

**CASE
STUDY**

ECPAT FRANCE

CALAIS, FRANCE

How to work with boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a context of migration and forced displacement



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

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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 and abuse 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 contexts and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies.

We know that the sexual exploitation and abuse 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 to prevent sexual exploitation. In July 2022, we began a process of mobilizing 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 member ECPAT France, several learning points were identified for a better protection of children at the national and global levels. Therefore, the aim of this case study is to document ECPAT France's practices in providing services to boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a context of forced migration and displacement. This case study aims to document and share the lessons learnt by the organisation, while helping to answer the question: *"How can we work with children and young boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse through a gender-sensitive approach?"*

INTRODUCTION

ECPAT France is a French civil society organisation, based in Paris since 1997, working for child protection and dedicated to combating all forms of sexual exploitation of children in France and abroad. The organisation runs a number of programmes addressing these issues, including issues relating to migration and forced displacement.

Since 2021, ECPAT France has been actively involved in tackling migration and forced displacement in Calais, located on the northern coast of France. Calais is adjacent to the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part of the English Channel, dividing Great Britain from continental Europe and France. The shortest distance across the Strait near Calais is around 32 kilometres. This geographical factor has made Calais, along with neighbouring towns such as Dunkerque, a convergence point for many people, including many unaccompanied children (mostly boys), who are travelling across the European continent in an attempt to cross over to the UK.

From January to September 2024, more than 10,000 people attempted to cross the Channel and almost 136,000 people crossed the Channel since the UK started counting arrivals in 2018.¹ The crossing is notoriously dangerous, due to the type of boats used and the unpredictable weather conditions: wind speeds in excess of force 7 (strong winds) occur more than 120 days a year, and cold-water temperatures, strong currents and heavy commercial traffic make the journey even more difficult. At least 37 people died attempting the crossing since January 2024, making it the deadliest year since the phenomenon started.²

The Profiles of Boys in Calais

The boys ECPAT France works with are typically aged between 15 and 17, although the youngest boy supported was 8. From 2021 to 2024, the majority of the boys were Sudanese nationals, followed by Syrian, Eritrean, Egyptian and Afghan. Many of these boys left their countries of origin at a very young age, having crossed several countries, often without any legal documentation, social support or sufficient financial resources. They often spend long periods in transit, exposed to psychological and physical violence, sometimes perpetrated by state actors. Along their journey, they face sexual exploitation and abuse, various other forms of sexual violence, forced labour and harassment, even on European soil.

“
There is a before
and an after Libya
for these boys³

Many of them leave their country of origin to reach the United Kingdom, perceived by their communities and families as an ‘Eldorado’ in terms of standard of living and financial opportunities, with the particular goal of sending part of their income back to their families. Once

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-june-2024/irregular-migration-to-the-uk-year-ending-june-2024>

2 <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/2101629/migrants-morts-traversee-manche>

3 Quotes from Ecpat France field staff

they arrive in Calais, almost all the boys have the goal to cross to the UK. The length of their stay in Calais is directly linked to the possibilities of crossing and is unpredictable. Some groups, such as Sudanese boys, tend to stay longer - sometimes for years - because of limited financial resources upon arrival. By contrast, Syrians often have their passage already organised and paid for by family members, which shortens their stay in Calais.

Living conditions in Calais are below minimum acceptable standards for children. Boys do not have access to regular routes to the UK. Crossing the border takes place through organised networks run by smugglers, who sometimes control the camps and exercise power over the boys. The crossing, whether by truck or boat, is always dangerous, with the risk of being charged for illegal crossing once they arrive in the UK if they drive the boat themselves, under pressure from the smugglers, being accused by UK authorities of being smugglers themselves, which subject them to being sent back to their country of origin. Regional and local authorities adopt a harsh approach to people on the move, with continuous police raids aimed at physically displacing people without providing alternative solutions or shelters, or guaranteeing security inside the camps. This comes in a context of several years of national policies aimed at making life more difficult for people trying to reach the European Union and the UK, including the recent threats to deport all people arriving in the United Kingdom to Rwanda⁴.

It is in this context that the city of Calais and the surrounding areas are home to a number of informal camps where boys stay with adults, raising concerns about their physical and psychological safety. The informal camps present a general lack of basic services, with the non-profit sector trying to provide what should be state-run services, with insufficient funding which has been decreasing over the years. These issues are further amplified by the months, and sometimes years, that boys have spent on the

move across continents and countries, exposed to various dangers far from their families and communities. Child protection services are overwhelmed and have difficulty ensuring that these children's rights are enforced on the territory. Furthermore, in France, child protection is the responsibility of each department⁵, with different policies with regard to age assessment tests. Under the European Union's Dublin Regulation⁶, these boys are required to apply for international protection in their initial country of arrival in the European Union, which is usually Italy or Greece. However, they have no obligation to apply for asylum in France, which makes their legal status unclear across the European Union.

These boys aim to cross to the UK despite the lack of basic services, the physical and psychological risks they face in the camps, and the public policies that limit their access to services and their rights. Without the financial means to pay for their journey across the border, **the boys are often exploited by smugglers in a context where the state does not protect them.** These dynamics are exacerbated by widespread gender and social biases among the communities in Calais, but also among state authorities, such as the police and the departments. The latter consider boys to be "invulnerable", which influences the very design of assistance measures and analysis of risks by the state, thereby increasing boys' exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse. Finally, boys in the camps are exposed to local networks of sexual exploitation, abuse and prostitution by locals or people from the community, who exploit the conditions in the camps to take advantage of this vulnerability.

In the camps, boys are forced to live among adults without any access to basic services. There are no toilets on site, and they have to walk for up to an hour to reach the only two toilets' points in Calais set up by the authorities. Food access is also difficult, as the food distributions set up by the State are not sufficient and do not cover all the living areas, and the NGOs have

4 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-the-uks-policy-to-send-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda/>

5 French administrative division, "département"

6 https://www.migrationsenquestions.fr/question_reponse/667-quest-ce-que-le-reglement-dublin/

to constantly change the distribution points depending on the resources and volunteers available. In terms of shelter, boys' only options are often abandoned buildings or tents, in both rural and urban environments, in overcrowded conditions that raise concerns for their health. There is no space to relax, play or express their

faith. In addition, they are exposed to the physical and psychological violence exploited by the smugglers who control the camps. In these settings, boys may also be in close contact with adults with substance abuse and dependency problems, exacerbated by the risk of theft, the presence of weapons and frequent police raids.



METHODOLOGY FOR DOCUMENTING PRACTICES

This case study was carried out using a semi-structured assessment and learning tool developed by the ECPAT International and *Global Boys Initiative* (GBI) research teams. The evaluation and learning questionnaire guided the interview with the teams working with the boys. The questions included in the questionnaire were designed to gather information on the practices considered effective by the organisation in supporting sexually exploited and abused boys in a context of migration and forced displacement.

The methodology was used during a visit to the organisation's office and its field projects, allowing direct observations to be made. GBI research shows that boys tend to fall between the cracks of child protection systems due to prejudices about their victimisation, as boys are often not seen as victims of sexual exploitation and abuse due to gender norms that do not see them as potentially vulnerable. This is even more relevant in a humanitarian context of forced displacement and migration, where restrictive policies at national, regional and local level amplify discrimination and exclusion.

The case study is based on these findings and provides elements for reflection and recommendations in working specifically with boys in this context. The experience gained by the ECPAT France team offers important lessons on how to support boys who have been on the move for months or even years, and how to provide support that respects their individual experiences and dignity.



KEY CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES IN WORKING WITH BOYS IN THE CONTEXT OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

A

Creating a Bond with Boys Taking into Account Unpredictable Time Frames, and Creating Safe Spaces in Hostile and Dangerous Environments

One of the main challenges observed in Calais is the **unpredictable timeframe available to forge a relationship of trust with boys**. As many of them aim to cross the Channel to the UK, their attention remains focused on finding opportunities to make the crossing, often through the intermediary of smugglers. This means that some boys only stay in Calais for a few days, while others may stay longer for a variety of reasons. When the ECPAT France team first meets an unaccompanied child, there is no guarantee that there will be a second interaction. **This makes the first meeting crucial for maximising the chances of future contacts** and establishing the initial trust needed for appropriate follow-up and support.

“
We never know if we will see a boy again.
”

One of the main strategies adopted by the ECPAT France team is to increase the frequency of visits to the places where children spend their days. **This regular presence helps to build a sense of recognition and familiarity with ECPAT France's field staff**. Even if staff do not directly provide services during these visits, informal interactions and showing a genuine interest in the boys' well-

being can significantly increase trust and the likelihood of future interactions. Active listening and remembering names and details of early conversations show boys that the person in front of them really cares about them.

This approach is also decisive when engaging with key people in the migrant and displaced communities, increasing the chances of being accepted and recognised by the various groups present in Calais. Examples of key people within the communities include adults who have already lived in Calais for several months or years and know the context, adults who have gained the trust of their community, who are listened to and have power within the community organisation, spiritual and religious leaders, as well as people who speak several languages and can communicate with different groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This category of key members also includes people who have contacts or who can initiate contact with smugglers in order to reach the UK. **Adults and influential community members play a major role in boys' perceptions of NGO staff, and can influence their choices positively or negatively.**

During the initial brief contact with the boys, the team members focus on gathering relevant basic information such as name, age, nationality and telephone numbers. They also provide information on how to reduce risks and promote self-protection. Examples of information to reduce risk include the complexity and dangers of crossing to the UK, such as weather and natural conditions that could endanger their lives and physical health, as well as the legal

risks of crossing if they are forced to drive the boat, expectations regarding living and working in the UK, their right to apply for international protection under the Geneva Convention and European law, and the benefits of registering with child protection services and taking age assessment tests with the French authorities.

ECPAT France found that adopting a non-judgemental approach is essential to building trust and putting children at the centre of the relationship. By adopting a child-centred approach, the team provides all the information necessary for the children to make informed and safe decisions, **while always respecting their autonomy and ability to make decisions affecting them.**

Boys in Calais have often endured perilous journeys across continents. They are often distrustful of foreigners, including NGO staff. Providing clear and transparent information on the role of ECPAT France, and how it differs from State police forces, is thus essential. This is coupled with clear communication about what ECPAT France can and cannot offer, **by always managing expectations and ensuring that promises are kept to maintain trust.**

A non-judgemental approach is particularly important when it comes to boys' decisions to leave their home countries or attempt to cross the Channel to the UK. **The ECPAT team aims to discuss the risks of these choices without ever questioning the decisions themselves.**

“

If we tell the boys that we want them to stay in France, we lose the contact with them straight away

”

One of the main challenges faced by the ECPAT team due to the structural conditions in Calais, is the creation of safe spaces within hostile and dangerous environments. The “tackling fixation points”⁷ approach reflects the authorities' ongoing efforts to move tents and displace people, with daily raids to confiscate tents and belongings. The use of barbed wire, stone and architectural fencing throughout Calais and the surrounding area creates an environment of constant uncertainty. Boys often have to choose between keeping their tents or queuing for food, at the risk of losing everything in case of police raids. This targeted strategy is designed to plunge boys into a logic of continuous survival, and reinforces the risks of control and exploitation. In this context, **creating safe moments away from camps and adults is crucial, increasing opportunities for connection and more in-depth conversations.**



7 In French “lutte contre les points de fixation”

B

Generating a Feeling of Relaxation Among Boys and Helping them Reclaim their Status of Children

A general feeling of mistrust prevails among the boys, even in the informal camps, where **they are pressured by gender norms to be strong and “act like adults”**. This means that it is important to preserve recreational areas for children who may have been on the move for years and who, even before starting their journey, might not have any sense of being a “child”, particularly for boys who have been exploited at work in their home countries or while crossing countries along their journeys.

When they are with adults in Calais, boys feel the pressure to project an image of being strong and avoid showing perceptions of weakness, as they do not want to be treated like children or

teenagers. However, when they feel safe away from adults and a bond of trust is established, their behaviour changes. **The ECPAT France field team maximises opportunities to share recreational moments with the boys, allowing them to be themselves without external pressure from the adults present in the informal camp or the state authorities.** It is important to reverse the prevailing context, which still requires them to “behave like men”, to show no emotion, and to be constantly on psychological and emotional alert, wary of the dangers around them. **Optimising recreational time therefore builds trust between the members of the field team and the boys.**

C

How to Identify Signs of Sexual Exploitation in Boys and Start a Conversation About It

While being aware of cultural differences, the ECPAT France field team also addresses issues relating to sexuality and gender norms in the European and French context, particularly with regard to the role of women and what is considered acceptable. This approach is compounded by the fact that sexual violence is very often a taboo subject in the boys’ countries of origin, making discussions about sexuality and consent difficult. Field staff sometimes share personal experiences (for example, moments of difficulty in the past, emotions of sadness they may have felt) to create a link and associate images with various experiences, facilitating conversations that would otherwise be more difficult to discuss, because of social and gender norms.

One of ECPAT France’s approaches is to **avoid dealing directly with sexual violence and to use other entry points for discussion**, starting conversations to assess whether the boys feel comfortable in general. In situations where

the team suspects sexual exploitation, letting the boys know that they might be aware that something is going on can reduce the pressure on the child and encourage them to open up. If one of the boys makes an inappropriate approach to a field worker, it is important to set boundaries while taking the opportunity to educate the boy about what is considered respectful or disrespectful behaviour, stressing the importance of consent and personal space.

“
If someone does not want to be hit on, you leave them alone.
”

Another strategy is to **address medical problems as a way of discussing sexuality**. For example, when dealing with medical problems such as urinary tract infections, field workers can explain sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and address stereotypes relating to homosexuality and sexual orientation. When discussing problematic sexual behaviour, it is crucial to reinforce the idea that boys have the right to say no if someone tries to approach them inappropriately, bearing in mind the difficulty of enforcing refusal in a context of power imbalance.

Adopting behaviours that are sensitive to boys' experiences is essential for building trust and respect, **avoiding whenever possible the fact that boys have to repeat again difficult stories or disclose details of past experiences**.

In this sense, field observations play a key role in identifying the risks and signs of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly when direct disclosure by boys is hindered by gender and social norms. Some key indicators include the environment in which the boys live in Calais, as some locations are associated with alcohol consumption, the presence of weapons, meeting points with smugglers and violence in general, including sexual violence. For boys in these environments, it can be harder to cope. A sudden change in a boy's financial situation, such as buying a new watch, an unexpected change in hygiene or spending nights in a hotel, can also

be an indicator of sexual exploitation. Urinary tract infections can also be a sign of sexual exploitation and abuse. ECPAT France's standard operating procedure in such cases is to increase opportunities for interaction and verification with the boys.

Alerting the child protection services in Calais is compulsory and is the first step in dealing with these cases. It is crucial to keep the boy as far away from the harmful environment as possible, as this strengthens the bond between the field worker and the boy, providing a safe space for decompression, individual conversations and the opportunity to ask sensitive questions away from the eyes and ears of the adults in the camp. In addition, when it comes to sensitive subjects, **talking in the third person can help boys feel more at ease, as they often do themselves**.

Due to the sensitive nature of ECPAT's work and the stereotypes associated with sexual exploitation and abuse, both among communities and among the boys themselves, ECPAT France does not present itself as an organisation specifically focused on sexual exploitation and abuse. Instead, it presents itself as an organisation with a broader child protection mission, offering information and support tailored to children.



Restoring a Sense of Individuality and Reducing Risk Behaviours Through Responsible Information Sharing

In a migratory context, boys face structural challenges imposed both by state entities and by informal forces such as smugglers or camp leaders. Living conditions in the camps **place boys in a situation of external denial of their own autonomy**, even though boys on the move often express their ability to navigate through structural difficulties and adversities. In addition, state-sponsored immigration policies are designed to place individuals in a physical and emotional limbo, thereby attempting to limit

all control and all possibility of choice. In such a context, **the process of empowerment and re-establishment of a sense of individuality becomes crucial to the well-being of these children**.

One of the first steps in restoring a sense of individuality is to ask the boys what they would like to do, which is rarely possible when they are on the move. ECPAT's approach is to place boys at the heart of all services and case management,

offering them the opportunity to make decisions, **starting with small decisions**, such as which recreational activities to choose, and moving on to bigger questions about their life plans, such as whether to go through a state age assessment, apply for international protection in France or attempt to cross into the UK. The practices used by the team in this respect are:

- Adapting activities and actions to the rights, characteristics and wishes of the boy they are working with. This process helps to build trust by showing that his interests, opinions and decisions are taken into account, allowing the boy to start thinking about his priorities again;
- Giving children the opportunity to look in the mirror or choose their own clothes, and thus to take care of themselves, are important elements in restoring a sense of being “a child”, of individuality and self-esteem;
- Initiate discussions about what their professional and personal goals might be once in the UK and, where possible, start working on these goals from Calais (for example, by taking English classes), allowing the children to think about their life plans. This process is particularly relevant because even when boys manage to cross the Channel, conditions in the UK may mean that they are not recognised as children, working on the informal market in precarious conditions where their rights are denied;
- This approach also applies to daily activities with boys, with **psychosocial activities defined according to their interests and needs**.

“
**Rediscovering
interests and hobbies
can be difficult
for boys, as the months
or years spent away have not
allowed them to express
themselves**
”

This happens in a context where the decision to leave and go to Calais is often taken years in advance and has guided the boys' choices for a long time, often influenced by the hopes of their communities and families in their countries of origin, as well as by the difficulties and violence encountered along the migratory routes.

Another important element at the heart of ECPAT France's work is the recognition **that a lack of control over their own decisions can affect their mental health**. A cautious approach is necessary when talking with the boys about their decisions to leave and their decision to travel to the UK, following the “do no harm” principle and avoiding placing them in delicate situations in terms of mental health. This is particularly relevant knowing that boys are in the middle of a migration journey, without a support system, and facing a lack of services and structural barriers. If the boys express the need to talk about these issues, the procedure is an immediate referral to the ECPAT France team psychologist to support their protection.

Another key pillar of ECPAT France's work in Calais is to reduce boys' risk behaviour when faced with sexual exploitation and abuse by **sharing suitable and clear information in an accountable and transparent way**. By providing relevant information, the ECPAT team aims to strengthen boys' ability to make informed decisions, in order to reduce the risk

of sexual exploitation and abuse due to a lack of information. The whole process of information sharing by the field team focuses on **abstaining from personal judgement**, even if the choices made by boys' contrast with what frontline staff might consider to be the "best choice" for them. The field team shares the risks associated with the various choices, in particular those linked to the crossing, providing the boys with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision. This is done both orally and by providing information materials developed by ECPAT France and other organisations working in Calais, including digital resources and online platforms setting out the legal rights they have in both France and the UK.

“

**We ask the boys:
Can you read the waves and
understand the force of the wind?
Do you know the emergency
numbers?**

”

Given that service provision in Calais is often geographically dispersed, **one of the main concerns of the field team is to indicate as clearly as possible where free services are available.** Even the ability to take a shower can become difficult for boys in Calais, and in some cases the need to access basic services can be exploited by people who use their needs to

exploit boys sexually or commercially. With this in mind, the ECPAT France team is taking action to reduce the risks faced by boys, knowing these risks can emerge and be exploited by smugglers and other adults in the community.

As the boys who arrive in Calais have no legal means of crossing and seeking legal protection in the UK, and have crossed continents and countries, often facing huge difficulties, they find themselves in a situation where state support is limited and often hostile, without the financial means to pay for a crossing that is never guaranteed. As the access to basic needs is often used by smugglers to manipulate boys into a situation of dependency in order to get an opportunity of crossing, knowledge of the services available becomes crucial for the boys to not be forced to depend on smugglers. By providing information on where to obtain basic services, such as meals and tents, as well as medical services offered by NGOs, ECPAT seeks to make information available to boys so that they can access their rights without having to rely on informal networks where the risks of exploitation increase, including the risk of exposure to sexual exploitation.



THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY-BASED WORK AND OF A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE APPROACH

Protecting and supporting boys against sexual exploitation and abuse does not happen in a void. A large part of ECPAT's work involves working not only with the boys themselves, but also with the communities around them. In a cultural context as diverse as in Calais, communities are made up of groups of people from different nationalities and countries of origin who tend to stay close and live in the same informal camps. They consult and influence each other in the decisions and organisation of daily life in Calais, including the organisation of crossings to the UK. Communities can often act as a protective factor for boys, but they can also increase their exposure to risks. One of the first strategies employed by ECPAT is to **develop a presence within these communities.**

Even when the ECPAT France team is not providing direct services or engaging in conversations with children, they regularly visit the various living areas in Calais. The team then familiarises itself with various people, makes itself visible, increases recognition of team members, checks out the various needs and eventually puts the adults in touch with other service providers in Calais. This approach aims to build trust between the community and the team members, and is also essential for observing the dynamics within communities.

Observing these dynamics is crucial for the team to understand how to interact with boys in a way that is acceptable to the community, to identify which members of the community can be allies in protecting boys, and to recognise those who can have a negative impact. Using the concept of community-based protection becomes then an essential strategy to protect boys, as some members of the community are aware of cases or risks of sexual exploitation and abuse. Observations in the field are also cross-checked through an ongoing informal exchange of information with other organisations working with the different communities to better understand which members can play a potential child protection role.

“

If the community does not trust us, we cannot act

”

Working with communities and understanding their dynamics is also a necessary step in ensuring that the first contact with boys is as safe as possible, by maximising opportunities and creating “excuses” to get boys out of the camps, for example by accompanying them to medical check-ups or helping them to get clothing. It is important to note that some adults in the camps may be involved in the sexual exploitation and abuse of the boys, **using their power to exploit the financial constraints faced by the boys and their need to secure crossing to the UK.**

In some cases, the boys are actively pursued by the smugglers to operate the boats or recruit others for the journey, on the pretext that, as children, they will not be prosecuted. Often, adults in the community act as contact points for the smugglers.

By maintaining a presence within the community, observing the dynamics and cross-checking information with external sources if there are doubts about a particular individual, ECPAT France is able to identify potential risks. In some cases, because of the trust and good reputation established by ECPAT within the community, adults have brought newly arrived boys directly to the field team for a follow-up.

The possibility of interacting with communities varies according to specific groups. For example, there is evidence that Sudanese communities tend to stay longer in Calais before trying to cross, while Iraqi Kurds often organise their journeys among themselves. For the Vietnamese community, there is a widespread distrust within the community of the various organisations working in Calais, which makes it extremely difficult to build trust and connections. Among Syrians, there is a tendency to respect and listen to the advice of adults and the elderly of their community, even if they are not well known.

Certain adults can also play a crucial role in persuading the boys to seek shelter in places designated by the child protection services of the Pas-de-Calais department. Access to these premises allows the boys to enjoy five nights in a safe space, far from the dangerous conditions often found in camps, without having to worry about how to shower, how to get food, or how to protect their tent from eviction by the police.

“
The adults in the community
play a fundamental role in convincing
the boy to access the shelters
”

One of the key features of working with boys from diverse cultural backgrounds is that team members need to be mindful of different cultural sensitivities, **as this is a cornerstone for helping boys from diverse backgrounds**. This means that approaches and activities need to be adapted to suit different cultural contexts. For example, when asked to choose between various psychosocial activities, it was observed that boys from Sudan regularly expressed the importance of playing football, unlike other nationalities. As a result, ECPAT team members have adapted the range of activities to meet this demand.

Similarly, it is essential to adjust activities in line with religious and national celebrations. During Ramadan, for example, the ECPAT team changes the times and duration of its visits to the camps to maximise opportunities for encounters while respecting the boys' spiritual practices. By establishing a relationship of trust with the communities, the team members were also invited to various *iftars*, the meal at sunset that marks the end of fasting during the month of *Ramadan*. Knowing about the festivities of different nationalities and religions shows the boys that the team is aware of an important aspect of their culture. Being present at collective celebrations helps to strengthen bonds. According to the team members, these moments also strengthen the morale and unity of the front-line workers.

“

Sharing moments of joy like the iftars is important for us. It strengthens the team and the community too” Frontline

”

Frontline workers attach great importance to providing spaces where boys can freely express their faith, as religion is often an important aspect of their lives and can be one of the key factors in their decision to leave their countries of origin. Cultural mediators can help to deconstruct some ideas, such as referring to the Koran with Muslim boys to deconstruct stereotypes about the role of women in society, or pointing out that fasting during *Ramadan* can be postponed if living and feeding conditions are not ideal, as is often the case in Calais.

Overall, **showing knowledge of the boys' culture and language is common practice for team members.** For example, the ECPAT team has developed specific playlists for each community, including popular songs that are recognised and appreciated by boys. Over the years of working with the boys, the field team has come to understand that music is a powerful way of connecting with them. In addition, boys often find themselves far from home and sometimes have limited contact with their culture of origin for months or years, in a context that is often hostile towards them, which can lead to feelings of nostalgia. Therefore music provides an instant connection for them. Using playlists and songs when the team accompanies the boys to appointments or during car journeys makes the boys feel at ease and creates a bond with the team members, which shows that they are already exposed to their culture, that they are interested in learning more and that they are committed.

Another strategy adopted by the field team is to keep themselves informed about the cultural references and geopolitical issues relating to the boys' countries of origin. **Understanding the political and cultural context helps team members obtain information about what might happen to the boys' friends and family in their home country, what they might follow on social networks, and other key cultural references.** Relevant information may include the level of press freedom, the role of photography, human rights conditions and gender issues.

“

If a team member knows that a boy left Afghanistan a year ago, they can look at the political situation at the time to better understand and empathise with the boy's experiences

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Language also plays a crucial role in working with various cultures and nationalities. In fact, using and adapting the language used by frontline staff working with boys is useful in deconstructing some preconceived ideas that boys may have about the person in front of them, especially in a context where the authorities are often openly hostile. In addition, **using appropriate language helps to reduce power imbalances between frontline staff and boys.**

Trying as much as possible to communicate at the same level as the boys is necessary both in terms of principles and efficiency in the delivery of services. For example, over the years, specific slang has evolved among the various communities in Calais. ECPAT team members have learned some of these key terms, allowing them to communicate more equitably with the boys, showing that they know and respect cultural references. Even if they are not specific slang terms, **learning the key words of the different languages is a way of creating a bond with the boys, who appreciate the effort**, putting them at ease and increasing the chances of building a relationship of trust.

Work with the French Community in Calais

Sexual exploitation of children also involves adults (in general) and children of French nationality (particularly those supported by social services), who come into contact with the boys and girls in the camps. In particular, there have been reports of adults and locals entering the camps to sexually exploit and abuse boys. Young boys in the camps are exposed to local sexual exploitation networks operated by French citizens, who exploit the vulnerable situation of these boys in the camps.

In addition, ECPAT France teams have observed a trend where young French girls being monitored by state child protection services makes contact and forming relationships with boys in the camps, increasing the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse for both girls and boys. The ECPAT France team continues its observations in the field to understand when such relationships are formed, and warns boys and girls of the risks linked to the dynamics of the camps, providing all the information and warnings necessary to reduce the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse specific to such mixed contexts. Given the limited understanding of the dynamics of sexual exploitation and abuse among the various public stakeholders, ECPAT France undertakes advocacy, awareness-raising and capacity-building activities with local authorities to improve the protection of all children.

HUMAN RESOURCES AND KEY ATTITUDES

In terms of team structure, ECPAT France works to **maintain a gender balance among field staff**, as boys may feel more comfortable discussing different topics with a variety of people. Some perceptions among boys are shaped by gender norms, which often see women as more caring and attentive. Boys may find it easier to confide in a female social worker about violence and difficult experiences. However, when it comes to talking about feelings of nostalgia, concerns for their family or spiritual issues, boys may prefer to talk to a man of the same culture and religion. The ECPAT France team found that boys often recognise individual field workers rather than the organisation as a whole.

“
It's easier for a boy to say 'I'm tired'
to a woman than to a man.
”

In addition to ensuring a balanced gender structure, ECPAT France works to **ensure diversity in terms of country of origin and cultural background within its field team**. The field team consists of a mediator and a cultural mediator, a social mediator and a psychologist. This helps to create an instant connection with boys who share the same or a similar culture of origin, and ensures that the language component, which is crucial for building trust, an additional asset for the field team in delivering services to boys.

Regarding teamwork, the standard operating procedure is to **debrief at the end of each day**, sharing important information, warning points and follow-up points for the following day. ECPAT France's office in Calais has offices arranged in a circle, with an open space in the centre, encouraging the sharing of information and discussion of challenges encountered and successes achieved. The team continuously receives and systematises information about children, both through direct exchange and observation, as well as by sharing information with the authorities and other organisations working in the area. During field visits, the team always works in pairs and has safety plans, which can be activated in the event of a dangerous situation for team members or for the boys themselves.

Finally, members of the field team have access to external psychological support to discuss their workload and the various cases and situations linked to their professional life, in order to protect the team members' mental health in a context of direct and indirect pressure while guaranteeing ECPAT's professional integrity.

CONCLUSIONS

The accumulated experience of the ECPAT France team working with boys in the context of forced displacement and migration in Calais, France, provides important lessons and perspectives.

ECPAT France has to adapt to a volatile institutional and operational context. National, regional and local politics constantly influence service provision, with uncertainty over timescales and workloads depending on the number of people in Calais. Seasonality also plays a crucial role, with attempted crossings and the number of departures influenced by weather conditions, including specific problems such as flooding and extreme cold in winter, and high temperatures in summer. Over the years, the general reduction in donations and funding has also put additional pressure on the provision of services and the presence of NGOs in Calais.

In this context, ECPAT maintains a constant exchange of information with the organisations present in the area, reinforcing the proactive identification of children among the stakeholders. The organisations refer the boys directly to ECPAT and provide ECPAT contact cards that include pictures and names of the field team so that they can be recognised, as well as key information about ECPAT and the organisation's telephone number. The field team also uses telephone communications to keep in touch and reach all the boys who have been in contact with ECPAT.

The lessons learned from this case study highlight the importance of several factors to consider when working with boys facing issues of sexual abuse and exploitation in a context of forced displacement and migration. These include the importance of creating a bond with boys in unpredictable timescales, creating safe spaces within hostile and dangerous environments, and generating a sense of relaxation in boys to help them reclaim their place as children in the positive sense of the word.

In addition, the case study highlighted how to identify signs of sexual exploitation in boys, restoring a sense of individuality that reduces risky behaviour by sharing appropriate and clear information in an accountable and transparent way. Finally, the case study provides key insights into the importance of community-based work and a culturally sensitive approach for boys in a multicultural context such as Calais.

FIND OUT MORE

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about ECPAT France's work in France and Calais and about their approach and services, please visit:
<https://ecpat-france.fr/en/home/>

To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and ECPAT International's work on this issue worldwide, please visit:
<https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>

To learn from other practitioners around the world about their work with boys:
<https://ecpat.org/story/global-boys-initiative-case-studies/>



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