

**CASE
STUDY**

URBAN LIGHT THAILAND

How to adjust to boys' reactions and conduct interactive and participatory activities with boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.



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The views expressed herein are solely those of ECPAT International. Support does not constitute endorsement of the opinions expressed.

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From Urban Light Foundation (Thailand):

The Boys and Young Men who shared their time and opinions

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Cover illustration:

The illustrations on the cover of this report depict environments and situations relevant to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys in Thailand.

Photos in this cover are from Urban Light Foundation (Thailand)

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CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, ECPAT International launched the [Global Boys Initiative \(GBI\)](#) to explore the sexual exploitation of boys and the services available for their protection. The Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with children, vulnerability and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies. With the completion of the Initiative's first phase of research, we can now speak with confidence on a number of pressing issues related to the sexual exploitation of boys, successfully consolidating what we know to influence and frame the agenda for programming, advocacy and new research. We know that the sexual exploitation of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, and barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation.

In July 2022, we began a process of mobilising ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalise on members and partners' experiences in working with boys.

In discussions with our partner Urban Light in Thailand, several points of learning were identified as relevant to the success of the GBI nationally and globally. These included the documentation of their work with boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation.

To this end, the aim was to document the working practices of direct assistance to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in Thailand in order to capitalise on these experiences, to encourage learning from other organisations in other countries around the world, and to feed into GBI's practical knowledge – thus contributing to answering the global question: *“how can we work with male children at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a gender-sensitive approach?”*

INTRODUCTION

Urban Light is an organisation founded in 2009 in the city of Chiang Mai (northern Thailand) working specifically with boys, young men, and adult survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as of child and human trafficking.

Chiang Mai is the number one destination for tourism in the northern part of the country and many boys from neighbouring communities come to the city to look for professional and educational opportunities. According to the experience and research of Urban Light, boys make up a significant percentage of survivors of sexual exploitation and child trafficking in Thailand, yet most of the anti-trafficking organisations work predominantly with women and girls. Boys might fall into the dynamics of sexual exploitation as a survival strategy and the persons exploiting them come both from local and foreign communities. Lack of income opportunities is one of the main factors pushing boys into sexual exploitation. A lack of legal documentation and identity papers also represents a major push factor in this respect.¹ Urban Light also supports young men, and adult men, and see this is important especially in light of the challenges that the majority of boys face in disclosing a potential situation of sexual exploitation.

“Evidence and experience tells us that boys and men disclose late. Some boys disclose in their childhood and do not receive help. Others may not realise that they were sexually exploited. Sometimes they come back later to seek support. They might be an adult by the time they finally disclose what happened to them”.

The strategy of Urban Light to support boys at risk and survivors of sexual exploitation is organised around three main pillars: engage, protect and empower. The **engage** pillar includes regular outreach activities in communities, online outreach on social media, and the services of a drop-in centre in Chiang Mai where boys can access basic services and participate in different activities. The **protect** pillar includes the organisation of different thematic workshops providing boys with different skill sets (according to their chosen priorities), case management services and emergency, and housing. The UL team includes a Director of Case Management, a licensed social worker, and other qualified professionals who are able to support clients with counselling, psychosocial support and coordination, educational, training and housing opportunities, and legal advice and support, and referrals (depending on staffing capacities). These services are provided by Urban Light directly, as well as through referrals to local institutions and other civil society organisations. The **empower** pillar covers advocacy and partnerships. Partnerships do not only involve other civil society organisations or local child protection actors but also local businesses, non-formal education centres and local government. The **strategy** puts the best interest of survivors at the centre of the organization’s work and integrates the **right to participation** as much as possible.

¹ More information on the dynamics of sexual exploitation of boys in northern Thailand can be accessed here: <https://www.urban-light.org/research>

This way, survivors and at-risk individuals are involved in discussions about the available services and are enabled not only to select the type of services they would like to receive but also to co-design the activities and operations of the organisation.

The presence of Urban Light in vulnerable communities, as well as the reputation gained through the assistance provided to boys and young men, allowed its staff to gather a great amount of learning in the work with boy survivors. The experience accumulated by Urban Light in developing strategies and approaches that allow boy survivors to become agents in the design and delivery of support and care services is particularly interesting when working with male survivors of sexual exploitation, which comes with a high level of complexity and challenges.

The drop-in centre run by Urban Light with the boys, and for the boys, represents an important part of the community in Chiang Mai and the activities conducted by the organisation have gained a good reputation amongst boys, families and communities. This is reinforced by the regular presence of the staff of the organisation in the streets and in vulnerable communities. A high proportion of boys are indeed usually introduced to Urban Light by other boys or young men.

A young man who has used Urban Light's services for many years gave an interview in January 2023, in which he shared how this word-of-mouth system works:

“If I see someone who needs help, the first place I think of is Urban Light. If I meet someone and maybe they’re drinking too much, maybe they’re homeless, I tell them about Urban Light. I tell them that they can get help at Urban Light. They can get health care support. They can get advice. If they are really in trouble, I will ask them ‘what are you doing tomorrow?’ and tell them ‘If you don’t have anywhere to go we can go to Urban Light together’. I’ll take them on the back of my motorbike.”

These spontaneous peer-led dynamics have become essential for the work of Urban Light and are a very important indication of the level of trust accorded by boys.

METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE

This case study was produced with the use of an assessment and learning tool developed by ECPAT International's Research and GBI's teams. The assessment and learning questionnaire guided the interview with the coordination and the case management team. The questions included in the questionnaire aimed at collecting information on what practices seem effective according to the organisation in providing case management assistance to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation and what key elements need to be considered in addressing the complex and unique challenges that boys face in accessing support. The methodology was applied during a visit to the office of the organisation and its services, in which direct observations could be conducted on the physical space and resources.

The research conducted in the framework of the GBI tells us that boys who are involved in situations of sexual exploitation and trafficking face a series of very complex challenges and issues. In addition, the findings of the research confirm that approaches to ensure that boy survivors can participate in defining their priorities and needs in terms of services remain undocumented. The experience gathered by the Urban Light team offers important learnings on **how to adjust to boys' reactions in cases of sexual exploitation and ensure that boys have the possibility to participate in the design of activities relevant to them**. This case study focuses therefore on how to understand and deal with the reactions of boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation and how to conduct activities that allow boys to participate at different levels of the organisational work.

The outreach work of Urban Light with boys in vulnerable situations

Cases of boy survivors or boys vulnerable to sexual exploitation can be directly identified by or referred to Urban Light teams by other grass root and civil society organisations, as well as local authorities and partners. The teams of Urban Light conduct outreach activities in the streets and in communities that are considered more vulnerable. This work includes also engaging with business establishments, where boys might be sexually exploited by local and foreign customers. This engagement is particularly complex as it involves working with the owners of these businesses that do not have the right to employ any person under the age of 18. Some boys might lie about their age, and this problem is exacerbated by the fact that many boys (especially those coming from rural, minority and migrant communities) might not have identity papers.

Business owners know that they cannot employ boys under 18 years old, but if a customer wants to meet with a boy child, some business owners facilitate meetings at the boy's residence or at a hotel. This way, boys would not show up directly at the establishment, making the crime more difficult to be detected by law enforcement officers. This issue adds a layer of complexity to the task of identifying boy survivors and creating initial contact with them.

To initiate contact and develop connections with boys living or working in the street and boys who are employed in local business establishments,² the outreach team uses two different approaches, depending on the location of the outreach:

Approach 1

For street-living, or street-involved boys, the outreach team first observe how the boys behave in the streets and their appearance, what clothes they have, if they are alone or in a group, or if the boy child seems to be looking for customers. If the staff feels confident about the fact that the boy might be involved in a high-risk situation or in need of protection, he/she would approach the boy and introduce him or herself.³ In the first general conversation, the staff would also let the boy know about the work of Urban Light and the support that he could receive at the centre of the organisation. The main objective is to develop first contact with the boy – or the boys – and share information on the services of Urban Light. Initial conversations may be rapid and general or may take the form of longer, informal chats, to provide a listening ear and build trust. According to the teams, some boys might be willing to visit the centre immediately, and some others might think about it for longer periods of time.

² The ones that can be identified, taking into consideration the difficulties before mentioned.

³ Urban Light staff also seizes the opportunity to be in contact with street-connected children, as well as street-involved or street-living adults, to share prevention messages and share information on the services of the organisation. Since many boys in these situations do not have a traditional, nuclear family, they naturally tend to spend their time with groups of peers and older individuals, who may become 'found families'. These older clients are sometimes the ones who will later introduce a boy to the Drop-in Center, and oftentimes may have been exploited as children, themselves, too. Urban Light also provides adult services.

“It’s not a mistake if you approach a boy and he’s not in the ‘target group’. You thank the boy and then leave. If you are right about the boy though, you can at least start helping him in feeling safer”.

The reasons why a boy decides to visit Urban Light’s Drop-in Centre really depend on the specific situation of each individual boy, or the exact time in which the first approach happened. In general, it has been noted that if when a boy needs help in a very concrete and urgent aspect, he will probably come earlier. Urban Light offers the option to visit the centre but whatever the boy decides the team will also let him know that Urban Light is a place where he can potentially receive help and support.

“The street is also an office of Urban Light”.

The support provided by Urban Light in the street includes the provision of snacks, hot meals and water. Based on the requests or needs identified by the boys, Urban Light can also bring harm reduction kits to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STI) and information about the services provided by the organisation, as well as maps to the Drop-in Centre, and contact details (telephone, website, and commonly used apps). Boys who do make the trip to visit the centre will be shown around and will be invited to just rest, eat and spend some time there. This helps the process of familiarisation of the boys with the organisation and allows the boys to see if the centre could be a support for them and if its services are aligned with their priorities, upon discussion.

Approach 2

When the Urban Light team engage with local businesses employing males for sexual services, they will first meet with the owner or the manager of the business to introduce themselves and the work of Urban Light. Some owners are immediately welcoming, as they may already have a policy to only employ adults. Others may deny the involvement of children in their business activities, being afraid of the consequences if they were to acknowledge this illegal activity. The team members convey their non-judgemental approach – and explain about the benefits of visits for harm reduction (providing safe sex kits and training workshops)- and do not insist on immediately meeting the employees. The staff then proceed to explain to the manager the situation and potential harm that can come to males in this sector and the activities that Urban Light organises for boys in the city (such as sports competitions and games), inviting owners to share the information on these activities with boys, without pointing fingers and creating a feeling of accusation.

When staff conducts outreach activities in both situations, team members would be in pairs – unless this is not possible because of workload. The use of visibility materials and clothes is not something systematic for the team, as experience has shown this comes with both advantages and inconveniences. Indeed, while outreach material allows boys to associate the staff with the organisation Urban Light, it can also scare boys. Some boys might indeed perceive the staff as a more formal figure in this way, compared to when they wear casual everyday clothes. The use of visibility items also raises some concerns in terms of confidentiality and safety for the boys. Community members might know Urban Light and be familiar with the work done by the organisation and would associate the boys with sexual exploitation or prostitution, potentially fostering discriminatory attitudes towards them.

According to Urban Light, it is important to conduct field visits in communities and streets on a regular basis and to use these visits as opportunities to build a relationship and rapport with boys in a step-by-step way. Every meeting represents a chance to know more about the boys and to show them that they can trust personnel from Urban Light. Field visits are therefore more than just a way to provide and share information with the boys.

Their experience shows it takes time to be able to construct rapport with the boys, sometimes several months, and this consideration needs to be taken into account when constructing programming meant to support them. Weekly visits to communities seem to be a good frequency to allow boys to recognise staff and become familiar with their presence. As some boys might be more shy or reluctant to interact, a key recommendation shared by Urban Light is to start engagement and conversations with the people in the area that seem to be more talkative or curious than others. According to the staff, oftentimes there will be one boy, or a nearby adult, who is willing to engage in activities or conversations. These people can indeed play a critical role in passing the message to other peers in their community about the information shared on Urban Light services and in facilitating contact with them. The first interactions would not be around specific child protection issues such as sexual exploitation, but rather focused on getting to know the boys and the people in their communities, to share information on Urban Light, its drop-in centre and what services and activities are provided there.

Understanding and adjusting to boys' reactions and attitudes through support services

When a boy starts to feel comfortable in visiting the centre of Urban Light and participating in its activities, he would normally start to share some of his problems and concerns with the caseworkers in the order of what constitutes a priority for them. Other times, a boy might exhibit some signs, which lead staff to believe that he may have been exploited or trafficked (mental health symptoms, problems with addiction, etc.). These concerns would then be discussed with the caseworkers, who would support the boy in assessing them and discussing solutions. As seen above, the gradual visits to the centre and the progressive process of familiarisation with its work allows boys to see how Urban Light could support them best and to assess the level of safety created by the staff.

Some boys might join the activities or visit the centre with high levels of anger or tension. This can be the case during their first visit to the centre, but also in other moments. The experience developed by the Urban Light team proved that, in these situations, it is important to know how to deal with boys' reactions and behaviours. Staff understood that these reactions might be due to stress related to their situations or the lack of opportunities to ask for help. In these cases, the staff ensures that their own attitude remains calm and indicates control and security. Social workers might recur to tell boys that they will not engage in a discussion with them until they are calm and ready to talk.

“As a social worker, you need to be able to be calm and show them that you can handle the situation and that you do not view them as ‘scary’, as they may be used to other people treating them that way.”

In cases where there are no urgent anger issues to deal with, and when boys feel comfortable enough to start sharing some of their concerns, they do it according to their perceived line of needs. In many cases, physical health-related issues represent their main concern. The staff of Urban Light would therefore proceed to ask how they are feeling and what specific symptoms they are experiencing, providing them with options of receiving basic first aid on site, or visiting the hospital together, where they can access specialised care.

Urban Light works to create and raise awareness with local service providers on how to provide care to male survivors, while preparing the boys on the questions that might be asked and the steps of the process. The organisation also has budget lines available to cover the expenses related to care. It is important to note that here staff would not necessarily ask for details as the boy might not be comfortable in sharing what happened, but would only ask about what hurts and what they are worried about. The road to the

hospital represents an important opportunity in this sense to have a more informal conversation with the boy and ask more questions about why they are concerned. In this sense, the staff would keep an informal and friendly attitude and would not inquire too much about what happened to the boy. Staff would rather ask questions about their life and their situation, and about their circle of friends, for example. Staff also make sure to inform boys of the organization's policies regarding confidentiality, reassuring the boy about the fact that this information would not be shared, unless in case of high risk to a person's safety and life.

“Even when we know that the health concern might be related to a situation of sexual exploitation, we would not ask for information from the beginning”.

Creating a trust link with the boys, where they feel comfortable enough to share what happened to them and a possible situation of exploitation or abuse, can be very challenging. The level of trust accorded by the boy really depends on the individual experience of each boy. Indeed, some of them might be able to share very soon, some later, and some probably never. In any case, when dealing with these cases, Urban Light staff always considers that:

- Even when a relationship of trust is established and the rapport with the boy is good, there will always be things about their lives and situation of exploitation or abuse that are too complicated or painful to explain, and the boy might not share all the information. Sharing this type of information can affect his life and relationships. It is important to understand this from the very beginning of the work with the boys, and accept dealing with the information that they are willing to share and disclose;
- Keeping promises made to boys is an important element in the process of rapport building. This has proven relevant and true for every case the staff had to deal with. When staff is able to keep promises and be transparent about the support that they can and cannot provide, this helps the boys in increasing their feeling of trust;
- Showing that you can respect confidentiality – even on questions unrelated to their protection – from the very beginning of the interactions facilitates the construction of rapport;
- Body language and clothing also matter in establishing a relationship and a safe space with the boys. Staff have noticed that wearing informal clothes (like a T-shirt and jeans) reduces feelings of formality and it creates an opportunity to discuss items and break the ice. Moreover, in some situations, staff may sit on the floor (or generally at a 'lower' level compared to where the boy is standing) to help in shifting the power relationship. This is related to a possible subconscious perception that some boys might have in terms of who is perceived as more vulnerable. As boy survivors often found themselves in situations where power was taken away from them, body language and gestures become even more important.

Urban Light's case management services to boys are delivered by case workers and include counselling, psychosocial support, financial management advice and coordination of care and assistance services (including health, housing, formal and non-formal education, and vocational training). The timeline of case management support provided to boys depends on each individual case and can vary greatly amongst boys. Boys who are involved in long-term situations of sexual exploitation, or boys who are not able to

leave the dynamic of sexual exploitation early, are also supported through harm reduction activities.⁴ An interesting point in the approach to case management employed by the staff of Urban Light is the participatory and non-intrusive nature of the relationship built with boy survivors. The first conversations with boys tend to be about general things in life, easy topics to just break the ice. The fact of being able to show interest in their lives and listening to any kind of information they might share is important. Using formulations and communications that showed that the information transmitted was well received and understood is a helpful first step in building rapport.

Team members from Urban Light use a variety of different activities to engage with boys:

- Some boys might want to disclose directly to a social worker the situation of sexual exploitation, but many prefer to not go into detail and prefer to only provide information about their needs for support services. To avoid direct conversation on the issue and to ensure that the services provided by Urban Light are in line with the boys' priorities and trajectories, the organisation implements different activities to kick off the interaction with them. Staff of Urban Light also learnt that a first direct conversation does not necessarily work with all boys and that opportunities for more dialogue come with time and thanks to the development of rapport;
- To boys to understand and reflect on issues of sexual exploitation and child trafficking, the Urban Light developed a workshop with cards that can be used both for individual and group sessions. The cards come with simple images, portraying characters of all skin colours, genders, and disabled characters. The card game was developed by Urban Light and is based on the Palermo Protocol. Staff will use cards portraying the different vocabulary that makes up the definition of human trafficking according to this internationally accepted definition. The images can be matched with the definitions, or can be used as a conversation starter with the boys, to ask what they think about that image, what that image represents for them, whether they have ever witnessed or experienced something like this, or whether they have heard of each different form of human trafficking (including sexual exploitation).
- It has been noted that during financial and savings management advice sessions, boys might be more prone to share information on their situation. This advice and support is widely appreciated by boys at the centre as they perceive it as a useful and concrete skill to have in their lives, and it provides them with practical tools to consider leaving situations and dynamics of sexual exploitation. Boys seem to appreciate this activity as it provides them with concrete tips and tools on how to save money and how to manage their finances according to their different needs and wishes. Providing boys with concrete and solutions oriented advice that they can implement in their daily lives helps in showing them that Urban Light can support them in improving their situations.

The key elements to build trust with boys, according to the learnings gathered by the staff of Urban Light, are mainly:

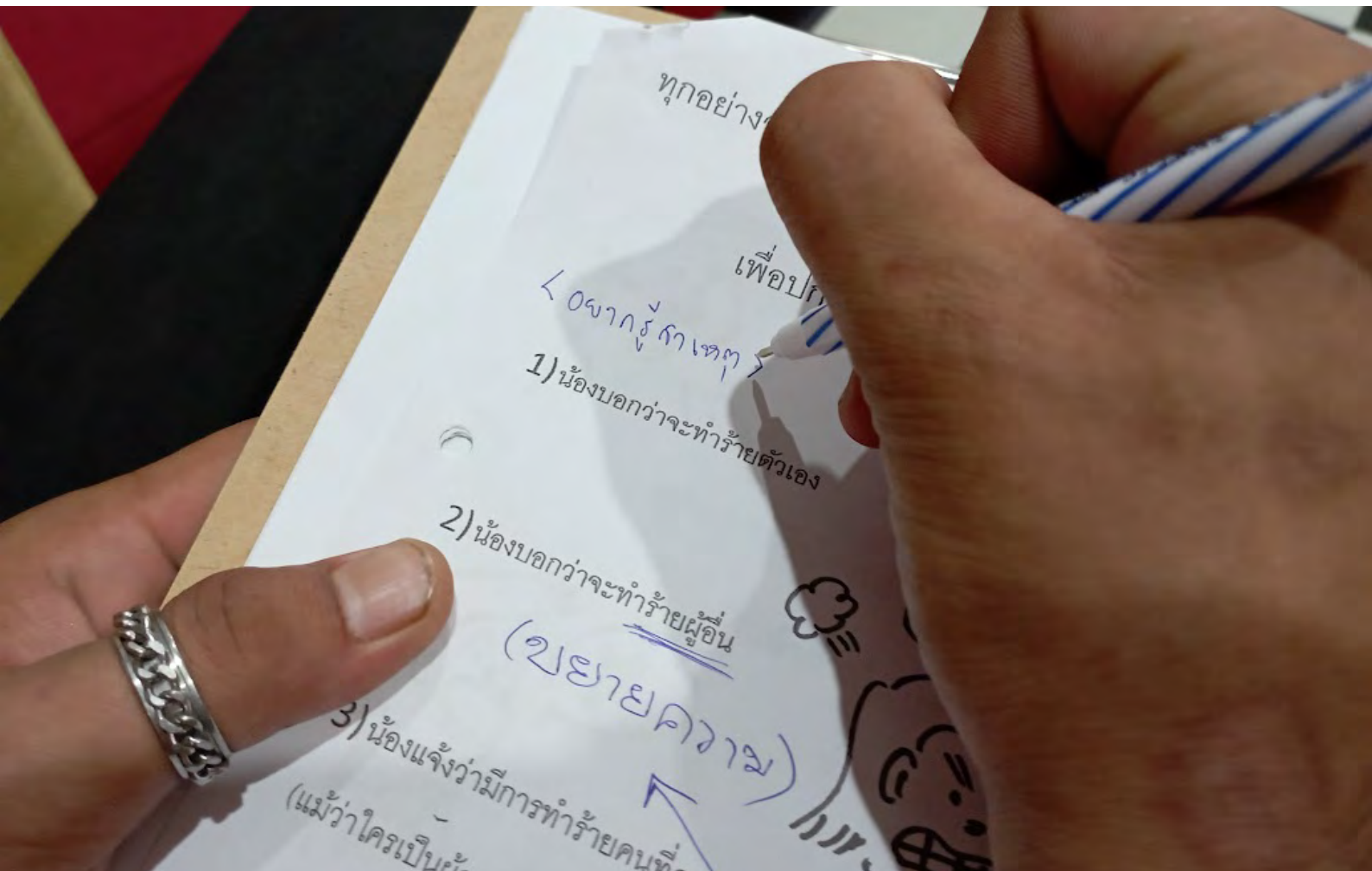
1. Not always assuming the formal role of the social worker/staff member, but also that of a friend, an 'older brother or sister' (a common term for older acquaintances in Thailand), or a figure that boys can relate to and that they can get to know on a human level. For example, when boys provide contact details (such as their social media information) it has been useful for staff to monitor their activities and follow-up on potential indicators that the boys might not be doing well. Sending messages replying to concerning stories or pictures are sometimes as simple as: *"Hi! Just checking in that you are alright"*. This helps the boys to know that they have a safe adult who cares about their safety and emotions;

⁴ This includes substance and alcohol abuse, self-harm reduction, as well as STI prevention and other forms of support.

2. Honesty on what services and support one can provide or cannot provide. Honesty and transparency are essential in building trust, along with keeping the promises made during the initial encounters;
3. The use of language that is friendly and informal. Avoiding technical terms or jargon and using slang words that boys use in their lives are useful tips in this respect;
4. Being able to provide advice on a variety of subjects and life situations. It has been noted that boys appreciate having the possibility of asking for advice or help in matters related to their personal relationships and financial issues.

“Different boys might come in with different attitudes and reactions. It is important to stress that they made a very important first step. Show them that they will move forward and that you can support them in restoring hope”.

In any case, some level of case management services can be provided without a clear or full moment of disclosure from the boy. For example, the organisation conducted psychosocial support activities, family visits and referral to essential care services for some boys that were in high-risk situations or that were referred by other organisations or community members.



The participation of boys in the design of the interventions of Urban Light

As mentioned previously, the right to participation is at the core of the intervention of Urban Light with boy survivors and this approach can be appreciated at different levels. Participation is not only a fundamental value for the organisation, but it also proved to be effective in building trust with the boys.

“You need to ‘hand over the stick’, to let the boys know that you value their opinions, and that wherever possible, you will act on their advice”.

In overall service provision

Urban Light conducts participatory assessments with boys to regularly evaluate the relevance and quality of its overall services, as well as to adjust or add some of the activities. These exercises are conducted using methodologies such as simply asking for boys’ regular inputs during exchanges but, more specifically, through interactive activities. For instance, boys can be asked to define their priorities, their preferred activities and current (or desired) services and put a sticker on a flipchart under each priority to assess the relevance or to indicate with stickers or drawings what services are considered important, need to be adjusted or added. Before these exercises are conducted with boys, the staff ensures that they understand that the organisation has limited resources and that therefore priorities and rules need to be defined accordingly. Providing boys with information in a transparent manner also contributes to creating a sense of trust and belonging, and helps to show them that their opinions are respected.

“You need to deserve their respect and trust, like you would do with anyone else in life”.

Recently, Urban Light conducted a participatory evaluation of its services⁵ and of the drop-in centre with boys and their recommendations and inputs were considered in the strategy of the organisation as well as in the design of the drop-in centre.

⁵ With the support of an organisational change management expert.

“We don’t just ask the boys for their opinions. We have to show them that they were actually listened to and that we acted upon their advice. This is especially important for boys who have been sexually exploited. When they have experienced moments in which they are utterly powerless, it’s important to take them seriously, respect them as ‘experts by experience’ and this also helps them to build (back) their self-confidence. To allow them to have some control over the decisions that affect them”.

For example, one of the recommendations made by the boys was to organise the office space and the area for activities of the centre in a way that they could be closer. Boys expressed the will to be together and spend time together in one single space. That recommendation was taken into account in the design of the new space and the new Urban Light centre/office allows staff to interact constantly with boys –allowing for everyone to literally ‘be on the same level’. Similarly, the coffee machine and snack area was purposely located next to the desk of the Thailand Country Director to facilitate opportunities for exchange and rapport building.

This change was relevant not only from a boy participation point of view, but also for the creation of a relationship with the boys. The ability to naturally spend more time with the boys in the new space showed an increase of boys sharing and talking.

“If they see you all the time and you participate in the activities with them, they know you”.

In this sense, a useful tip shared by the staff of Urban Light was to use activities and informal spaces as opportunities to show interest in the boys’ lives and proactively initiate conversations. This is deemed important as it demonstrates genuine care and interest in the boys’ lives. In addition, keeping the majority of the interactions positive and friendly contributes in taking away some of the pressure and the anxiety generated by their life situations.

Urban Light developed several strategies to initiate these interactions with boys, ranging from activities around games or playing/discussing music. An example is the game **“keeping the balloon in the air”**, Staff members might throw a balloon in the air in the centre making sure that it does not drop to the floor and invite boys to help them with that. This simple technique is considered a good icebreaker because anyone can join at any time if they want to, and because it is easy and can be implemented with very few resources by everyone.

In learning and training activities

In learning and interactive activities, boy participation is also a fundamental pillar. Urban Light organises workshops on different sets of recreational, creative and sensitization (prevention) activities with boys, which span from music to other creative activities, educational activities, sexual and reproductive health, safety, financial and savings management, rights and protection. Some activities are conducted to raise awareness and to provide boys with a feeling of empowerment in understanding their rights and the support that they can receive. Skills workshops are often designed around project-based learning, rather than through traditional forms of training and education.

Recently, Urban Light has found that some boys are better able to acquire skills and new information with a learning by doing approach, which takes away the formalities related to traditional forms of teaching. This is particularly relevant for those boys who were not able to attend school, or that might struggle with focus and learning because of their experiences of exploitation and abuse. This approach uses and builds upon the boys' own resources and skills, rather than using a top-down approach. Urban Light therefore provides boys with the materials and the space to conduct structured activities, but the boys can create their own resources, prioritise the discussion topics and teach each other how to use materials based on their own skills and experiences.

An interesting example of this approach can be seen in the participatory development of awareness-raising campaigns on the issues of sexual exploitation and trafficking of boys. Boys can choose the topics on which they feel that the community should be sensitized, as well as the best strategies to use to reach the agreed target audience. Urban Light provides structures in informing boys about what elements need to be considered when developing community campaigns, but boys remain in charge of their design. Having an initial workshop asking simple questions to the boys is the first step: **“So guys, how do we want to do this? Who do we want to reach?”**. This activity is an example of how boys can feel empowered in participating in the very design of interventions for issues that affect them but also expand their knowledge on child protection issues, and human rights and learn technical skills such as video editing, and construction of impactful messaging, inter alia. Another key positive element noted through the implementation of these activities is that it creates an opportunity to bring out everyone's talents and interests. Some boys might be naturally very good at coming up with slogans, for instance. They will have the chance to realise what their skills are and can also support other boys in bringing out the best of them. This seems to reinforce the sense of control, purpose and belonging for boys.

“I can actually do this. This is something I am learning, but I am also feeling empowered about this”.

In the process of recruitment of the personnel of Urban Light

The selection process of new personnel is done through a first online interview, criminal background check (when possible), and a visit to the centre and through the practical implementation of an activity with the boys in the centre. The interesting component of this process is that boys are therefore involved in the selection of personnel and can share their feedback on what they think of the candidates and how they made them feel during the activities. This of course also provides staff of Urban Light to observe how the candidates interact with boys and how comfortable they feel in engaging in activities and conversation with the boys. As seen, some boys and young men might be dealing with very complex situations and this can sometimes be reflected in their behaviours and attitudes. Observing the attitudes of the candidates during these exercises can thus be helpful in getting a sense of who they are and how they can fit with the values and objectives of Urban Light. The observations are specifically made around the capacity of the candidates to feel comfortable and suggest activities and on their level of instinct to invite boys to join activities and their will to genuinely get to know the boys, as well as to ensure compliance with the organisation's child protection and safeguarding policies. Some guiding questions in this respect are for example:

- Are they just doing the activity to get it done? Or are they really trying to get to know the boy?
- Are they sharing some information about their own lives? Are they too quiet or too talkative? Are they a good listener? Are they able to build rapport?
- What kind of relationship are they establishing with the boys? Does it feel friendly and appropriate?
- What are the reactions of the boys that can be observed during the interactions?
- What are the reactions of the boys following the interaction? Staff will ask them "What did you think? Should we hire this person?"

Cross-cutting principles in all participation activities

Throughout all activities, boys' participation is completely voluntary. This means that Urban Light staff provides information to the boys about the workshop and activities and the boys can decide if they want to join or not. This way, boys do not feel pressured to join and they feel that they are in control of what they want to do. As seen, this feeling of control is particularly important to boys affected by sexual exploitation. This approach also allows boys who might not want to initially join the activities and workshops to observe the participation of those boys who joined. When boys who participate in the activities give positive feedback about them and can also show success or new skills, other boys will feel encouraged and curious to join.

“Some boys will show other boys or friends what they did and learnt, how they felt and how good they felt. Then other boys might join too”.

In general, in all activities where boys participate, setting clear rules of collaboration and participation is essential. When boys are able to express what their rules and boundaries are, and listen to other peers or staff’s rules, they can also accept them. There is always a conversation taking place about what agreed rules will be respected.

“If a boy recognizes that the rule comes from them, or that it has come from the other boys, they will be more likely to accept and respect them”.



The human and technical resources needed for implementation

Urban Light counts on different skill sets within its team and gender diversity. Caseworkers providing counselling and case management services to the boys include a licensed social worker, who also conducts outreach and community-based activities. Team members have developed expertise and experience in working with boys through implementation and have adapted their communication and counselling techniques to take into account the gender norms and barriers that boys face when accessing help and support. As seen, this can be appreciated for instance in the capacity of social workers to deal with boys' reactions, maintain a calm attitude and engage with them in a friendly and positive manner.

- Having team members of different genders is very important for the work of Urban Light. It has been observed that boys might feel more comfortable in sharing information on their affective or family relationships with female social workers. In this respect, it has also been observed that boys might talk to female staff in a calmer and kinder way, generally, while they might be more straightforward or speak louder with male staff. Boys might be more shy to share information with women on their encounters and sexual activities with customers. Boys might also test the attitude of the female social workers in discussing issues related to sex and sexuality by talking about the girls and women they are talking to, the kind of messages they are exchanging and other materials. Staff have noticed that it is important to show them that these conversations can be held with them, that they are not shocked about the details, and that they can be a positive mentorship figure in their lives. The voluntary workshops conducting on sexual and reproductive health,⁶ run by female staff, also help boys in feeling more comfortable to share with them;
- With male team members, boys may prefer to share about their hobbies or interests, but also more extreme issues such as conflicts or violence they might have experienced in the streets (conflicts with other boys or gangs). It is important to have male staff available as most boys might find it easier to connect on the ground of shared interests and hobbies. As many boys also lack a male positive figure in their lives, the presence of a role model that can show kind and calm reactions, and who is able to share emotions is essential. Boys may also prefer to discuss certain health care issues, or receive first aid from male members of the team.

Moments of conversation and reflections amongst colleagues dealing with boys' cases are essential for staff to deal with potential feelings of frustration, to share the workload and to seek advice on how to deal with the most complex cases. It is important to note that almost all cases that Urban Light deals with can be considered very complex and require regular preparation and follow-up. Some cases might be particularly delicate, urgent or severe, leading to an overall feeling of frustration for the staff when solutions are hard to reach. Some boys might initially leave a situation of sexual exploitation but then fall into negative coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, self-harm or gambling.

⁶ These workshops are not only for boys, their partners and families can also join.

In addition, Urban Light is home to material resources that are important for outreach and on-site activities. The Drop-in Centre has materials that allow boys to engage in a wide range of creative and educational activities. The centre currently has IT equipment, creative and craft materials, musical instruments, food, and rest areas. Boys can come and join the activities and use the materials during the working hours of the centre and can join the voluntary workshops described above. The availability of different materials to roll out varied activities with boys is important as it allows them to choose and join those that are more in line with their interests and talents.

Urban Light also provides short-term, emergency housing, which is particularly relevant for boys who might need urgent shelter or that need housing during the case management process. It is important to provide with this option – to the extent possible – to provide a time for those cases of boys and their families, or men who might be dealing with urgent safety concerns, to first be protected and have their most basic needs for survival met.

Finally, the partnership established by Urban Light with other organisations and businesses helps considerably in completing the case management support provided by the organisation and in providing boys with some alternative options to sexual exploitation – especially in terms of income opportunities. Urban Light has several partnerships that provide boys with the possibility of attending vocational training initiatives and entering job placements and opportunities. Coupled with the financial and savings advice provided by the staff of the organisation, this strategy allows boys and young men to feel that they have options about their lives and that it is possible to obtain other forms of income.



Conclusion and possibilities for expansion of work

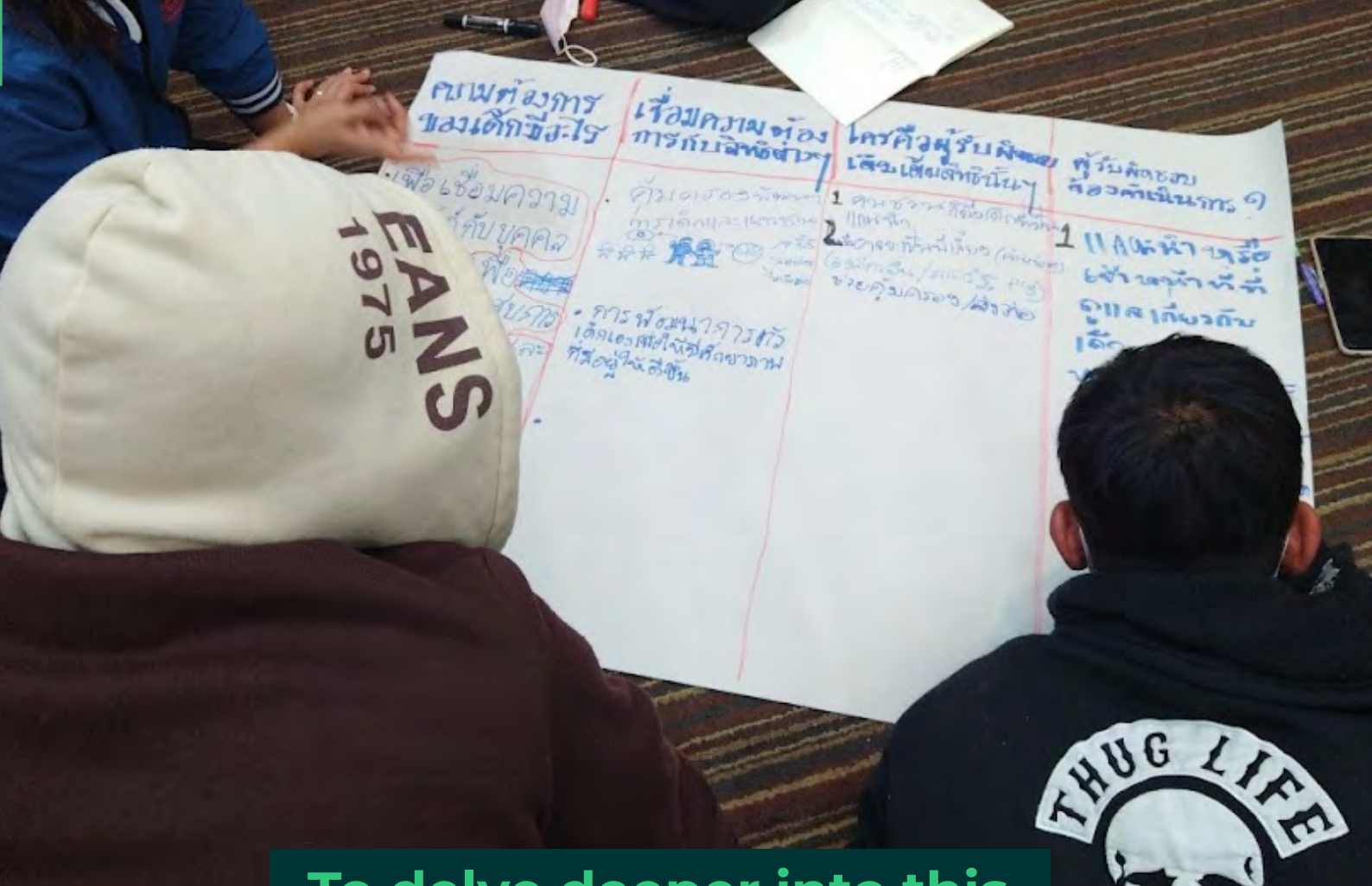
The experience accumulated by the team of Urban Light in Thailand in working with boy survivors of sexual exploitation provides important learnings and insights on how to deal with the reactions that boys might have while dealing with these situations and how to ensure that boys can participate in the design and roll out of the organisation's activities.

Creation of a empathic relationships link and rapport have been deemed essential by all the staff of Urban Light, and a general learning of the organisation is that generating a sense of empathy can come from active listening to the boys and from a genuine interest in knowing them. Urban Light staff also used information from other disciplines – such as from interventions on working with youth with learning difficulties and children with disabilities – to adapt their approach. As seen, many boys who visit the centre did not have a chance to receive an education or struggled with learning at school because of their history of abuse and exploitation. If funding is available, and where deemed possible and in line with each individual case's needs, Urban Light provides literacy courses to complement activities and supports access to formal and informal education.

According to the experience of the staff, boys look out for positive examples and supportive figures, and they like to know that other people are also going through the same challenges and emotions. In this sense, Urban Light learnt how to create a safe environment where boys feel that they can be part of a community and exchange with peers about similar life situations and issues. When the staff normalises conversations about emotions and mental health, it generates a feeling of empathy and solidarity amongst boys. Staff has learnt that by opening up first and showing boys their emotions or concerns helps immensely in this regard. On the same line, being able to show to boys that staff is also working on their mental health and their personal progress contributes to the strengthening of rapport.

“If you do not feel comfortable in sharing too much about your life – make up a friend! Show the boys that they are not alone and that these things can happen”.

The skills developed by the staff of Urban Light in dealing with very complex cases, understanding boys' reactions, and meaningfully involving boys in the construction of their interventions deserve to be documented in more depth and capitalised on. Research from ECPAT International Global Boys Initiative indicates that front line workers oftentimes struggle in coping with boy survivors' reactions, as these can be male-expected behaviours such as violence, aggressiveness or refusing to cooperate. The approaches and techniques developed by the staff of Urban Light to break the ice with boys, adapt a calm attitude, and engage in difficult conversation could contribute to tackling this challenge.



To delve deeper into this

- To know more about the work of Urban Light in Thailand and obtain more detail on their approach and services, please visit: <https://www.urban-light.org/>
- To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the work of ECPAT International on this at the global level, please visit: <https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>
- To know more about the work of ECPAT International: <https://ecpat.org/>



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