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Protecting and assisting boy survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse

THEMATIC DIALOGUE BRIEF

This thematic dialogue brief is based on the CTIP Thematic Dialogue: *Protecting and assisting boy survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse*, jointly hosted by jointly hosted by ASEAN-USAID Partnership for Regional Optimization with the Political-Security and Socio-Cultural Communities (PROSPECT), NEXUS Institute and ECPAT on May 9, 2022. It also draws extensively from the Discussion Brief drafted as background to this thematic dialogue, as well as research and resources developed by ECPAT in the framework of the [Global Boys Initiative](#).

This CTIP Thematic Dialogue was facilitated by Francesco Cecon (Head of the Global Boys Initiative at ECPAT International). The dialogue was attended by 17 practitioners and representatives from government institutions and civil society organizations working in four ASEAN Member States, as well as representatives from ASEAN-USAID PROSPECT, NEXUS Institute and ECPAT.

The thematic dialogue offered an important platform for practitioners in the ASEAN region to highlight prolific nature of the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys as well as the dearth of protection and assistance available to boys. The dialogue explored different challenges that service providers face in providing protection and services to boys as well as challenges that boys themselves face in accessing and accepting this support, including social biases and assumptions that prevent boys from being recognized as victims and in need of protection and support.

The dialogue was also an opportunity to discuss ECPAT's Global Boys Initiative, which aims to improve global knowledge on the sexual exploitation of boys, inform legislative efforts to improve the protection of boys and to develop tools and guidance on how to effectively work with boys. Through this initiative, ECPAT has identified issues and challenges that arise in identifying and protecting boys, as well as promising practices, when working with boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, across different contexts and communities.

Introduction

Throughout ASEAN (and indeed everywhere in the world) boys suffer sexual exploitation and abuse. And yet there is a general lack of awareness of the prolific nature of the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys. There is also a dearth of protection and assistance available to boys as well as social and gender biases and assumptions that prevent boys from being recognized as victims and with the rights to protection and support. These biases also mean that boys themselves do not recognize their own exploitation or do not feel able to seek out or accept assistance.

...this issue of sexual exploitation of boys is very, very hidden. It's not much talked about. And even if there is a case it is very quickly hushed up. (Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

*Note: Asterisk indicates quotes from ECPAT's country report on Hungary, available here: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Global-Boys-Initiative-Hungary-National-Report-English.pdf>

Lack of protection and assistance has real life and long term impacts in the lives of sexually abused and exploited boys and constitutes a failure on behalf of states to guard the best interest of the child. There is an urgent need to better inform practitioners and the general public about the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys globally as well as the barriers and challenges to identifying, protecting and assisting boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse. This is not only relevant and needed to protect boys, but also to challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes that lead to broader issues of gender based violence.

In Southeast Asia, all ASEAN Member States have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Children as well as the [2013 ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Elimination of Violence against Children](#). The latter outlines commitment by Member States to adopt “gender responsive, child sensitive, and age-responsive approach” in providing victims/survivors with protection and assistance, access to justice, recovery and reintegration in the community, including by strengthening capacity of law enforcement, social workers, and other stakeholders and promoting exchange of information and good practices. More recently, regional resolve to strengthen effectiveness of rights-based and gender-responsive child protection and support services was affirmed in relation to the growing issue of online exploitation and abuse with the [2019 Declaration on the Protection of Children from all Forms of Online Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN](#).

...the idea is not to take any attention away from sexual violence and exploitation against girls, but to strengthen the child protection framework and the child rights framework for all children and ensure that we do not miss boys when we discuss sexual exploitation (Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

I think we should raise more awareness on protecting children and give more examples that are relevant to the boy and bring up the voice from the boy. (Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

Part 1: The Challenge



Discussion Questions

- What **challenges do you face** as service providers in providing protection and services to boys?
- What **challenges do boys face** accessing and accepting protection and services to boys?

In spite of widespread abuse and sexual exploitation of boys, findings from ECPAT’s global literature review and 10-country research project highlighted substantial gaps in the **availability of support services for boy survivors** as well as issues in how services are provided.

Key challenges include:

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Inadequate identification and recognition of boys as victims. Practitioners often do not recognize that boys are victims of sexual exploitation and abuse and therefore do not identify boys and provide them with protection and services. Most practitioners have not been educated or trained on the issue of the **vulnerability or victimisation of boys** which limits their capacity to recognize victimized boys and refer or assist them.

Services are not tailored for boys. Practitioners are generally not equipped to identify and provide appropriate services to boys subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. Gender norms and biases mean that response services are not typically designed and implemented in ways that meet the needs of boys.

Services are often small scale and under-resourced. Services specific to boy survivors are often times very small scale and local- that is, located only in some cities, areas of communities but not an integral part of the national protection system. Not uncommonly these are initiatives founded by man survivors of child sexual abuse and function with limited funds and capacity.

Inadequate guidance, training and standards. Service providers working with boy survivors have often gained experience and expertise through a 'learning by doing' process, with few opportunities for training and capacity building. Services do not necessarily have evaluation and learning frameworks and schemes to regularly document and capitalise on their practice and expertise.

Law and policy does not protect boys. Service providers face many challenges in protecting and assisting boys in their daily work due to the legal and policy framework in which they operate. This means that, for example, laws and policies in a specific country might complicate referrals or access to reparation or justice for abused and exploited boys. Similarly, laws criminalising homosexuality might prevent reporting of cases of sexual abuse against heterosexual boys as well as children with a different sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

...we might perceive boys as participatory actors in their sexual exploitation so we don't necessarily see them as victims but that they looked for it, enjoyed it, part of their sexual exploration
(Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

... we've got activities that the boys are involved in. They've been created with their design, with their input. And so we have this model that we are confident in. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

... the services that we provide to the boy are very limited. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

... but when it comes to actually finding the money to hire staff and carry out these projects for us it's a barrier. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

In our training curriculum, we don't define the difference between the boy and girl when they experienced trafficking... We don't see the difference between girl and boys reactions.
(Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

So when we think about how laws and policies and procedures are created to deal with questions of child sexual abuse and exploitation, boys are often times out of the equation. (Facilitator of the Thematic Dialogue)



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Lack of professional connections and networks with like-minded practitioners and organisations. Service providers rarely have connection or ability to network with other practitioners on learning and exchange of practices to increase and improve the ‘know-how’ on the provision of prevention and response interventions to boys. Many organisations operate at the local level, with limited resources, heavy workloads and complex child protection cases. This hampers practitioners’ ability to integrate exchange and networking opportunities in their schedules. In addition, given that the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys remains unexplored in general child protection discussions and agendas, few training, learning and connection possibilities are created and opened for practitioners.

In addition, **boy survivors face barriers in accessing and accepting protection and services.** Barriers and challenges include:

Gender norms and social expectations. Social and cultural expectations of masculinity require boys to be invulnerable, strong, self-sufficient, control their emotions and solve their own problems. Deviating from these norms, for example, by seeking help, can be regarded as a form of a weakness – failing to be a ‘real man’. **Gender norms can even prevent boys from recognising they have been victimised or impact the ways they demonstrate they need help.** Internalisation of these gender norms mean that boys may feel guilt, shame, and self anger.

...boys have internalized beliefs and ideas of masculinity and what it means to be a boy, a man. And that impacts their ability to share emotions and feelings, to seek out help, to look for support because... boys don't cry, boys need to be strong. (Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

*“I didn’t know back then that this was something over the line, I thought it was just uncomfortable for me”. (Sexually exploited boy)**

Culture of silence. There is also a culture of silence around the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys that inhibits help seeking or accepting help when offered. This is further reinforced by individual, relational, community and institutional factors. This means that lack of disclosure, or hiding situations of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys might happen at the level of the boy’s will to report, but might also be affected by the reactions of individuals surrounding the boy (the family, the community, his peers, etc.). It might indeed happen that families or communities dismiss the boys’ experiences or hide the issue to avoid discrimination and stigma. The majority of boys might only be able to disclose and/or seek support and help only during their adult lives. Support programmes for young and adult male survivors of child sexual abuse or child trafficking should therefore be available as to guarantee continuum of care.

...help seeking behaviour is not generally accepted for boys so when a boy looks for help, it may be dismissed, even by professionals. (Facilitator at the Thematic Dialogue)

“I became silent and started missing class and other activities that I used to enjoy, no one noticed anything except for one teacher, after months.” (Sexually exploited boy)*

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Difficulty in disclosure. While disclosure of abuse and exploitation is difficult for anyone, male vulnerability make disclosure particularly challenging for boys. Limited disclosure by boys in turn means that practitioners have limited experience on the issue and boys get overlooked in the statistics and reports.

... I think we should raise more awareness on protecting children and give more examples that are relevant to the boy and bring up more the voice from the boy. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

Part 2: The Response



Discussion Questions

- What approaches and tools **can we use** to better identify trafficked and sexually exploited boys?
- What strategies **do you use** in your work to protect and support boy survivors?

To identify and meet the needs of sexually exploited and abused boys, ECPAT International launched the [Global Boys Initiative](#) to research the scale and nature of the sexual exploitation of boys and to understand how to better prevent, protect and support boy survivors.¹ This included a series of meetings and conversations with ECPAT members, other civil society organisations, academia, and partners to further understand the existing gaps in the provision of services to boys at risk and survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Using these learnings, the *Global Boys Initiative* is now focusing on ‘putting learning into action’: how to respond to the challenges around this issue, and how to support boys and service providers to effectively address sexual exploitation. This includes a learning exercise (developing case studies) to document practice(s) to capture and better understand what works and what does not work in engaging and working with sexually exploited and abused boys.

The case studies explore issues and challenges that arise when working with boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, across different contexts and communities. The case studies are critical in the design and elaboration of new guiding and technical documents as they build on local and existing practices to feed global knowledge and approaches in adjusting services to be gender-sensitive and adequate in considering the specific trajectories of boys. All case studies contribute to answering the overarching question of **“how can we [practitioners] work with boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse with a gender-sensitive approach?”**.

¹ Research included the [Global Literature Review](#) and 10 [country specific research reports](#) covering legal, policy and response services programmes in India, Morocco, the Gambia, Belgium, Thailand, South Korea, Hungary, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bolivia.

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The case studies have been collected in Bolivia, Colombia, Namibia, the United Kingdom, Morocco, **Thailand, Cambodia** and South Korea. In spite of the cultural differences and dynamics related to the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys, there are several trends and similarities in the approaches and practices used by practitioners in working with and supporting boys. Learning is outlined in the strategies below.

- Key points to consider before working with boys
- Key tips for the first contact with boys
- Promising practices in establishing trust and safety with boys

Key points to consider before working with boys

- Consider **gender dynamics** in designing targeted strategies to work with boys.
- Use a sensitive approach to **ethnically and culturally diverse communities** in introducing sensitive topics related to sexuality, gender and sexual violence.
- Understand **different scenarios and situations in which sexual exploitation can happen**, as well as its consequences and impact beforehand.

... communication should always be at the same level again, taking away all that formality role in a way of taking away that power dynamic, that boys already face in their daily lives. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

Key tips for the first contact with boys

- **Initial contact** with boy survivor is essential in developing rapport and trust to carry out future assistance work;
- The role of counsellors and/or social workers during the initial contact is crucial in **eliminating existing fear**, in encouraging boys to continue seeking support and in providing future support;
- The consistent use of **reaffirming language** or where necessary, native language helps in making the boys feel safe as well as in removing any preconceived ideas of how the counsellors or social workers might be;
- The counsellors and/or social workers should refrain from establishing a relationship of power with the boys but **should communicate in the same level as the boys** to make them feel heard.

... take the time to understand and listen and process the information that the boys gave us and trusted us with, not necessarily needing to provide an answer straight away. (Facilitator of the Thematic Dialogue)

...a common learning across all countries has been the importance of reaffirming language. Because of the stigma that the boys go through in situations of sexual abuse and exploitation, it is important that the counselor or the social worker or the outreach worker from the first contact removes in his or her language any preconceived idea of how that relationship should work, any gender bias, and really start to establish a safe space from that moment. (Facilitator of the Thematic Dialogue)

Promising practices in establishing trust and safety with boys

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- Ensuring a right balance between seeking information and **active listening** to boys.
- Assigning the right counsellor or social worker is essential to build trust and develop need-based solutions for boys.
- Use tailored language and communication techniques to **confirm confidentiality** and creating a safe space for boys.
- **Group activities** can provide a safe space for boys to develop feelings of shared experience, validate their experience and developing trust.
- Understand and **adjust to boys' reactions and attitudes** to tailor communication and support activities;
- **Keep promises** made to boys as part of the process of rapport building;
- **Engage in a wide range of creative and educational activities** using creative, craft, sport materials to break the ice and develop rapport with boys.
- **Consider broader framework of child protection** as professionals may not have the necessary skills or training to link boys' symptoms (like physical or mental health issues) to harm from sexual exploitation and abuse. Sexual abuse and exploitation of boys should be mainstreamed to ensure that that boys are identified and referred to relevant child protection services.

... building trust with boys generally takes longer because of the challenges they face. First conversations can be just listening about their lives, situations and not necessarily the issue itself. To understand and create a moment when the boy can see that someone care. This is particularly important when boys lack figures like that in their normal lives. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

... responsive listening is the basic skill when working with the survivor. So step by step we are building the trust to let them feel safety and then we use the very basic skill, asking open questions. after we build the trust we use different kind of questions to get more understanding about their needs so we can refer them to the next step or even to the previous support services. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)

...how to mainstream in our child protection work the issue and provide practitioners, but also communities with examples as we do for the girl child, also for the boy child, so they can actually start thinking about also how to protect boys at the same time as girls. [...]where we want to go to is really to mainstream and make sure that we can address the needs, individual needs of everyone in the in our conversations on child protection. (Facilitator of the Thematic Dialogue)

... the staff and the practitioner can share with their community or with children to [help them] understand that the boy and girl they need to be protecting. (Practitioner at the Thematic Dialogue)



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Resources

ECPAT International (2023) *Global Boys Initiative Case Studies* including:

- *Bolivia Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/gbi-case-study-bolivia/>
- *Colombia Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/gbi-case-study-colombia/>
- *Morocco Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/gbi-case-study-morocco/>
- *Namibia Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/gbi-case-study-namibia/>
- *United Kingdom Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/gbi-case-study-uk/>
- *Thailand Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/global-boys-initiative-case-study-thailand/>
- *Cambodia Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/global-boys-initiative-case-study-cambodia/>
- *South Korea Case Study*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/resource/global-boys-initiative-case-study-south-korea/>

ECPAT International (2021) *Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys*. ECPAT International. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Global-Boys-Initiative-Literature-Review-ECPAT-International-2021.pdf>

ECPAT International (2022) *Global Boys Initiative Country Reports*, including:

- *Belgium Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/GLOBAL-BOYS_BELGIUM_2022.pdf
- *Bolivia Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GLOBAL-BOYS_BOLIVIA_2022JULY_v5.pdf
- *Gambia Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/GLOBAL-BOYS_GAMBIA_2022AUGUST.pdf
- *Hungary Report*. Available at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Global-Boys-Initiative-Hungary-National-Report-English.pdf>
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- *Morocco Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GLOBAL-BOYS_Morocco_14November2022_FINAL.pdf
- *Pakistan Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Gobal-Boys-Initiative_Pakistan-Report_FINAL.pdf
- *South Korea Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Global-Boys-Initiative-South-Korea-National-Report_English.pdf
- *Sri Lanka Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ECPAT-Global-Boys-Initiative-Sri-Lanka_EN.pdf
- *Thailand Report*. Available at: https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ENG-Global-Boys-Initiative-Thailand-Report_April-2021_FINAL_2.pdf

Kavenagh, M., Hua, Nicholas & C. Wekerle (2023) 'Sexual exploitation of children: Barriers for boys in accessing social supports for victimization', *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213423001102?dgcid=author>

*Note: Asterisk indicates quotes from ECPAT's country report on Hungary, available here: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Global-Boys-Initiative-Hungary-National-Report-English.pdf>



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Josenhans, V., Kavenagh, M., Smith, S. & C. Wekerle (2020) 'Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys', *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213419304673>