuse or domestic violence. Children are brought there by social services. New arrivals live in one house, where they are closely monitored for the first three months. They then move into other houses within the orphanage, where they form long-term relationships with other children.

CONCLUSION

The sexual exploitation of boys is a grave human rights violation that is all too often unrecognized or unseen. Most research regarding the sexual exploitation of children has neglected the experiences of boys and youth who identify outside the gender binary. Given this gap, strengthening research on this topic is vital to improving policy, service delivery and prevention efforts. At the same time, the sensitivity of the subject matter necessitates heightened vigilance beyond conventional research ethics considerations. This paper outlined key ethical and methodological

challenges when conducting research on the sexual exploitation of boys, which remains complex and fraught with difficulties. Discussion of these and emerging challenges is critical to continued improvement of research guidelines that protect the rights of all involved boys and promote the well-being of children as the highest priority. Guidelines must continue to develop and evolve to reflect the realities of children's lives in an ever-changing world, and in response to ongoing consultation, re-assessment, and an increasingly robust evidence base.

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MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Global prevalence rates on the sexual exploitation of boys have yet to be determined
- Gendered social norms might discourage boys from reporting or disclosing sexual exploitation, making the issue more invisible
- Whether or not an individual child is exploited is influenced by a complex interplay of individual, family, community and societal factors
- High rates of substance use are consistently found among boys who have experienced sexual exploitation
- There is some evidence that law enforcement and service providers are less likely to identify boys than girls as victims of sexual exploitation
- Far fewer services are available for sexually exploited boys in comparison to girls; when services do exist, they have generally not been designed in ways that are boy-friendly, or with the specific needs of boys in mind

KEY ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Many barriers exist in attempting to quantify the scope of the problem, including underreporting, definitional inconsistencies and social stigma
- A more diverse range of sampling approaches is warranted since boys who have experienced sexual exploitation are often a hidden and hard-to-reach population
- Research pertaining to the sexual exploitation of boys requires extra attentiveness and caution above and beyond ethical considerations of conventional research
- Building trust is a key challenge in research with children who have experienced exploitation
- Boys should have a voice in providing feedback on research methods used to ensure that they are sensitive to their experiences