



# ISSUES PAPER

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## LITERATURE REVIEW: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RESEARCH ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION INVOLVING CHILDREN

ECPAT International, ECPAT Taiwan and National Chung Cheng University in Taiwan are collaborating on a project to enhance global ethical practice in research on sexual exploitation involving children. As a first step, this paper identifies the critical ethical considerations for research on this highly sensitive topic that have been named in the relevant formal and informal literature. The paper also makes suggestions for some potential approaches. This paper is a precursor to *Guidelines for Conducting Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation involving Children* that are being developed by a global working group of ECPAT member organisations during 2019.

### INTRODUCTION

The impact and scale of sexual exploitation of children (SEC) cannot be overstated. This crime against children, which violates their human rights and can impose lifelong trauma, continues to outpace laws and policies, the justice system and child protection services.

Establishing prevalence data for SEC is highly complex, but the available evidence does show that children are increasingly vulnerable, and no region, country or child in the world is immune.<sup>1</sup> There is no typical victim, offender or offence, but enabling factors like rapidly expanding access to the Internet and mobile technology and cheap and easy travel are leading to more opportunities to offend – and to more victims.

Despite this complexity and scale there remains a dearth of research and rigorous data on child sexual exploitation and children's exposure to risk. This gap is both a function of the hidden nature and sensitivity of the problem, compounded by the rapidly changing environment in which children now live:<sup>2</sup>

*"In much of the world, children's lives have changed dramatically over the last generation. New risks have emerged or expanded but tremendous advances have also been made...Other transformations could be argued to have brought both positive and negative changes in the vast array of factors shaping children's lives (e.g. the emergence and pervasiveness of the Internet and the rise of globalization)."*<sup>3</sup>

These changes imply that if we are truly to tackle sexual exploitation of children then we need to better understand not only the scope, magnitude and statistics relating to SEC but also the nature of the lived experience, environments, attitudes and behaviours that expose children to these risks. Obtaining data from children themselves better reflects their perspectives and experiences directly and reduces misinterpretation by adults.<sup>4</sup> Children's voices and personal narratives allow for

- 1 ECPAT International, Defence for Children, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. (2016, May). *Offenders on the move: Global study on sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism*. Bangkok: ECPAT International
- 2 Berman, G., Hart, J., O'Mathúna, D., Mattellone, E., Potts, A., O'Kane, C., Shusterman, J., and Tanner, T. (2016). *What We Know about Ethical Research Involving Children in Humanitarian Settings: An overview of principles, the literature and case studies*. Innocenti Working Paper No. 2016-18. UNICEF Office of Research: Florence.
- 3 *Ibid*, p11.
- 4 Laws, S. and Mann, G. (2004). *So You Want to Involve Children in Research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*. Sweden: Save the Children.

valuable new insights which have the potential to lead to more effective interventions for both children and adults.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond providing better data, children's perspectives in research also has the potential to positively impact children themselves. This is noted for less contentious research involving children but also applies in difficult contexts and when exploring sensitive subject matter such as sexual exploitation of children.<sup>6</sup> Arguments for the value of this research are frequently framed within a child rights perspective.<sup>7</sup> In relation to research on sexual exploitation involving children the recognition of a child's right to have a voice and the potential value of research directly involving them may be overlooked when they are viewed exclusively as victims rather than survivors.

The discourse on child protection however remains critical. Within these contexts, and where research is undertaken with child survivors, minimizing both immediate and longer-term harms, identifying clear risk mitigation strategies, acknowledging the sensitivity of the subject matter, and, differentiating between therapy and research remain fundamental considerations in the development of ethical research in this domain. However, these questions should not mean a flat avoidance of such research. Instead, what is required is; considered reflection, consultation to explore and seek to balance differing moral and ethical perspectives, and, a grounded appreciation of the complexities and potential implications of the research. These reflexive approaches, while allowing space for nuance and attempting to simultaneously balance competing priorities, must always be guided by 'the best interests of the child' throughout the research and beyond.

### **Approach of this paper**

This paper attempts to unpack some of the critical ethical considerations for research on sexual exploitation that involves children. In doing so, there is recognition that much of the literature and more specifically the guidance available, primarily relates to more general research involving children.<sup>8</sup> This paper will therefore attempt to focus in narrowly on the specificities of research on sexual exploitation involving children while reverting where necessary and appropriate to the more general literature and guidance pertaining to research involving children on sexual violence, which raises similar if not many of the same ethical issues. Finally, where relevant, reference will be to the more general child focused research literature and guidelines.

This literature review is the result of consultations and advisory support from a working group of ECPAT members engaged in research on sexual exploitation involving children. The review comprised desk-based research and was conducted solely in English. The review has not followed a systematic process, and so can best be considered as a 'scoping review'. Discussions at an ECPAT global workshop in Taiwan in late 2017 led to the collection of relevant documentation, complemented by further searches using online search engines and databases. The search strategy utilized a combination of key words including 'child', 'children', 'young people', 'youth', 'victim', 'survivor', 'children at risk', 'boys', 'girls', in combination with the following terms 'child sexual abuse', 'child sexual exploitation', 'violence', 'child trafficking' 'child prostitution'. The information was primarily sourced from journal articles, guidelines, grey reports<sup>9</sup> and publications from international organisations and NGOs. In light of the dearth of research in this area, no limitations were placed on the date of publication.

- 5 Zwi, A. and Grove, H. (2006). [\*Researching with Children in Conflict-Affected Settings\*](#). Humanitarian Exchange, 34. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- 6 Rittenhouse, R., and Felicini, E. (2015). [\*Ethical issues of researching sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk\*](#). *ECPAT International Journal*, Issue 10 (June); Devries, K., Child, K., Elbourne, D., Naker, D., and Heise L. (2015) "[\*I never expected that it would happen, coming to ask me such questions\*](#)": [\*Ethical aspects of asking children about violence in resource poor settings\*](#). *Trials*. 16 (516) 1-12; Hart, J., and Tyrer, B. (2006). [\*Research with children living in situations of armed Conflict: concepts, ethics and methods\*](#). *Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper No 30*. Oxford University.
- 7 The United Nations. (1989). [\*Convention on the Rights of the Child\*](#) Article 12. Geneva: Office of the High Commission for Human Rights.
- 8 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [\*Ethical Research Involving Children\*](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; Powell, M.A. (2011). [\*International literature review: Ethical issues in undertaking research with children and young people\*](#). Lismore: Southern Cross University, Centre for Children and Young People/Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Research on Children and Families; Morrow, V. (2005). [\*The ethics of social research with children and young people – an overview\*](#). Institute of Education, University of London.
- 9 Grey literature/reports stands for manifold document types produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats that are protected by intellectual property rights, of sufficient quality to be collected and preserved by libraries and institutional repositories, but not controlled by commercial publishers; i.e. where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body. (The Twelfth International Conference on Grey Literature in Prague in 2010 )

## IMPORTANT TERMS<sup>10</sup>

**ASSENT** – Assent is the term adopted in a number of countries to describe the willingness to participate in research, evaluations or data collection by persons who are by legal definition too young to give informed consent according to prevailing local law but who are old enough to understand the proposed research in general, its expected risks and possible benefits, and the activities expected of them as subjects. Assent is similar to the process of informed consent. Assent by itself however, is not sufficient, alone. If assent is given, informed consent must still be obtained from the subject’s parents or guardian or a responsible adult.

**CHILD** – In line with the majority of international legal instruments and with international practice, the term ‘child’ is understood as including any person who is under the age of 18 years.

**CONFIDENTIALITY** – Confidentiality is the process of protecting an individual’s privacy. It pertains to the treatment of information that an individual has disclosed in a relationship of trust, with the expectation that this information will not be divulged to others without permission.

**INFORMED CONSENT** – The voluntary agreement of an individual, or his or her authorized representative, who has the legal capacity to give consent, and who exercises free power of choice, without undue inducement or any other form of constraint or coercion to participate in research. The individual must have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the nature of the proposed evidence generating activity, the anticipated risks and potential benefits, and the requirements or demands of the activity to be able to make an informed decision.

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS (IRBs) OR ETHICAL REVIEW BOARDS (ERBs) OR COMMITTEES** – A specifically constituted review body established or designated by an institution to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects recruited to participate in biomedical or behavioural or social science research. IRBs attempt to ensure, both

in advance and by periodic review, protection of subjects by reviewing research proposals and related materials. IRB protocols assess the ethics of research, evaluations or data collection and analysis and their methods, promote fully informed and voluntary participation by prospective subjects capable of making such choices (or, if that is not possible, informed permission given by a suitable proxy), and seek to maximize the safety of subjects. In this procedure IRBs will be included in the term Ethical Review Boards.

**PRIVACY** – The ability of an individual to control the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing themselves (physically, behaviorally, or intellectually) with others. Privacy refers to the right of individuals to limit access by others to aspects of their person that can include their thoughts and identifying information.

**SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN** – 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).

**SEXUAL ABUSE** – The sexual abuse of a child is the act of (a) engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities and: (b) engaging in sexual activities with a child where: use is made of coercion, force or threats; or abuse is made of a recognised position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family; or abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child, notably because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence. This definition includes causing a child to witness sexual activities or sexual abuse, or threatening a child into sexual activities with a third party.

**VOLUNTARY CONSENT** – refers to a human research subject’s exercise of free will in deciding whether to participate in a research activity. Special care, therefore, must be taken to eliminate undue pressure or coercion (real and perceived) particularly when research subjects have a diminished capacity to refuse.

10 The terminology adopted in this paper relating to sexual exploitation of children is consistent with the Luxembourg Guidelines. These Guidelines, developed by an Interagency working group led by ECPAT, were designed to provide all individuals and agencies working for the prevention and elimination of all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children with guidance for the understanding and use of the different terms and concepts they may encounter in their work.

## ETHICS PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION INVOLVING CHILDREN

Most of the seminal international human subject and child focussed ethical research frameworks are guided by what are perceived to be a set of global, universal principles.<sup>11</sup> These principles require that researchers attend to both the *human* as well as the procedural dimensions of research.<sup>12</sup> The most common universal principles are frequently categorised under three headings, summarised below with particular reference to research on sexual exploitation involving children:

### **Do no harm:**

The principle of non-maleficence/beneficence (in other words, ‘do no harm’) requires that researchers avoid harm or injury to children, both through acts of commission or omission. If research is likely to do harm to children it is unethical and should not proceed. It also refers to a researcher’s obligation to strive for their research to improve the status, rights and/or well-being of children.<sup>13</sup> In this context, harms should be considered broadly and may include any physical, psychological (trauma, stress etc), social or economic harms that a child may experience by virtue of the research.<sup>14</sup> This principle has particular salience for research on child sexual exploitation in light of both the sensitivity of the subject matter and, importantly the potential vulnerabilities of those exposed to or at risk of sexual exploitation.

### **Justice:**

The principle of justice refers to consideration of the equity of representation of various child cohorts (whether defined by age, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, exposure to exploitation etc.) within research. It also refers to the need for explicit acknowledgement and strategies to

address the power dynamics inherent in adult/child relationships and their potential manifestation in research with children. Justice therefore demands consideration of the perceived benefits and burdens of the research for those involved.

This principle is consistent with a child rights approach which recognises the importance of children’s voices as articulated in the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#).<sup>15</sup>

In the context of ethical research on sexual exploitation involving children, the principle of justice requires reflection on who and whether to engage children in the research and the potential burden of this research. This burden includes the duration and timing of the research, exposure (or over-exposure) to other data collection processes, children’s circumstances (are children still currently being exploited?) and, if being provided psychosocial support, their location within the therapeutic process.

### **Respect:**

The principle of respect implies valuing children and their lived realities. It requires recognition that children’s decisions exist within broader personal, relational, social, cultural, legal and environmental contexts.<sup>16</sup> In standard international guidelines it refers to respecting the dignity of participants and their capacity, when fully informed – to make decisions whether or not to consent to research.<sup>17</sup> In relation to children, it requires an understanding that the decision to participate or otherwise is shaped by power dynamics and their cognitive capacities and development. These power dynamics must be understood to ensure that research on child sexual exploitation involving children takes into account and is both mindful and respectful of the complex attitudes and dynamics that children at risk or exposed to child sexual exploitation may have towards adults.<sup>18</sup>

11 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [Ethical Research Involving Children](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; UNICEF (2015). [Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis](#). Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Office of Research; Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) & World Health Organization (WHO). (2002). [International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects](#), Geneva: CIOMS.; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research. (1978). [The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research](#). Bethesda: The Commission, Academy of Social Sciences.

12 *Ibid*

13 *Ibid*

14 National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (1978). [The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research](#). Bethesda: The Commission, Academy of Social Sciences.

15 The United Nations. (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Treaty Series, 1577, 3. Geneva: United Nations.

16 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [Ethical Research Involving Children](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti;

17 Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) & World Health Organization (WHO). (2002). [International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects](#), Geneva: CIOMS.

18 Edmonds, C. (2003) [Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour](#), Geneva: ILO.

The following additional principles may also be considered relevant in relation to research on sexual exploitation involving children.

### **Best interest of the child:**

The best interests of the child is generally understood as the governing principle for legal and particularly medical decisions about children.<sup>19</sup> It places the best interest of the child in their specific context as a primary if not the governing principle in relation to decision making involving or effecting children. In research on sexual exploitation involving children it may be considered pertinent as it provides guidance in contexts where legislative requirements may be in conflict with ethical and moral imperatives (such as mandatory reporting in contexts where the reporting may harm the child, or asking consent from parents responsible for sexual exploitation etc)<sup>20</sup> and where potential mitigation strategies need to be in place.

### **Children's right to be heard and the right to access to information:**

These rights-based principles underpin justifications for ethical research on child exploitation involving children. Within a rights-based framework research involving children can provide a forum for expression and can potentially be both protective and empowering.<sup>21</sup> The degree and nature of engagement should always take into account the evolving capacities of the child with due consideration, wherever possible, of individual competencies.<sup>22</sup> A child's right to be heard should not be uncritically dismissed exclusively on the basis of sensitive subject matter and must be weighed carefully with due consideration of the potential value to both society and the children involved of their voices and perspectives on subject matter that may affect them and their lives. Further, a child's right to access information is instructive in that it mandates that all relevant information is provided in an accessible and child friendly format to allow children to make fully informed decisions regarding their participation in research.

### **Transparency and accountability:**

The principles of transparency and accountability require acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for the processes, actions and outcomes of research. These principles require that researchers clearly communicate to participants, relevant stakeholders and communities the purpose of the research, the methods to be used and the intended use of findings. However, it should be clear that the nature, content and form of the information communicated to relevant parties should reflect the context, competencies and the best interest of the child.

In the case of research on sexual exploitation involving children, accountability demands that the impact of the research on children and their communities both during and consequent to the research be considered and that careful planning and management, clear mechanisms and assigned responsibilities for follow up and support if necessary, are in place prior to any adverse events occurring.

### **A final reflection on principles and their implications:**

When reflecting on the above principles it is important to reiterate that, in keeping with the best interest of the child there may, in practice, be tensions between principles relating to 'children's right to be heard and the right to access to information', and, the principle of 'do no harm'. While Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that children be allowed to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, this should be qualified by Article 17 (e) which is explicit in stating that guidelines need to protect the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being. The practical implications of this tension are that in order to ensure that research on sexual exploitation involving children is ethical, it needs to consider:

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- 19 Shah, S., (2013). [\*Does research with children violate the Best Interests standard? An empirical and conceptual analysis.\*](#) Northwestern Journal of Law and Social Policy, 8 (Spring).
- 20 Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education National Research Council. (1993). *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect.* Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- 21 Simantiri, N., (2018). [\*Empowerment of child victims and children at risk of sexual exploitation.\*](#) The Hague: Down to Zero Alliance and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Save the Children. (2004) [\*So you want to involve children in research? A toolkit supporting children's meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children.\*](#) London: Save the Children.
- 22 Lansdown, G. (2005). [\*The Evolving Capacities of the Child.\*](#) *Innocenti Insights no. 11.* Florence: Innocenti Office of Research.

1. **Whether children should participate** Is it necessary and critical that children participate in the research? Are other data sources available? What are the likely positive and negative impacts of their involvement?<sup>23</sup>
2. **When children should participate** At what age? At what point in their therapeutic process if they have been exposed to child sexual exploitation? At what point in the research process?
3. **How children should participate** What methods should be involved? To what degree should children be involved in the research?

## KEY ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN RESEARCH ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION INVOLVING CHILDREN

The following sections highlight the critical ethical issues, considerations and risk mitigation strategies identified in the literature that should be considered when embarking on, or undertaking, research on sexual exploitation involving children. It is organised around the common concerns identified in key international and child centred research guidelines<sup>24</sup> while specifically focussing on the relevant considerations for research on sexual exploitation involving children. The issues are organised under four headings:

- Harms and Benefits
- Informed consent
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Payment and Compensation

### Harms and benefits

Reflection on the harms versus the benefits of research can be considered both an overarching principle and a key consideration in undertaking research with human subjects.<sup>25</sup>

*“In order to prevent harmful or unprofessional research, risk benefit assessments need to be made at different levels: by the researchers; by ethics, funding and scientific review committees and advisers; and by the people who are asked to take part in the research (children and young people) and their care givers.”<sup>26</sup>*

The need to reflect on the potential benefits and harms that the research may involve is a key consideration in the literature on research with children but has particular salience in discussions with children relating to sexual exploitation. This is particularly important given the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential vulnerability and sensitivities of children interviewed that may have been exposed to sexual exploitation.<sup>27</sup> In the context of research in this sensitive domain it is argued that there needs to be considered and careful reflection on the risks versus the benefits, rather than a wholesale prohibition against the research itself or an uncritical position that ‘good’ SEC research requires the direct involvement of children as respondents.

### Understanding the potential benefits

Children’s involvement in research on sexual exploitation can play a critical role in their protection, in shaping appropriate supports and services and importantly in the development of risk mitigation strategies.<sup>28</sup> Further, there is some

- 23 When reconciling these principles it is important to differentiate between child participation in research and participatory research involving children. The latter focuses on a particular suite of research methodologies while the former usually relates to children as the subjects of interviews. Participatory methodologies require more substantive engagement with children throughout the research cycle and can include the participation of children in; providing advisory support and input into the research programme design, undertaking data collection, analysis of data, triangulation of data and dissemination and advocacy of findings. The stage and degree of participation will be contingent on the participatory method adopted. It is important to note that there is little guidance from the literature on the use of child based participatory methods for highly sensitive subjects like child sexual exploitation and further work in this area is required.
- 24 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; UNICEF (2015) *Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Office of Research; Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) & World Health Organization (WHO). (2002). *International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects*. Geneva: CIOMS.; United States. (1978). *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research*. Bethesda: The Commission, Academy of Social Sciences.
- 25 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti;
- 26 Alderson, P., and Morrow V. (2004). *Ethics, social research and consulting with children and young people*. London: Barnardo’s.
- 27 Rittenhouse, R., and Felicini E. (2015). *Ethical issues of researching sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk*. *ECPAT International Journal*. Issue 10 (June).
- 28 Simantiri, N., (2018) *Empowerment of child victims and children at risk of sexual exploitation*. The Hague: Down to Zero Alliance and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Save the Children. (2004) *So you want to involve children in research? A toolkit supporting children’s meaningful and ethical participation in research relating to violence against children*. London: Save the Children.

evidence to support that children may actually find it beneficial to be asked questions about their attitudes and experiences and to engage with an interested adult on sensitive subjects that may be viewed as taboo or stigmatising within the cultures and contexts in which they live.<sup>29</sup> For example, in research focussing on boys and their experience of abuse, a number of participants noted that it was the first time any adult had ever acknowledged that boys could be impacted by abuse.<sup>30</sup>

Research involving children in these contexts provides a means to amplify children's voices, challenge the culture of silence in which abuse thrives while also encouraging active engagement with services and professional support.<sup>31</sup> As noted previously, children's involvement also ensures that children's perspectives are explicitly considered and that adult assumptions are tested against the lived realities, understandings and attitudes of children contextualised within the significant and ongoing changing environments in which they are living.<sup>32</sup>

As noted in Article 12 of the UN CRC 'a child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting [them]'.<sup>33</sup>

Much of the literature on research, and particularly research with vulnerable<sup>34</sup> cohorts note that in light of the increased risks that their capacities, agency or circumstances present, the research should ensure that there are *direct benefits* to participants.<sup>35</sup> It is noted that where no direct

benefit is likely, at minimum the results should have clear benefits to other persons in the same group, for example children who are the same age or have the same condition and that any they should not be exposed to more than minimal risk.<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, minimal risk refers to those risks that an adult or child may be reasonably exposed to or encounter in daily life, or in routine medical, dental, or psychological examinations. This duty of care, is particularly applicable to ensure research on sexual exploitation involving children is ethical. Reflection on direct benefits to participants requires explicit consideration of the necessity of the research, the effective use of findings and the provision of supports to those in need. This may also have practical implications as ethics review processes may withhold approval and prevent the research from being undertaken without direct benefits.

A final point relating to the benefits of the research is the need for researchers to be clear as to the likely extent of the influence of any relevant research findings on policies, programs or services. The influence of findings may be strengthened if all relevant stakeholders (such as governments and service providers) are actively engaged from the outset of the respective project. Irrespective of the approach adopted, every effort should be made to ensure the benefits of the research are realized without overstating or over-promising in relation to outcomes. This is particularly true in relation to changes over which they may not have direct control.<sup>37</sup>

- 29 Draucker, C. (1999) *The emotional impact of sexual violence research on participants*. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 13 (4). 61-169; Walker, E., Newman, E., Koss, M., and D. Bernstein. (1997) *Does the study of victimization revictimize the victims?* *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 19 (6). pp. 403-10; Priebe, G., Backstrom, M., and Ainsaar, M. (2010). *Vulnerable adolescent participants' experience in surveys on sexuality and sexual abuse: ethical aspects*. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 34 (6). pp. 438-447.
- 30 United States Department of State (2017) *Assisting male survivors of human trafficking*, *Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights*. Washington DC: United States Government;
- 31 Draucker, C. (1999). *The emotional impact of sexual violence research on participants*. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 13 (4) . 61-169; Walker, E., Newman, E., Koss, M., and D. Bernstein. (1997) *Does the study of victimization revictimize the victims?* *General Hospital Psychiatry*, 19 (6). pp. 403-10; Priebe, G., Backstrom, M., and Ainsaar, M. (2010). *Vulnerable adolescent participants' experience in surveys on sexuality and sexual abuse: ethical aspects*. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 34 (6). pp. 438-447.
- 32 Berman, G., Hart, J., O'Mathúna, D., Mattellone, E., Potts, A., O'Kane, C., Shusterman, J., and Tanner, T. (2016). *What We Know about Ethical Research Involving Children in Humanitarian Settings: An overview of principles, the literature and case studies*. *Innocenti Working Paper No. 2016-18*. UNICEF Office of Research: Florence.
- 33 Office for the High Commission for Human Rights (1990) *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Geneva: OHCHR.
- 34 In this context, vulnerable refers to the definition adopted almost universally in international ethical guidelines namely potential subjects who either have (1) Decisional impairment, whereby they lack the capacity to make autonomous decisions in their own interest, perhaps as a result of undue influence/inducement, or, those in a position of (2) Situational/positional vulnerability, whereby potential participants may be subjected to coercion. These 'vulnerable' groups frequently include children, but may also include prisoners, pregnant women and marginalized groups.
- 35 World Health Organization (2007). *Ethical and safety recommendations for researching, documenting and monitoring sexual violence in emergencies*. Geneva: World Health Organization; World Health Organization (2018). *Guidance on ethical considerations in planning and reviewing research studies on sexual and reproductive health in adolescents*, Geneva: World Health Organization.
- 36 Avarad, D., Samuel, J., Black, L., Griener, G., and Knoppers, B. (2011). *Best practices for health research involving children and adolescents: Genetic, pharmaceutical, longitudinal studies and palliative care research*. The Centre of Genomics and Policy at McGill University, and Ethics Office, Canadian Institutes of Health research.
- 37 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

## DECIDING WHETHER TO DIRECTLY INVOLVE CHILDREN (OR ARE THERE OTHER WAYS?)

When considering the benefits of research on child sexual exploitation, questions need to be raised as to whether to involve children directly in the research. Research questions, especially those focused on violence, abuse and exploitation can have negative impacts.<sup>38</sup>

The risks to a child's physical, emotional and psychological health and wellbeing in addition to their cognitive capacities must be evaluated to determine whether children should be involved directly in this research.<sup>39</sup>

With respect to those children who have or are currently experiencing child sexual abuse, the literature shows that the recovery process is contingent on the individual, may take years and is related to both the context of the sexual abuse and the degree of ease in removing themselves from it.<sup>40</sup> In this context, consideration of where a child may be within the therapeutic process and alternate approaches to collecting information may be required, counterbalanced with reflection on the potential for bias from third party interviews and the value of children's own voices. The decision whether or when a child exposed to sexual exploitation should participate should be made by or in conjunction with an appropriately qualified expert.

A critically important factor in the decision whether to involve children directly in the research is reflection on whether other sources of data may be used such as pre-existing administrative data. The value of utilising pre-existing data may be multi-fold. In the first instance, it may limit psychological risks and potential bias in the data, particularly for children identified as being exposed to sexual exploitation who may have been subjected to repeated questioning.<sup>41</sup>

Second, if not eliminating the need for child involvement, it may, at minimum, limit the data that needs to be collected from children themselves.

Ongoing reflection and evidence related to the use and impacts of collecting and using different data sources and the potential benefits to child participants of research on sexual exploitation is critical to progress thinking and understand the value of this type of research. Researchers have reported fears that oversight committees, ethics review boards or institutional review boards will uniformly deny research on trauma or sensitive subjects such as child exploitation because of perceptions that such research is inherently too high risk.<sup>42</sup> Within this context, understanding the availability of pre-existing data sources, and clearly articulating actual or potential benefits to children is imperative.

## Understanding potential risks

### EXPLORING POTENTIAL HARMS TO PARTICIPANTS AND COMMUNITIES TO INFORM POTENTIAL RISK MITIGATION STRATEGIES

If the decision to directly involve children is made, the literature has identified a spectrum of potential harms that need to be accounted for and the appropriate mitigation strategies that can be developed to ensure children are protected and kept safe before, during and after research. This would include undertaking an assessment before the research process begins of potential negative psychological impacts and possible and consequent exposure to further violence and other risks.<sup>43</sup>

It necessitates the development of specific protection protocols outlining processes, provisions, supports and clear accountabilities for mitigating these risks.<sup>44</sup>

38 Rittenhouse, R., and Felicini, E. (2015). *Ethical issues of researching sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk*. *ECPAT International Journal*. Issue 10 (June).

39 Ibid; Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

40 Simantiri, N., (2018) *Empowerment of child victims and children at risk of sexual exploitation*. The Hague: Down to Zero Alliance and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

41 Edmonds, C. (2003) *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.

42 Chu, A. T., DePrince, A. P., and Weinzierl, K. M. (2008). *Children's perception of research participation: Examining trauma exposure and distress*. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Ethics: An International Journal*, 3(1), 49-58; Jaffe, A., DiLillo, D., Hoffman, L., Haikalis, M. and Dykstra, R. (2015). *Does it hurt to ask? A meta-analysis of participant reactions to trauma research*. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 40. pp.40-56.

43 Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011). *The ethics of research with children and young people*. London: Sage Publications. Aldridge, J. (2012). *Working with vulnerable groups in social research: dilemmas by default and design*. *Qualitative Research*. 14 (1). pp. 112-130; Rittenhouse, R., and Felicini, E. (2015). *Ethical issues of researching sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk*. *ECPAT International Journal*. Issue 10 (June).

44 Rittenhouse, R., and Felicini, E. (2015). *Ethical issues of researching sexual exploitation of children with victims, survivors and those at risk*. *ECPAT International Journal*. Issue 10 (June).

### **IMPORTANT ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS TO ADDRESS POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN ADULTS AND CHILDREN**

- Consider gender relations and gender preferences
- Age of the interviewer to be closer to the age of the participant to engender greater rapport and comfort (preferably)
- Limit number of adults present during an interview
- Preferably same language researchers to limit presence of interpreters
- Presence of support services personnel, preferably a mental health professional
- Consult and determine on the persons who should be present in interviews
- Genuinely consult the children involved, and continuously reflect and modify throughout if warranted

The literature provides a list of potential sites and situations where harms may occur as well as possible protection and mitigation strategies that may be adopted when involving children in ethical research on sensitive subjects such as sexual exploitation and in sensitive contexts. These include, the environments for recruitment and participation; the experience, training and attitudes of researchers; the supports available if a child becomes distressed or reveals previously unknown exploitation or abuse, and the legal requirements to report abuse to authorities (such as mandatory reporting requirements). While work has been done on research involving children generally – the following take precedence with research on sexual exploitation involving children.

#### **ADDRESSING POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN ADULTS AND CHILDREN**

The people involved in the research process and more particularly those working directly with

children must be carefully considered in light of the potential harms that may arise given the potential vulnerabilities and power differentials between adults and children. In these situations, gender relations can impact either negatively or positively on the child participant and need to be explicitly taken into account with different subgroups of children demonstrating different gender preferences for researchers. In addition there is research that notes that the age of the interviewer may impact the experience of the child, arguing for interviewers that are closer to the age of the participant to engender greater rapport and comfort.<sup>45</sup> Further, the number of adults that are present during an interview may likely have a significant impact on children, and in light of the power differentials between adults and children, the literature advocates minimising those present during an interview.<sup>46</sup> This may include minimising the need for and use of interpreters, wherever possible ensuring researchers speak the same language as the children. However, other researchers advocate for the inclusion and presence of support services personnel during research with children, particularly when involving survivors of sexual abuse to ensure immediate support for those who potentially have or are still experiencing trauma.<sup>47</sup> In these contexts, the research promotes relevant stakeholder (including relevant local partners) consultation to determine the persons who should be present in interviews, particularly in the instance of research with survivors. This may be critical to ensure that not only individual support needs are met but also that relevant cultural, legal, gender and age considerations are taken into account that may support or undermine the interview process. The caveat being that the potential power dynamics and positions of these stakeholders must also be taken into account when receiving this advice.<sup>48</sup> As always, when considering such questions, researchers are reminded to genuinely consult the children involved, to listen and respond to children's verbal or non-verbal cues and to continuously reflect on feedback and modify throughout if warranted.<sup>49</sup>

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- 45 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.
- 46 Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011). The ethics of research with children and young people. London: Sage Publications. Aldridge, J. (2012). *Working with vulnerable groups in social research: dilemmas by default and design*. Qualitative Research, 14 (1). pp. 112-130; Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.
- 47 Durham, A. (2002). *Developing a sensitive practitioner research methodology for studying the impact of child sexual abuse*. British Journal of Social Work, 3. pp. 429–442; Chan, T., Teram, E., and Shaw, I. (2015). *Balancing Methodological Rigor and the Needs of Research Participants: A Debate on Alternative Approaches to Sensitive Research*. Qualitative Health Research, 27(2). pp.260-270.
- 48 Cronin-Furman, K., and Lake, M. (2018). *Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts*. PS: Political Science and Politics.
- 49 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO; Siegel, D., and De Wildt, R. (2006). *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*. Geneva: Springer International Publishing.

## **AVOIDING THE POTENTIAL FOR TRAUMATISING, RE-TRAUMATISING OR ALIENATING CHILDREN**

The potential for harm to directly involved children may also manifest due to the nature, content or research methodologies adopted. As noted by Auerswald et al.<sup>50</sup>, research on sensitive subjects that directly consults children themselves requires developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally appropriate approaches, particularly for research involving children who may have experienced violence, abuse or exploitation.<sup>51</sup> Reflection is therefore required on the language<sup>52</sup> and content focus of interviews, surveys and focus groups.<sup>53</sup> For example, children may not see themselves as victims and language that frames them as such may merely serve to alienate them.<sup>54</sup> Further, language used and content explored needs to be carefully considered according to the age of participants. It is argued that not only is the subject matter and language critical but also the research design and methodologies, which may impact participation, disclosure rates, and the validity of the information provided by children.<sup>55</sup>

Recommendations for methodologies vary but the literature highlights the need for explicit consideration of the sensitivity of the research. For sensitive subjects like SEC, recommendations include avoidance of the use of pre-coded questionnaires and support for more open-ended questions and dialogue (particularly for those children who have or are being exposed to exploitation or abuse).<sup>56</sup> There is also some evidence to suggest that bias may be introduced in group-based methods<sup>57</sup>, though there are

advocates for appropriate and thoughtfully considered approaches that may empower potentially vulnerable and marginalised cohorts.<sup>58</sup> Importantly for victims of child sexual exploitation it is clearly noted that they should never be pushed to recount their stories unnecessarily.<sup>59</sup>

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING OF RESEARCHERS**

*“Research takes time, and high quality research is dependent on good relationships between informants and researchers.”<sup>60</sup>*

The potential risks inherent in research, particularly research on sensitive subjects such as child sexual exploitation may also be impacted by the selection, experience and training of researchers working with children. Creativity, flexibility and patience are argued to be critical skills and attributes of researchers in this context. Further, the use of appropriate language and familiarity with the possible logic and postures pertaining to the sex, caste, ethnicity, age group or backgrounds of child participants during engagement with the potential child participant are essential for not only establishing trust but also ensuring that they truly understand the purpose and the nature of the research they are being asked to consent to.<sup>61</sup>

The literature identifies potential recruitment strategies for working with children that may have been exposed to abuse and sexual exploitation. Research from Nepal has shown that recruitment of persons from local NGOs and community groups

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- 50 Auerswald, C., Akemi Piatt, A., and Mirzazadeh, A. (2017). [\*Research with Disadvantaged, Vulnerable and/or Marginalized Adolescents\*](#). Innocenti Research Brief 2017-06, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.
- 51 Turkel, A., and Tiapula, S. (2008). [\*Strategies for Interviewing Child Victims of Human Trafficking\*](#). National Center of Prosecution of Child Abuse Update. 21 (5). Virginia: National Center of Prosecution of Child Abuse.
- 52 Edmonds, C. (2003). [\*Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour\*](#). Geneva: ILO; Siegel, D., and De Wildt, R. (2006). *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*. Geneva: Springer International Publishing.
- 53 Turkel, A., and S. Tiapula. (2008). [\*Strategies for Interviewing Child Victims of Human Trafficking\*](#). National Center of Prosecution of Child Abuse Update .21(5). Virginia: National Center of Prosecution of Child Abuse.
- 54 Eds. Siegel, D., and De Wildt, R. (2006). *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*. Geneva: Springer International Publishing.
- 55 Rosenbaum, A., and Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J.(2006). [\*Meta-research on violence and victims: The impact of data-collection methods on findings and participants\*](#). *Violence and Victims*. 21. pp. 404–409.
- 56 Scott, J. (2000). Children as Respondents: The Challenge for Quantitative Methods (eds) Christensen, P. and James, A. Introduction: Researching Children and Childhood, (eds) Christensen, P., and James, A. (2000). *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. London and New York: Routledge Falmer.
- 57 Stark, L., Sommer, M., Davis, K., Asghar, K., Assazenew Baysa, A., Abdela, G., Tanner, S., and Falb., K. (2017). [\*Disclosure bias for group versus individual reporting of violence amongst conflict affected adolescent girls in DRC and Ethiopia\*](#). PLOS ONE. April 4.
- 58 Simantiri, N., (2018). [\*Empowerment of child victims and children at risk of sexual exploitation\*](#). The Hague: Down to Zero Alliance and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 59 U.S. Department of State (2017). [\*Engaging Survivors of Human Trafficking\*](#). Washington, D.C.:Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.
- 60 Edmonds, C. (2003). [\*Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour\*](#). Geneva: ILO;
- 61 Edmonds, C. (2003). [\*Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour\*](#). Geneva: ILO; Siegel, D., and De Wildt, R. (2006). *Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking*. Geneva: Springer International Publishing.

who work with targeted or affected communities may significantly reduce the risks involved in light of their knowledge and abilities to better recognise sensitives and to navigate sensitive terrain.<sup>62</sup> Further, as has been noted above, it has been posited that child psychosocial service providers, educators, and other professionals who work with children, and particularly children in sensitive contexts, may be well positioned to undertake the research or work with and when required, assist at-risk or exploited children during and after the research process.<sup>63</sup> Importantly, the need for qualified and experienced researchers is noted.<sup>64</sup> The decision as to who to recruit to undertake the research with children needs to balance the competencies, training and experience of the researchers with other social dynamics. This would include reflecting on age, gender and the rigour of the training process if less experienced but demographically more appropriate researchers are assessed to be better suited to undertake the research in terms of the potential for creating a stronger rapport with participants.

The literature also stresses the importance of training researchers. Recognising power dynamics and the potential abuses that may have been experienced by survivors, the sensitivity and the capacity of the interviewer to instil trust is paramount.<sup>65</sup> Recommendations for training include, modules or content on cycles of abuse and sexual abuse dynamics, general research ethics pertaining to child involvement in research, non-judgmental and respectful communication, minimizing traumatization or re-traumatization, management of disclosure of abuse and referral processes.<sup>66</sup> As noted by Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) in research involving sensitive contexts and subject matter, without professional training, re-traumatization or other adverse consequences

can result for even the most thoughtful and sensitive of researchers.<sup>67</sup>

The experience and training of the researcher are also relevant to the integrity of the research. Ethical research demands research integrity. Consequently, there is an expectation that researchers will have an appreciation of the principles and practices relating to the integrity of the research and adhere to them throughout the research process. Training therefore needs to explicitly articulate the principles and practices that are expected of researchers. According to the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity, researchers need to undertake research guided by the principles of; honesty, accountability, professional courtesy and fairness in working with others, and, good stewardship of the research.<sup>68</sup> This demands that the research is trustworthy, that the findings are based on rigorous methods and data, that accurate records are kept, that work is not plagiarized, contributors are appropriately recognised and that processes are in place to deal with any potential breaches.<sup>69</sup> These standards and expectations should be highlighted from the outset of the research and specifically during training as part of any broader ethical framework for research on sexual exploitation involving children.

#### **THE NEED FOR SUPPORTS ARISING FROM DISCLOSURE OF EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE**

In mitigating against potential harms and distress within sensitive, child-based research such as sexual exploitation, and in response to identification of participant need for support, the literature identifies a number of strategies. The development of these strategies frequently requires close collaboration and consultation with service providers and can include,<sup>70</sup>

- 62 Lynch, D., and Schenck, L. (2017). *Access to justice for child victims of sexual exploitation in travel and tourism*. Bangkok: ECPAT International; Edmonds, C. (2003). Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour. Geneva: ILO.
- 63 Todres, J., and Wolf, L. (2017). *The complexities of conducting research on child trafficking*. JAMA Pediatrics. 171(1). pp.9-10.
- 64 Dayal, R., Kalokhe, A., Choudhry, V., Pillai, D., Beier, K., and Patel, V. (2018). *Ethical and definitional considerations in research on child sexual violence in India*. BMC Public Health. 18 (114).
- 65 Todres, J., and Wolf, L. (2017). *The complexities of conducting research on child trafficking*. JAMA Pediatrics. 171(1). pp.9-10.
- 66 Todres, J., and Wolf, L. (2017). *The complexities of conducting research on child trafficking*. JAMA Pediatrics. 171(1). pp.9-10; Nikolaidis, G. (2013). Balkan Epidemiological Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (BECAN) Final Summary Report. Brussels: European Commission; Dayal, R., Kalokhe, A., Choudhry, V., Pillai, D., Beier, K., and Patel, V. (2018). Ethical and definitional considerations in research on child sexual violence in India. BMC Public Health. 18 (114).
- 67 Cronin-Furman, K., and Lake, M. (2018). *Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts*. PS: Political Science and Politics.
- 68 World Conference on Research Integrity. (2010). *Singapore Statement*.
- 69 Ibid.
- 70 International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2016). *Ethical Considerations for the Collection, Analysis & Publication of Child Maltreatment Data*. Aurora Colorado: ISPCAN. CP MERG (2012), *Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature*. New York: UNICEF Statistics and Monitoring Section/Division of Policy and Strategy.

- Developing a ‘red flag’ alert system that identifies children at particular risk of harm.<sup>71</sup>
- Referring children at risk to relevant support services. Ensuring that children asking for assistance or appearing to be at immediate risk are connected to counsellors or reported to authorities.
- Debriefing at the end of the interview or research process for specific individuals or adopting a debriefing protocol for all participants.<sup>72</sup>
- Obtaining certificates of confidentiality that exempt researchers from legal requirements to report confidential information to authorities in contexts where reporting presents a likely and significant risk to participants.<sup>73</sup>
- Providing lists of services to participants in case they require help.<sup>74</sup> This may include information for help lines, psychologists and child protection agencies. The literature advocates that contact details for these services be included in a broader list of general services to protect children from any risks associated with being identified as interested in accessing victim services.<sup>75</sup>
- Collecting information to re-contact children who disclosed a concern during a telephone interview for further assessment.<sup>76</sup>

#### **MEETING LEGAL REQUIREMENTS TO REPORT ABUSE AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY**

A further ethical concern and potential site for harm that is frequently discussed in the literature is the country specific legal frameworks pertaining to research with children. Relevant legal requirements may include mandatory reporting of child abuse to authorities and reporting of criminal activities. While some countries may have clear legal frameworks, others may not, and the nature of these laws frequently differs across countries. When following the principle of the ‘best interest of the child,’ researchers need to consider whether to report abuse identified through the research to authorities. In cases where reporting of abuse to authorities is a legal requirement, the need to consider the best interest of the child may arise when reporting is largely mechanistic and bureaucratic and fails to account for ‘human’ and social implications or impacts or, in instances where there is an absence of timely and/or appropriate support and protection services. The potential harms arising from reporting to authorities in the absence of limited or poor support infrastructure or in the case where authorities may be complicit with abuse may imply that mandatory reporting does more harm than good.<sup>77</sup> The literature presents a number of arguments for and against mandatory/voluntary reporting of suspected child abuse victims by researchers.<sup>78</sup>

- 71 Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., and Fisher, H. L. (2013). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment and other types of victimization in the UK: Findings from a population survey of caregivers, children and young people and young adults*. Child Abuse & Neglect. 37. pp. 801-813.
- 72 Carroll-Lind, J., Chapman, J., Gregory, J., and Maxwell, G. (2006). *The key to the gatekeepers: Passive consent and other ethical issues surrounding the rights of children to speak on issues that concern them*. Child Abuse & Neglect. 30. pp. 979-989; Black, M., and Ponirakis, A. (2000). Computer-administered interviews with children about maltreatment: Methodological, developmental, and ethical issues. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 15. pp. 682-695.
- 73 Carroll-Lind, J., Chapman, J., Gregory, J., and Maxwell, G. (2006). *The key to the gatekeepers: Passive consent and other ethical issues surrounding the rights of children to speak on issues that concern them*. Child Abuse & Neglect. 30. pp. 979-989.
- 74 Pinheiro, P.S. (2006). *World report on violence against children. Geneva: Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children*. United Nations; Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.
- 75 International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2016). *Ethical Considerations for the Collection, Analysis & Publication of Child Maltreatment Data*. Aurora Colorado: ISPCAN.
- 76 Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R., and Hamby, S. (2009). *Violence, abuse and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth*. Pediatrics. 124 (5). pp. 1411-1423.
- 77 Allen, B. (2009). *Are researchers ethically obligated to report suspected child maltreatment? A critical analysis of opposing perspectives*. Ethics and Behavior, 19 (1). Pp. 15-24 noted in CP MERG (2012)., *Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature*. New York: UNICEF Statistics and Monitoring Section/Division of Policy and Strategy; Uttal, D. (2003). *No, researchers should not be mandated reporters of child abuse*. Monitor on Psychology, 34(6). pp.29; Urquiza, A. (2003). Yes, there should be mandated reporting for researchers. Monitor on Psychology. 34 (6). pp. 28; Knight, E., Runyan, D., Dubowitz, H., Brandford, C., Kotch, J., Litrownik, A., and W. Hunter. (2000). *Methodological and ethical challenges associated with child self-report of maltreatment: Solutions implemented by the LongSCAN consortium*. Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 7. pp. 760-775.
- 78 Ibid

### **ARGUMENTS FOR** researchers' reporting of suspected child maltreatment:

1. The primary goal of mandated reporting is to protect children.
2. Some research suggests that vulnerable populations may expect researchers to provide aid on disclosure
3. Not reporting of maltreatment ultimately weakens professional codes of ethics
4. Where legally mandated, researchers should be bound by the legal frameworks of the country in which they are undertaking research.

### **ARGUMENTS AGAINST** researchers' mandatory reporting of suspected child maltreatment:

1. Researchers may lack adequate training or experience in the detection of maltreatment.
2. Including researchers as mandated reporters may lead to over-reporting.
3. Over-reporting of invalid cases will increase stress and hardship for some families.
4. It may be preferable to encourage and support maltreating families to self-report to child protection and mental health services.
5. Reporting may threaten the integrity of research and may result in difficulties advancing science and knowledge. The threats to the integrity of the research could potentially include:
  - a. The sampling methodology being damaged due to potential participants' refusal to take part for fear of being reported (falsely or otherwise);
  - b. Difficulty recruiting and retaining participants if reporting is discussed during the consent process;<sup>79</sup>
  - c. Confidentiality being broken during the course of the research project;
  - d. Inconsistency in protocols in multisite studies;
  - e. possibility of participants not providing accurate data for fear of being reported to child protection services.<sup>80</sup>

Some research has suggested that researchers instigate measures to avoid reporting of abuse. This would include limiting response options, advising subjects of the implications of disclosing abuse, masking the data or using technologies such that interviewers are 'blinded' to individual responses of individual participants.<sup>81</sup> However, these strategies, while resolving the dilemma of reporting, fail to allow for the collection of valid information about child maltreatment.<sup>82</sup> In contexts where mandatory reporting is required, adherence to the principle of the best interest of the child should guide researchers. For example, when children may be exposed to further violence with

limited if no supports or child protection systems and no possibility of removing the child from the context then methods to avoid child disclosure of abuse need to be seriously considered. These methods may include asking indirect questions focused on attitudes and perceptions of social norms rather than direct questions pertaining to experiences, while also making it clear to the child what the potential risks of disclosure may be.<sup>83</sup>

With respect to the potential to uncover illegal activities undertaken by children disclosed directly or indirectly during data collection (including prostitution, drugs etc.), as noted above, obtaining

79 Uttal, D. (2003). [\*No, researchers should not be mandated reporters of child abuse\*](#). *Monitor on Psychology*, 34(6).pp.29.

80 Allen, B. (2009). [\*Are researchers ethically obligated to report suspected child maltreatment? A critical analysis of opposing perspectives\*](#). *Ethics and Behavior*, 19 (1). pp 15-24.

81 Socolar, R., Runyan, D., and Amaya-Jackson, L. (1995). [\*Methodological and ethical issues related to studying child Maltreatment\*](#). *Journal of Family Issues*, 16. pp. 565-586.

82 *Ibid.*

83 Uttal, D. (2003) [\*No, researchers should not be mandated reporters of child abuse\*](#). *Monitor on Psychology*, 34(6). pp.29; Knight, E.D., Runyan, D.K., Dubowitz, H., Brandford, C., Kotch, J., Litrownik, A., and Hunter. W. (2000). [\*Methodological and ethical challenges associated with child self-report of maltreatment: Solutions implemented by the LongSCAN consortium\*](#). *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 7. pp. 760-775.

certificates of confidentiality or establishing formal agreements with relevant government bodies that exempt researchers from legal mandates that allow authorities the right to children's confidential information should be sought.<sup>84</sup>

### **ETHICAL REVIEW PROCESSES**

In a number of countries, ethical review of research by a research ethics committee, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or a research ethics panel is enshrined in legislation and/or in research/academic institutional frameworks. In other contexts, particularly in locations where formal review boards do not exist, informal review processes and committees may be established with relevant experts who provide similar oversight. In the policies, procedures and terms of reference that guide most of these boards and committees, children may and frequently are perceived as inherently vulnerable and thereby, irrespective of the nature of the subject matter and context, research involving children almost universally requires ethical review of the research process. These boards are mandated to assess whether risks are minimised and reasonable, the programme justified by the benefits, consent is obtained and there is equitable and appropriate selection and engagement with participants.<sup>85</sup>

While performing a potentially invaluable role, as noted previously, research on sexual exploitation involving children may face significant or obstacles in obtaining clearance from formal and informal ethics review boards and committees. The research highlights that researchers perceive that board members frequently adopt attitudes supporting a blanket prohibition against child participation in light of the sensitivity of the research.<sup>86</sup> It has been proposed that research focussing on survivors who are 18 years or older but were first trafficked when they were children may address this barrier. It is argued that using an older cohort presents an opportunity to demonstrate the potential for direct benefits to participants necessary to pursue studies on younger children.<sup>87</sup> Where the option

of not involving children is irreconcilable with research aims and potential benefits to children, research proposals or protocols must provide a comprehensive assessment of risks, benefits and strong mitigation strategies to ethical review boards or oversight committees to support their endeavour. In the absence of functioning review processes, rigorous cost/benefit analysis and the development of clear protection protocols outlining ethical issues, risk mitigation strategies and accountabilities should be undertaken, preferably in collaboration with relevant partners.

### **REFLECTION ON POTENTIAL HARMS TO RESEARCHERS DURING THE COURSE OF RESEARCH**

When reflecting on ethical issues and potential harms arising from research on sexual exploitation involving children consideration is also required in relation to potential harms to researchers themselves. Harms to researchers can be categorised in relation to the physical safety of the researcher during and after the research, and the risks to mental health arising from the potential for vicarious trauma. In contexts of research on child sexual exploitation there is a significant risk of vicarious trauma, and in research involving children who may have been or are currently being exploited there may be substantial risks from perpetrators.<sup>88</sup> It has been noted that female researchers particularly, may be exposed to threats of sexual harassment or rape.<sup>89</sup> When considering the physical safety of researchers, all precautions necessary must be undertaken to ensure their safety. This planning should be undertaken prior to the research taking place with clear understanding of the physical, social, cultural, political and environmental conditions in which the research will take place. The research recommends that at minimum, a security and risk-management plan must include:

1. Well-established channels of communication so that no researcher or child is left out of reach;
2. Training in crisis management for field-based enumerators;

84 Carroll-Lind, J., Chapman, J., Gregory, J., and Maxwell, G. (2006). *The key to the gatekeepers: Passive consent and other ethical issues surrounding the rights of children to speak on issues that concern them*. Child Abuse & Neglect. 30. pp. 979-989.

85 Todres, J., and Wolf, L. (2017). *The complexities of conducting research on child trafficking*. JAMA Pediatrics. 171(1). pp.9-10; Cronin-Furman, K., and Lake, M. (2018). Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts. *PS: Political Science and Politics*.

86 Siegel, D., and De Wildt, R. (2006). Ethical Concerns in Research on Human Trafficking. Geneva: Springer International Publishing; Chu, A. T., DePrince, A. P., and Weinzierl, K. M. (2008). *Children's perception of research participation: Examining trauma exposure and distress*. Journal of Empirical Research on Human Ethics: An International Journal, 3(1), 49-58; Jaffe, A., DiLillo, D., Hoffman, L., Haikalis, M. and Dykstra, R. (2015). Does it hurt to ask? A meta-analysis of participant reactions to trauma research. Clinical Psychology Review. 40. pp.40-56.

87 Todres, J., and Wolf, L. (2017). *The complexities of conducting research on child trafficking*. JAMA Pediatrics. 171(1). pp.9-10.

88 Bal Kumar, K., Subedi, G., Gurung, B., and Adhikari, K.P. (2001). *Nepal - Trafficking in girls with special reference to prostitution: A rapid assessment, Investigating the Worst Forms of Child Labour Rapid Assessment Series, No. 2*. Geneva: ILO.

89 Bal Kumar, K.C., Subedi, G., Gurung, B., and Adhikari, K.P. (2001). *Nepal - Trafficking in girls with special reference to prostitution: A rapid assessment, Investigating the Worst Forms of Child Labour Rapid Assessment Series, No. 2*. Geneva: ILO.

3. Evacuation procedures;
4. Plans for counselling and/or treatment in the unlikely event that researchers or children are hurt in the course of research or experience vicarious trauma.<sup>90</sup>

It is worth noting that a case study in Nepal has shown the value of recruitment of local researchers and research guides in light of the valuable knowledge that they are likely to possess relating to potential high risk areas and how to safely navigate cultural, gender, religious and politically based social norms.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, In terms of the safety and wellbeing of researchers, it is critical that researchers be adequately trained and informed of their rights to pull out of the research project without repercussions should they need to.<sup>92</sup>

### **Informed consent**

Consent is one of the most complex ethical issues in research involving children and more particularly when undertaking research on a sensitive subject such as child sexual exploitation. In a number of countries, informed consent is distinguished via legislation from assent where the former is required from parents or guardians and the latter from children themselves.<sup>93</sup> In research involving children, best practice notes that the consent/assent of the child is requisite and research should not proceed without it. This requirement should be qualified if disagreement between children and their guardians or the appointed responsible adult is likely to result in harm to the child.<sup>94</sup> The

age of informed consent is generally held to be 18 but may be lowered according to case law and/or according to the specifics of the subject matter (for example a number of countries lower the age of informed consent for research relating to sexual and reproductive health to 15).<sup>95</sup> In instances where these legal definitions do not exist, the sensitivities of the subject matter, the competencies of the child, the cultural norms relating to children's agency and the responsibilities of the child should be taken into account when deciding whether to seek informed consent from guardians or parents. It should be noted that the requirement for parental or guardian consent may be problematic in research on sexual exploitation in light of the possibility that the parent or guardian could be the perpetrator.<sup>96</sup> In these instances, consideration will need to be given as to whether to seek consent from these persons. In instances where adult informed consent is mandatory, child advocates or a trusted adult identified by the child could be considered or, alternately, an appropriate adult may be determined via focus group discussions and key informant interviews prior to engaging in research with children.<sup>97</sup>

Truly informed consent/assent ensures that child participants fully understand the purpose and content of the study, the procedures that will be followed, the duration and timing of the research, the use of the research results/outputs and any personal risks and actual or potential benefits associated with their participation in both the short and longer term. This entails utilizing child friendly consent processes that reflect the competencies and understanding of the child.<sup>98</sup>

90 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.

91 *Ibid*

92 *Ibid*

93 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

94 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; Powell, M.A., Fitzgerald, R.M., Taylor, N., and Graham, A. (2012). *International literature review: Ethical issues in undertaking research with children and young people*. Lismore: Southern Cross University, Centre for Children and Young People/ Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Research on Children and Families; Morrow, V. (n.d.). *The ethics of social research with children and young people – an overview*. Institute of Education, University of London; UNICEF (2015). *Ethical Procedures for Research, Evaluations and Data Collection and Analysis*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

95 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; Berry, V. (2009). *Ethical considerations in conducting family violence research*. *Research Ethics Review*. 5(3). pp.91-100.

96 International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2016). *Ethical Considerations for the Collection, Analysis & Publication of Child Maltreatment Data*. Aurora Colorado: ISPCAN.

97 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO; CP MERG (2012). *Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature*. New York: UNICEF Statistics and Monitoring Section/Division of Policy and Strategy; International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2016). *Ethical Considerations for the Collection, Analysis & Publication of Child Maltreatment Data*. Aurora Colorado: ISPCAN.

98 *Ibid*.

Consent should be considered ongoing and continue as long as the child is involved in the research. Importantly, truly informed consent clearly communicates that participation in research is voluntary and the child can withdraw at any point during the research without consequence.<sup>99</sup> Attention however must be paid to the child's capacity to say no to an adult either verbally or through body language as this may be expressed indirectly, be culturally determined and impacted by age, social strata and gender roles.<sup>100</sup> In obtaining consent the literature on sexual exploitation and trafficking is clear on the importance of children voluntarily participating and the avoidance of any form of coercion. In these circumstances it is clearly stated that the outcomes or benefits of the research should not be overstated and promises to children should always be realistic and realizable.<sup>101</sup> Further, the researcher attempting to secure consent should make a clear effort to differentiate the research from any service provision.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, to ensure appropriate accountability, information regarding the institution and researchers involved and a contact point for complaints and queries should be provided.<sup>103</sup> The confidentiality of the research and any limitations to this confidentiality (see section on mandatory reporting above) should also be provided. It is worth noting that children may not welcome such confidentiality and may wish to be named or visually identified in reports and presentations.<sup>104</sup> However, whether to do so is contested in the literature with some researchers asserting that

the adult view of the children's best interests and safety concerns must prevail over the expressed wishes of some children.<sup>105</sup>

Research clearly highlights however, that any research involving children, particularly on sensitive subjects such as sexual exploitation must take into account the age and cognition of the child, providing the above information in appropriate language and taking the time for all questions and responses using relevant tools and visual aids if necessary.<sup>106</sup> Edmonds also stresses the importance of allowing time between presenting the research to the child and the child agreeing or disagreeing to consent to the research (either in written or verbal form) to allow them time to discuss the research with peers, parents or guardians.<sup>107</sup>

### **Privacy and confidentiality**

Privacy and confidentiality are critical considerations in the ethical collection of data on individuals. The ability to maintain the privacy of the individual and the confidentiality of their data is essential to securing trust between the researcher and participant and to the overall integrity of the data collection process. In light of the sensitivity of research on sexual exploitation involving children privacy and confidentiality has even greater importance given the additional security, safety and potential personal and social implications.<sup>108</sup> Risks associated with privacy and confidentiality may occur and need to be considered throughout the research process. This would include recruitment, initial collection of data, analysis of information, sharing and

99 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO; U.S. Department of State (2017). *Engaging Survivors of Human Trafficking*. Washington, D.C.:Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. June.

100 *Ibid.*

101 U.S. Department of State (2017). *Engaging Survivors of Human Trafficking*. Washington, D.C.:Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. June; Edmonds, C. (2003) *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO; U.S. Department of State (2017). *Engaging Survivors of Human Trafficking*. Washington, D.C.: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. June; Cronin-Furman, K., Lake, M. (2018). *Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts*. PS: *Political Science and Politics*.

102 *Ibid.* Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018).

103 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

104 Kendrick, A., Steckley, L., and Lerpiniere, J. (2008). *Ethical issues, research and vulnerability: Gaining the views of children and young people in residential care*. *Children's Geographies*, 6 (1). pp. 79-93.

105 Kendrick, A., Steckley, L., and Lerpiniere, J. (2008), *Ethical issues, research and vulnerability: Gaining the views of children and young people in residential care*. *Children's Geographies*, 6 (1). pp. 79-93; Hill, M. (2005). Ethical considerations in researching children's experiences in S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.) *Researching children's experience*. London: Sage Publications. pp.61-86.

106 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO; CP MERG (2012). *Ethical principles, dilemmas and risks in collecting data on violence against children: A review of available literature*. New York: UNICEF Statistics and Monitoring Section/Division of Policy and Strategy; International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). (2016). *Ethical Considerations for the Collection, Analysis & Publication of Child Maltreatment Data*. Aurora Colorado: ISPCAN.

107 *Ibid.* Edmonds (2003).

108 Abebe, T. (2009). *Multiple methods, complex dilemmas: Negotiating socio-ethical spaces in participatory research with disadvantaged children*. *Children's Geographies*, 7(4), 451-465; Edmonds, C. (2003) *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.

dissemination of findings, storage of data, transmission of data, dissemination of findings and disposal of records or devices on which information is stored.<sup>109</sup>

## PRIVACY

The need to protect the privacy of the child involved in research on sexual exploitation, as noted above, is critical in light of the sensitive nature of the research. The methods and locations for recruitment and for the research itself should ensure the greatest possible privacy for the child. As highlighted previously, group-based research may not be the most appropriate method, not only with regards to the quality of the data but also by virtue of the potential for intensely personal disclosure during the process.<sup>110</sup> To address the potential sensitivity and disclosure of individual experience discussions may be had relating to attitudes rather than experiences and/or or involve an exploration of opinions relating to a hypothetical case study (the ‘metaphorical approach’).<sup>111</sup>

To ensure privacy, the setting should allow children involved in research to impart information privately and freely. For example, children being interviewed should be able to speak without being overheard and children responding in written form should be able to do so without it being seen by outsiders. In certain instances, where privacy cannot be guaranteed, the decision will need to be made as to whether to undertake the research.<sup>112</sup> Alternately, researchers have promoted the use of computer assisted self interviewing techniques that allow children to fill out surveys anonymously on a computer screen.<sup>113</sup>

While consultations with groups and organisations that work with children are necessary to determine appropriate means and locations to recruit children into the research or to undertake the research, as noted by Edmonds, wherever possible, both girls and boys should also be given the choice to decide upon the terms, place and conditions of the data collection.<sup>114</sup>

## CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

Ensuring the confidentiality of personal data is critical for both securing the trust of the child while also protecting them. To this end, clear explanations should be provided to children of; how their information will be protected throughout the process from recruitment through to the destruction of the data, who will have access, and, any limits on the confidentiality of the data (see section on mandatory reporting of abuse). As noted previously confidentiality and anonymity might not always be welcomed or expected by the child and may have to be negotiated. Securing the confidentiality of the data however, should be considered a default position of the researcher.<sup>115</sup>

In relation to protecting the anonymity of child participants, it is strongly recommended that identifiable information in the informed consent process should be physically separated from transcriptions and surveys. Alternately an agreement can be made between children and the researcher to the use of pseudonyms.<sup>116</sup> In cases where the research targets a very specific group, the sample size may be enlarged to include those outside the group to better ensure anonymity.<sup>117</sup> It should be noted that identifiers are not limited to names but includes all other information that may identify a person. These identifiers may include geospatial information, including addresses,

- 109 ECPAT International (2012). *Children, HIV/ AIDS and Sexual Exploitation: Strengthening Systems for the Right to Prevention, Protection, and Response in Nepal and Togo*. Bangkok, ECPAT, Centre for Global Health and Development and Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. UNICEF (2015). *Ethical Procedures for Research, Evaluations and Data Collection and Analysis*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.
- 110 World Health Organization (2018). *Guidance on ethical considerations in planning and reviewing research studies on sexual and reproductive health in adolescents*. Geneva: World Health Organization. ; Stark, L., Sommer, M., Davis, K., Asghar, K., Assazene Baysa, A., Abdela, G., Tanner, S., and K. Falb (2017). *Disclosure bias for group versus individual reporting of violence amongst conflict affected adolescent girls in DRC and Ethiopia*. PLOS ONE. April 4.
- 111 Wenke, D. Júlia Pàmias, J., and Costella, P. (2015). *Orientations for professionals and officials working with and for children on the move*. Greece: RESILAND and the Prevention of and Fight against Crime Programme of the European Union.
- 112 Abebe, T. (2009). *Multiple methods, complex dilemmas: Negotiating socio-ethical spaces in participatory research with disadvantaged children*. Children’s Geographies, 7(4), pp. 451-465.
- 113 Radford, L., Corral, S., Bradley, C., and Fisher, H. L. (2013). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment and other types of victimization in the UK: Findings from a population survey of caregivers, children and young people and young adults*. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 37. pp.801-813.
- 114 Edmonds, C. (2003) *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.
- 115 Kendrick, A., Steckley, L., and Lerpiniere, J. (2008). *Ethical issues, research and vulnerability: Gaining the views of children and young people in residential care*. *Children’s Geographies*. 6 (1). pp. 79-93.
- 116 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.
- 117 *Ibid*.

personal characteristics or physical conditions, identification numbers, names of relatives or friends, or even revealing quotes that may allow inference of individual identity or location.<sup>118</sup> It should be emphasized that confidentiality measures should not only be considered when the data is collected. Confidentiality also pertains to all the means and methods of dissemination of the findings, requiring clear review processes to ensure that persons are not identifiable in the reports, summaries and in all relevant communications about the findings.<sup>119</sup>

With regards to the collection, transmission, storage, analysis, and destruction of data, clear security protocols need to be developed, minimising those who have access, ensuring physical or electronic safeguards such as locks, passwords (the literature notes that multiple authentication processes are good practice<sup>120</sup>) and encryption keys, and, defining key timeframes and methods of destruction of the data. Further, in relation to electronic data, researchers will need to have a good understanding of the security of cloud storage, transmission mechanisms and data collection platforms to ensure that they adhere to strict security protocol and practices.<sup>121</sup>

### **Payment and compensation**

Remuneration, whether financial or in-kind, must be carefully considered when doing research with children.<sup>122</sup> Compensation for out of pocket expenses such as travel to research sites should always be budgeted for.<sup>123</sup> In relation to payment for participation, consultations should be

undertaken with key partners and stakeholders that work with children and that are familiar with the local environment, expectations and norms for payment for research, as well as with children themselves.<sup>124</sup> This step may be critical not only to ensure that remuneration is appropriate but also to prevent tensions and even violence between those participating and those who have been excluded, particularly in resource constrained environments.<sup>125</sup> The form of payment or remuneration may be individual, such as small health related items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste or soap. In some instances, the provision of food during the research may be sufficient.<sup>126</sup> Alternately, remuneration may take the form of gifts for relevant local institutions such as books, pens and desks for schools.<sup>127</sup> In some contexts children may request gifts such as cash and cigarettes and, in anticipation of these requests, informed by earlier consultations, clear guidance will need to be provided to field researchers as to how to proceed in these instances.<sup>128</sup>

It should be noted that in the specific case of research on children that are currently victims of commercial sexual exploitation some researchers have deemed it appropriate to present themselves as a client in order to interview the child. In these cases, the researcher will pay the current rate to ensure that the child's earnings are not compromised. The ethics of this approach is highly questionable given that the potential for raising expectations of liberation or lifestyle changes may be high and that this approach inadvertently contributes to the demand that

118 For further information see UK Data Service (2019). [Anonymisation](#). Essex: University of Essex.

119 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [Ethical Research Involving Children](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; Morrow, V. (n.d.). *The ethics of social research with children and young people – an overview*. Institute of Education, University of London.

120 Berman, G. and Albright, K. (2017). [Children and the Data Cycle: Rights and Ethics in a Big Data World](#), *Innocenti Working Papers no. 2017-05*, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

121 Berman, G., Powell, J. and Herranz, M. (2018). [Ethical Considerations When Using Social Media for Evidence Generation](#), *Innocenti Research Briefs no. 2018-20*, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

122 Edmonds, C. (2003). [Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour](#). Geneva: ILO.

123 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [Ethical Research Involving Children](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti; UNICEF (2015). [Ethical Procedures for Research, Evaluations and Data Collection and Analysis](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

124 *Ibid.*

125 Berman, G., Hart, J., O'Mathúna, D., Mattellone, E., Potts, A., O'Kane, C., Shusterman, J., and Tanner, T. (2016). [What we know about ethical research involving children in humanitarian settings: An overview of principles, the literature and case studies](#). *Innocenti Working Papers no. 2016\_18*, Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti.

126 Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D. and Fitzgerald, R. (2013). [Ethical Research Involving Children](#). Florence: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

127 *Ibid.*

128 *Ibid.*

fuels the sex industry that exploits children.<sup>129</sup> In these instances, prior consultation with adults who have experienced child sexual exploitation and are sufficiently removed from the process could be invaluable.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential sensitivities and experiences of the participants involved, ethical research on sexual exploitation involving children demands additional vigilance to traditional research ethics considerations. When deciding whether to undertake this research, whether to directly involve children themselves, or when considering issues that may arise during the implementation of this research, critical and ongoing reflection is required on the value of the research and maintaining ethical standards while being cognisant of the potentially greater burden of risks involved. These risks have implications not only for approval by relevant ethics committees but also, and more importantly, for the children themselves. Therefore, the methods, locations, processes and competencies of researchers must be thoroughly and rigorously considered, supported by consultations with local stakeholders working with children, and, where possible and appropriate, with the children themselves.

The literature reflecting on these issues however is still underdeveloped. The ethical issues remain complex and must keep pace with the environmental and technological changes that are occurring and significantly impacting children's lives. To do so requires ongoing research, consultation, reflection and appropriate ethical review of research programmes. It necessitates 'live' ethical guidelines that are regularly updated to reflect contemporary phenomenon, ongoing discussions, practices, understandings and a more robust and substantial evidence base. It is only in this way that the value of research involving children on child sexual exploitation can be shown, its capacity to be undertaken safely and thoughtfully and its value in supporting and empowering the children involved may be evidenced.

129 Edmonds, C. (2003). *Ethical considerations when conducting research on children in the worst forms of child labour*. Geneva: ILO.



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