



COLLECTIVE ACTION

End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

West, Central, and North Africa

REGIONAL WORKSHOP

27-31 May 2024 Dakar, Senegal





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Disclaimer:

The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this report are those of the participating organisations and do not necessarily reflect the views of ECPAT International.

Designed by:

Manida Naebklang

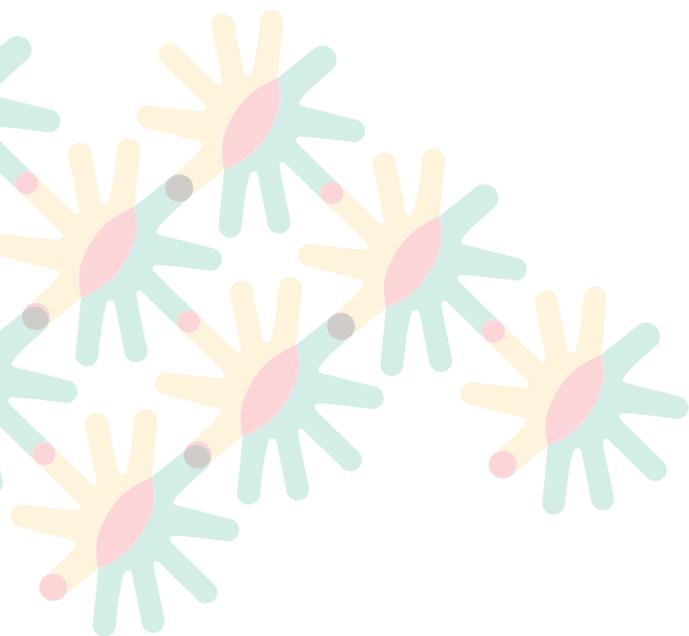
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INTRODUCTION



From May 27-31, 2024, ECPAT International, in collaboration with key partners, hosted the *Collective Action: End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Regional Workshop* in Saly, Senegal. This pivotal event gathered over 90 participants from more than 50 civil society organisations (CSOs) spanning 31 countries across Africa, including French, English, Arabic, and Portuguese-speaking regions. Attendees comprised representatives from the [ECPAT International](#) network, young women from the [She Leads](#) programme, [Safe Online](#) grantees, and international organisations. The workshop aimed to galvanise regional efforts to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse in West, Central, and North Africa.

In 2022, ECPAT's consultations with members and child protection actors highlighted an urgent need for CSOs in the region to enhance their expertise and adapt their

strategies in response to the evolving landscape of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The discussions underscored the necessity for CSOs to expand their knowledge, address gender norms influenced by societal values, and advocate for comprehensive prevention and response strategies. Building on this need, the workshop was meticulously crafted to foster partnerships, drive innovation, and bolster civil society networks across various sectors.

This report captures the rich insights, challenges, and promising practices shared during the workshop. It serves as a vital resource for guiding future actions and shaping a unified approach towards combatting child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the in the digital world.



AT A GLANCE: EMERGING TRENDS AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES

- 1. *Rise in Online Sexual Exploitation:*** The increasing use of technology has facilitated wider access to children by abusers, with peer-to-peer online sexual exploitation also on the rise.
- 2. *Ongoing Humanitarian Crises:*** Instability and humanitarian crises have led to displacement and school closures, placing children in more vulnerable situations, including sexual exploitation.
- 3. *Boys as Victims of Sexual Violence:*** Despite a notable increase in recognition and reporting of boys as victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, cases are often not taken seriously and addressed properly.
- 4. *Budgetary and Financing Constraints:*** While legal frameworks are in place in many countries, there is often a lack of budgeting and financial support for implementation, with many governments failing to allocate necessary resources.
- 5. *Role of Community-Based Approaches:*** Community-based approaches, including engaging new stakeholders like children and youth groups, have proven effective in addressing sexual exploitation but are not sufficiently valued and systematically implemented.
- 6. *Child Participation:*** Involving children in activities has been effective, though more needs to be done to ensure their meaningful participation.
- 7. *Collaborating with Traditional and Religious Leaders:*** Traditional and religious leaders hold significant influence in West African communities, making their engagement crucial for effective child protection efforts.
- 8. *Importance of Traditional and New Media:*** Utilising both traditional (radio, TV) and new media (online platforms) is critical for sensitising and educating communities on child sexual exploitation.
- 9. *Inconsistent Implementation of Laws:*** Despite strong child protection laws in place, significant gaps remain in their application across rural and marginalised areas. The decentralisation of policies, laws, and structures accessible at local level, especially in rural areas, is a significant problem across the region.
- 10. *Inter-Ministerial Collaborations:*** While good collaboration exists with Ministries of Social Affairs, engagement with other ministries remains limited and lacks leadership, affecting comprehensive policy implementation.
- 11. *Emergence of Sexual Extortion and Harmful Sexual Behaviours:*** New forms of child sexual exploitation, such as sexual extortion and harmful sexual behaviours among children (especially boys), are increasingly being documented and need targeted interventions.

THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

The thematic discussions at the Senegal Regional Workshop offered a deep dive into the complexities of combatting the sexual exploitation of children in today's rapidly evolving society. These discussions illuminated the multifaceted challenges and underscored the imperative for multi-pronged, innovative strategies to protect children. Here, we explore the main themes, including technology-facilitated sexual exploitation, sexual exploitation in humanitarian settings and travel and tourism contexts, the gender dimensions and causes of sexual exploitation, as well as the challenges in accessing justice for child victims. We delve into key findings from the workshop's discussions and outline strategic recommendations for each.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Findings:

The rapid evolution of technology has significantly heightened the risks of sexual exploitation of children online, a trend that necessitates urgent action. Effective responses require robust collaboration between CSOs, governments, and other stakeholders, including private sector actors, formal and non-formal systems, and traditional and religious actors, yet such synergy is currently lacking. Participants noted a widespread lack of awareness among parents and children about the dangers of online platforms. This was also evident among caregivers and service providers. Moreover, the

inadequacy of existing legal frameworks, which are often outdated and fail to address the complexities of online child sexual exploitation, coupled with the absence of reliable data on the prevalence and nature of this issue in the region, further complicates efforts to design effective interventions, with many key actors misunderstanding its extent and manifestation. Reporting mechanisms are either underutilised or poorly implemented, with inadequate follow-up from law enforcement and support services, thereby undermining trust and effectiveness.



Recommendations:

- **Enhance Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Establish effective and contextually-adapted mechanisms for collaboration between CSOs, governments, traditional and religious leaders, and the private sector, particularly tech companies, to create comprehensive and sustainable solutions with children.
- **Improve Support Mechanisms for Victims and Survivors:** Invest in the development of child-friendly, gender-sensitive, widely accessible and qualitative support systems that include reporting pathways. Ensure they are supported by effective law enforcement and child protection services and justice processes. Children should be meaningfully and regularly involved in evaluating these systems to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.
- **Capacity Development for Stakeholders:** Strengthen the capacities of all stakeholders, including CSOs, law enforcement, and the justice system, to understand and address online child sexual exploitation effectively. This includes training on digital evidence handling and the unique needs of victims of online exploitation.
- **Strengthen Educational Efforts on Technology Risks:** Governments and stakeholders should prioritise regular education and awareness-raising initiatives on the dangers of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation. Schools, parents, caregivers, and children must be equipped with the knowledge to recognise risks and be aware of existing protection mechanisms and how to use them.
- **Focus on Data Collection, Analysis and Utilisation:** Address the current data deficit across by establishing comprehensive data collection mechanisms that inform both advocacy and programming efforts and better utilisation of existing data. This data should be used to adjust and design interventions that are responsive to current trends.
- **Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Implementation:** Governments should prioritise updating and particularly enforcing laws to address online child sexual exploitation. This includes ensuring that laws are adaptable to the rapidly evolving nature of technology, contextually appropriate and locally understood.



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Findings:

In West and Central Africa, the sexual exploitation of children in humanitarian settings is a pervasive and complex issue, exacerbated by the region's ongoing conflicts, migration, climate change, and displacement crises. In these situations, both girls and boys face heightened risks of sexual exploitation.

Girls seem to be especially at risk during their journeys or in refugee camps and internally displaced persons communities, where they may be coerced into exchanging sex for food, water, or safety. Boys, on the other hand, are often recruited by armed groups and exploited in various ways, including sexual abuse linked to their roles as children affected by armed forces. The ongoing conflict in the Sahel region has pushed young people, mostly boys, onto dangerous migration routes toward Europe via Morocco and Algeria, where many have suffered various forms of abuse, including sexual exploitation, all along their journey. Additionally, sexual abuse perpetrated by those meant to protect them, such as international and local humanitarian workers and peacekeepers, is a still significant issue, with

many benefiting from impunity due to limited reporting and weak accountability mechanisms.

The lack of essential services and adequate capacities in transit, internally displaced, and refugee areas, coupled with the absence of child-friendly disclosure and reporting opportunities, leaves many sexually exploited children without the support they need. The situation is further complicated by the normalisation of violence within displaced communities, where traditional social structures are often disrupted, leading to increased vulnerability factors among children. Despite some community-based initiatives, there remains a significant gap in effective prevention and response mechanisms due to inadequate resources, outdated or poorly implemented laws, and a general lack of data on the prevalence and forms of child sexual exploitation in these settings. The unique challenges of addressing child sexual exploitation in the region call for more coordinated efforts between local communities, governments, and international actors to protect children from sexual exploitation in these contexts.



Recommendations:

- **Enhance Collaboration with Local Communities:** Work closely with local leaders, including traditional and religious figures, as well as the formal and non-formal private sector, to mobilise and support community-based and community-led prevention efforts and protective mechanisms for girl and boy victims while ending social tolerance towards the offenders. Engaging local actors who understand the contexts is crucial for creating effective interventions that resonate with the affected populations.
- **Focus on Child-Friendly Support Services:** Develop and implement accessible, child-friendly and gender-sensitive support mechanisms that can ease safe and protective disclosure and reporting. This should be accompanied by the provision of psychological support and other essential services tailored to the rights of children, ensuring that they are safe and supported throughout the chain of services they access.
- **Invest in Preventive Training:** Prioritise the capacity development of local communities and civil society actors before a crisis occurs. This includes training on child protection, establishing multi-sectoral protection strategies, and supporting communities to be prepared to respond effectively when crises arise.
- **Improve Water, Sanitation, Food Security and Livelihoods Infrastructure in Displacement Settings:** Displacement contexts in North, Central, and West Africa heighten the exposure of children to risks of sexual exploitation, particularly young girls, due to a lack of privacy, limited subsistence means and access to basic needs. Internally displaced families often struggle to access clean water and sanitation, resulting in young girls facing risks of sexual exploitation when collecting water. Additionally, organisations on the ground have noted instances where internally displaced people have been forced into sex in exchange for food aid. To address these risks, enhancing water supply and sanitation facilities, and ensuring reliable food security and livelihood options are essential steps to protect displaced children, especially girls, from sexual exploitation.
- **Integrate Child Sexual Exploitation Prevention in Humanitarian Response Plans and Work Across Sectors:** Work with governments to ensure that child sexual exploitation prevention and responses are integrated into national humanitarian response plans. This should include clear guidelines on protecting girls and boys from risks of sexual exploitation in crisis situations, adequate budgetary allocations, and the mainstreaming of child protection and sexual exploitation interventions across sectors.
- **Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms:** Advocate for the establishment of robust reporting and accountability mechanisms, within humanitarian organisations and peacekeeping missions and in communities, to ensure that perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are held accountable. This includes introducing clear codes of conduct, regular monitoring, complaint mechanisms that are accessible and trusted, and transparent investigative processes.



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN TRAVEL, TRANSPORT AND TOURISM

Findings:

The sexual exploitation of children in travel, transport and tourism is a growing and multifaceted issue in the region, driven in part by major power imbalances, social tolerance, and impunity of offenders. Some unregulated forms of tourism, such as voluntourism with children, community tourism, and the rise of informal accommodation platforms, pose significant threats to children's right to live free from violence and sexual exploitation.

When it comes to volunteer opportunities facilitated by tourism companies, religious missions, or other organisations, many are unregulated and frequently lack proper oversight and child safeguarding measures, further exacerbating these risks. Similarly, the informal nature of various tourism arrangements, including transport sector services, makes it difficult to protect children, with unregulated spaces increasing the risks of exploitation. Business and congress travel or seasonal and migrant work, such as extractive work in mines or in agriculture, can result in negative impacts on children living in local communities, if no protection measures are in place.

The expansion of digital technologies has further complicated the landscape, enabling tourists—whether foreign or domestic—to connect directly with local communities, thus heightening children's vulnerability to exploitation. Local intermediaries, such as informal transport and accommodation providers, often facilitate these interactions, connecting children with tourists in remote or poorly regulated or monitored settings. The increasing normalisation of sexualised behaviour

mirrored in unregulated online platforms and social media has amplified the risks, especially for children in local communities with limited awareness of risks of sexual exploitation, including through online interactions.

A major challenge lies in the lack of strong governmental engagement and regulations of the travel, tourism and transport industry, with governments often unable to keep pace with rapidly evolving trends which proliferate in contexts of economic disparities, harmful social norms and local practices. Gaps in child protection regulations also continue to persist, including inadequate age verification when children travel alone or check into accommodations, including both hotels and private accommodations. Where child protection laws and regulations exist, it has been observed that there tends to be limited enforcement. The regulatory measures should be coupled with social action, to ensure that the responsibility of the state is complemented with local capacities, increased awareness, prevention efforts, monitoring and reporting.

Although reporting hotlines for cases of sexual exploitation are operational in a number of countries, their use by children remains limited, partly due to a lack of awareness and trust in the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Child rights-oriented collaboration between CSOs, governments, and the private sector is urgently needed to address these challenges and adequately protect children from sexual exploitation within the travel and tourism sector.

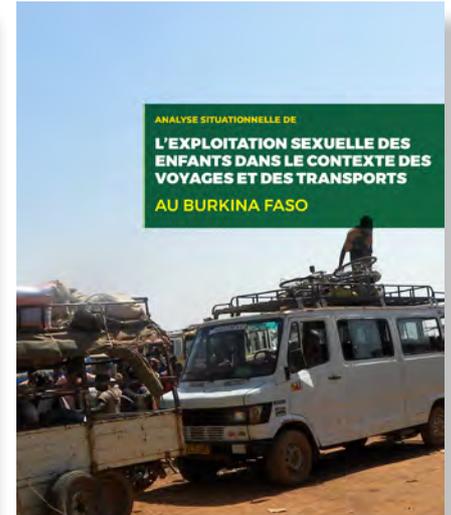


Recommendations:

- **Engage and Regulate the Private Sector:** Collaborate with digital platforms such as Airbnb and Booking.com and social media companies to identify and monitor key risk indicators, such as specific search terms or behaviours that suggest a risk of child sexual exploitation. Governments should work with these companies to enforce stricter age verification and accessible reporting mechanisms.
- **Increase Private Sector Commitment and Action:** Business across the sectors, such as travel and tourism, transport, or finance, can play a positive role in preventing the sexual exploitation of children. Civil society organisations, which can amplify children's voices and perspectives on the local impact of business activities, are vital partners in this effort. [The Code](#), along with its local partners, can support businesses in identifying risks, conducting due diligence, and taking action to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation of children.
- **Strengthen Regulation and Oversight of Voluntourism:** Governments should implement stricter regulations for organisations hosting volunteers, especially those coming through unregulated channels, including business tourism packages or religious missions. This includes requiring child safeguarding policies and procedures from host organisations, and background checks for all volunteers who should be skilled professionals prepared in advance in order to engage in any activities with children.
- **Enhance Data Collection and Monitoring:** Improve data collection, including on the number of volunteers and tourists entering the country, and those using informal accommodations, or engaging in voluntourism activities, to take proactive measures to protect children.
- **Raise Public Awareness and Mobilise Community Action:** Launch targeted awareness campaigns to inform local communities and children and equip them with knowledge about the risks of sexual exploitation. Encourage local communities to report suspicious activities, proactively report cases, and disrupt risks of offending.
- **Strengthen CSO Capacity and Collaboration:** CSOs should work in coalitions, such as ECPAT, to enhance their technical capacity to engage effectively with the private sector and governments. This includes advocating for stronger regulations and providing specialised support in addressing sexual exploitation.
- **Promote Peer-to-Peer Counselling and Engagement with Children:** Develop peer-to-peer counselling initiatives to support children who may be exploited in transactional sex or other forms of sexual violence, and empower youth to advocate for change within their communities. This approach can help in early identification and prevention of sexual exploitation.
- **Strengthen Support Mechanisms and Improve Reporting Hotlines and Helplines:** Governments and CSOs should work together to ensure services and support mechanisms can protect victims and survivors and promote the use of existing reporting hotlines and helplines for cases of sexual exploitation in travel and tourism contexts, including when facilitated by technology. This includes building trust in these mechanisms and ensuring they are accessible and responsive.

Promising Practices from Members:

- **Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Niger:** Partners carried out country-specific research on the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and transport. The studies aimed to document local knowledge, assess current practices, and identify localised responses to the issue. Click [here](#) to read the report – available in English, French, and Spanish.
- **Kenya and Uganda:** ECPAT members from both countries are actively working to regulate voluntourism activities to protect children from the risks of sexual exploitation. Their efforts include advocating with governments, engaging businesses and relevant stakeholders, as well targeted campaigning initiatives.



ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Findings:

Discussions on access to justice for child victims of sexual exploitation in North, West and Central Africa highlighted significant challenges rooted in gender biases, distrust in formal justice systems, and the coexistence of traditional and customary practices, which are at times ill-adapted to deal with cases of sexual exploitation of girls and boys. Gender-sensitive barriers were evident, with boys often overlooked as victims and girls still facing stigma and disbelief or blame for their victimisation.

Additionally, formal justice systems are frequently inaccessible or untrusted, especially in rural areas where customary justice prevails. Procedural obstacles such as corruption, lengthy court processes, lack of child-centric practices, and inadequate support mechanisms further

impede victims' ability to seek and obtain justice. There is also a critical need for integrating traditional, customary, and formal justice systems, enhancing community engagement, and providing specialised support throughout legal proceedings to ensure that the justice process is fair, accessible, and tailored to the rights and unique needs of child victims.

Ultimately, the effectiveness and accountability of the justice system lies in the experiences of children in contact with its procedures. For child victims of sexual exploitation, their best interests must come first—above bureaucratic and procedural hurdles—with services that are accessible and tailored to their specific needs.



Recommendations:

- **Enhance Accessibility and Child-Centric Practices in Legal Proceedings:** Reform court procedures to be more accessible and centred around the rights of the children involved. This includes, among others, providing free legal support, using child-friendly language and settings, minimising delays, ensuring separate environments for children to report abuse, and covering associated costs. Such measures will reduce barriers to accessing justice and legal remedies and make the process less intimidating for young victims.
- **Remove Statutes of Limitations for Sexual Crimes Against Children:** Access to justice and legal remedies should be ensured for survivors of child sexual exploitation who decide to disclose and report later in life. By removing procedural barriers such as statutes of limitations for sexual crimes against children, legal systems can ensure that perpetrators are held accountable regardless of how much time has passed, and survivors are granted the right to seek justice and legal remedies on their own terms.
- **Implement Continuous Contextually-Adapted, Evidence-Based, Gender-Sensitive, and Trauma-Informed Training for All Justice Professionals and Actors:** Justice professionals (including magistrates, prosecutors, lawyers, law enforcement personnel, social workers and those assigned to work where children are deprived of their liberty) should receive mandatory and comprehensive training at the beginning of their recruitment and throughout their service. Trainings should focus on child-centric/survivor-centric practices and also be aimed at addressing and mitigating gender biases, ensuring that all child victims are recognised, believed, and treated with equal seriousness and not stigmatised or blamed for their victimisation. Commendable examples in the region – such as the incorporation of mandatory training on child protection in the national curriculum of law enforcement academies in Burkina Faso, Senegal and Togo – should be enhanced, amplified and used as examples by other countries in North, West, and Central Africa and beyond.
- **Ensure Collaborations and Referrals Between Customary, Traditional and Formal Justice Systems to Deal with Cases of Child Sexual Exploitation:** Develop or build on existing frameworks that facilitate collaboration between traditional/customary and formal justice systems. By bridging these systems, communities can trust and engage with the formal justice process more effectively, ensuring that local contexts and cultural practices are respected while upholding the best interests of the child.
- **Combat Corruption and Enhance Transparency in the Justice System:** Implement robust anti-corruption measures and promote transparency within the justice system. Ensuring that cases are handled impartially and without undue influence will build trust among victims and the broader community, facilitating more effective and fair justice delivery.
- **Strengthen Community Engagement and Support Networks:** Engage community and traditional or religious leaders and local support networks in advocating for and supporting child victims of sexual exploitation. Educating communities about the importance of justice and providing platforms for victims to report abuse can foster a more supportive environment and encourage victims to seek justice.
- **Promote Continuous Victim Support:** Ensure that child victims receive ongoing support throughout the legal process. Assigning advocates or support persons to accompany them, providing emotional and psychological assistance, and ensuring their voices are heard and respected in all proceedings can contribute to mitigating the trauma associated with legal actions and promote healing. Notwithstanding the importance of victim's support, national systems should be re-vamped to ensure support services are available to children even when a formal report has not been made.

Promising Practices from Members:

- *Cabo Verde*: Established four child-friendly centres across different islands within judiciary police stations to facilitate testimony collection and address challenges faced by child victims during court proceedings.



KEY FINDINGS

CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

“*The best way I think girls and young women can be included in conversations like this... is where everyone has equal opportunity to share their experiences and what they're faced with in their country like what we are doing.*”

– Miatta Zeorgar, representative of She Leads

Child and youth participation emerged as a core theme during the discussions, with participants emphasising the importance of involving children and young people in decisions that affect their lives. It was noted that meaningful participation not only empowers children, but also leads to more effective and sustainable initiatives. Participants discussed various strategies for enhancing child and youth participation, highlighting the need for safe spaces, supportive environments, and capacity-development initiatives that enable young people to voice their concerns safely and ensure they have an audience who is ready to be influenced to contribute to the development of policies and programmes. Participating CSOs shared promising practices such as organisation, community or school-based child/youth clubs/councils and reference groups, survivor-led or child-led groups and child-friendly safe spaces and recovery centres for victims of sexual violence.

Participants also identified several challenges in their efforts to engage children and young people, including:

- Navigating cultural sensitivities and taboos that make discussing issues like sexual exploitation with children difficult.
- Adulthood—where limiting stereotypes and assumptions about childhood and children's capacities prevent meaningful conversations.
- Insufficient financial and human resources and capacities to effectively plan and implement meaningful child participation.
- Safeguarding and ethical concerns when involving children in sensitive discussions.
- Ensuring diversity and inclusivity, particularly in reaching younger children, children with disabilities, and those in marginalised areas.

“*Children don't speak policy. So how do we as civil society organisations bring the voices of children into political spaces? How can we translate their ideas into policy-influencing messages?*”

The young women who participated in the workshop also raised challenges they face in sharing their views:

- Their opinions are often not considered, leaving them feeling undervalued and demotivated.
- Engagement is typically limited to one-off events, lacking sustained, meaningful involvement.
- There are few platforms available for them to participate.
- Many of their peers are unaware of their right to participate and the platforms available to express their views.

– Timothy Ekesa, Executive Director,
Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children

EXAMINING THE GENDER DIMENSION OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

In the region, deeply ingrained attitudes, beliefs and taboos surrounding sexuality, gender-related issues, and homophobia continue to hinder efforts to prevent and respond to the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls and boys. Despite growing awareness of the specific risks that girls face on issues of gender-based violence, girls still contend with stigma, victim-blaming attitudes and discrimination. Power imbalances and limited control over girls' bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health place them in situations of increased vulnerability, often resulting in underreporting of abuse and exploitation.

Meanwhile, awareness around the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys remains limited, even though it is widely recognised as a child protection issue that disproportionately affects boys on the move, street-connected boys, those involved in child labour (across different settings), and boys associated with armed forces

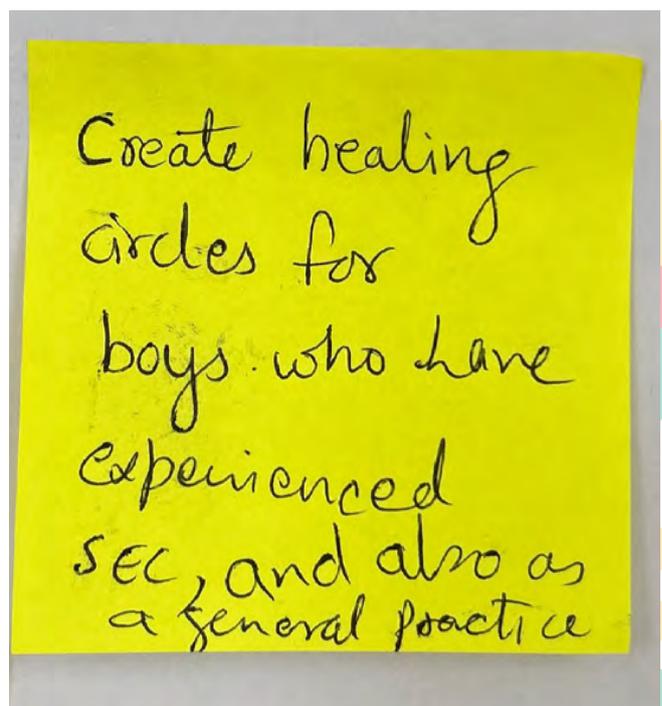
and groups. Taboos and problematic legal frameworks around homosexuality, coupled with the fear of reprisals, contribute to gender-blind and ill-adapted prevention and response services. Additionally, work around the deconstruction of harmful masculinities and understanding how these affect boys' capacity to seek help, explore their sexuality and form consensual relationships with peers is still underdeveloped.

The workshop provided an opportunity to reflect more on the role of power, taboos and gender norms in perpetuating child sexual exploitation. Participants identified opportunities to rethink current approaches to community engagement and advocacy activities, with a consensus on the need to strengthen the internal capacity of CSOs to better understand the interconnectedness between these issues and formulate awareness-raising messages that could actively challenge taboos and biases.

Reflection Activity: Tree of Collective Action

One of the workshop's impactful moments was the creation of the Tree of Collective Action, a group reflection activity which invited each participant to contribute one key action they plan to take to ensure gender-sensitive child protection and enhance the protection of both boys and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse, recognising the gender differences and gendered needs of both.

This symbolic tree grew with every contribution, becoming a living testament to the collective will for change. It served as both a reminder and a call to action—highlighting the small yet impactful measures we can take to create lasting change in the lives of child survivors, including boys.



LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND SOCIAL NORMS

The effectiveness of legal frameworks is often undermined by deeply ingrained local social norms that conflict with formal legal protections for children. Discussions highlighted the need for legal reforms that are contextually sensitive, gender-aware, and child-centric, as well as the importance of community engagement in implementing these laws effectively.

Insufficient Protection for Boys: In many countries, laws are mostly designed to protect girls specifically, which can lead to gaps in protection for boys. For example, laws around the age of sexual consent often only consider girls, which affects the reporting and prosecution of cases involving boy victims or survivors.

Conflict Between Formal and Traditional Customary Justice Systems: Traditional customary justice systems, often shaped by local and social norms, can sometimes conflict with formal legal frameworks. These systems might handle cases through customary laws, which can result in practices like forced marriages to the offender or other forms of double victimisation for children.

Influence of Social Norms on Disclosure and Reporting: Social norms within communities can affect the willingness of victims and their families to disclose and report cases of sexual exploitation. In some cases, there is a lack of understanding about what constitutes sexual exploitation, and disclosure and reporting is often discouraged due to fear of social repercussions or damage to the child victim and family reputation.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Community engagement and support were identified as crucial elements in effectively addressing child sexual exploitation and improving access to justice for child victims. Participants emphasised that local communities play a pivotal role in both preventing and responding to incidents of sexual exploitation. Effective community engagement involves not only informing and mobilising community members but also fostering a supportive environment where girl and boy victims and their families feel safe and empowered to seek help and are not stigmatised or blamed. The discussions highlighted the need for community-based approaches that integrate traditional practices with effective child protection frameworks to create more holistic and contextually adapted solutions.

Integrated Community Approaches: Successful community engagement strategies often involve a blend of formal and informal systems. For instance, in **Burkina Faso**, efforts have been made to integrate traditional justice systems with formal legal frameworks to address cases of child sexual exploitation. This approach ensures that community norms and practices are respected while also adhering to formal legal standards.

Community-Based Reporting and Action: In **Niger**, a notable community-based approach has been implemented involving clubs of fathers and traditional leaders. This initiative focuses on encouraging the reporting of child sexual exploitation cases and ensuring that appropriate actions are taken post-reporting.

COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL SYSTEMS

The collaboration between formal child protection systems and informal, community-based mechanisms is critical for effective prevention and protection of children. Participants stressed the need to harmonise and facilitate collaboration between these systems to ensure that all children, regardless of their location or background, have access to justice and protection.

Harmonising Plural Legal Systems: Integrating formal legal frameworks with customary justice systems can help ensure that child protection laws are respected and enforced at the community level.

Role of Traditional Leaders: Traditional and religious leaders often play a significant role in customary justice systems. Their collaboration with formal processes can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of child protection efforts.

Community Engagement: Communities play a critical role in shaping attitudes and practices that can prevent or perpetuate harmful behaviours and practices. Collaborating and engaging with community actors, including caregivers and children, is a necessity to address the structural drivers of the sexual exploitation of girls and boys.

COLLABORATION AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The importance of capacity strengthening and multi-sectoral collaboration emerged as central themes in the discussions on enhancing child protection efforts. Effective child protection strategies hinge on robust collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, CSOs, and community groups, including children and young people. Such partnerships are essential for preventing violence and challenging harmful behaviours and practices, mobilising resources, developing comprehensive strategies, and delivering services that are both effective and sustainable. However, challenges in coordinating efforts and aligning priorities across different sectors can impede progress. To overcome these challenges, a focus on skills and capacities development, resource allocation, and leveraging technology is necessary.

Duplication of Initiatives and Programmes: With many CSOs working in isolation, this leads to duplication of initiatives which may hinder the effectiveness of programme implementation.

Resource Constraints: Many organisations face significant challenges due to limited resources, which hampers their ability to respond effectively to cases of child sexual exploitation.



SHE LEADS' GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN LEAD THE CHARGE FOR CHANGE



“ We are not only here to talk to you people, we are not only here to read beautifully for you to listen, but for you to implement. ”

– Josephine Ngegba, representative of She Leads

Four young women from West Africa (Mali, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone), representing the She Leads programme, attended the Regional Workshop in Senegal to present the experiences of their peers facing online child sexual exploitation, and to call for urgent action to addressing this growing crisis.

She Leads is a joint initiative led by Plan International Netherlands, ECPAT International, Defence for Children – ECPAT the Netherlands (DCI-ECPAT), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), and Terre des Hommes the Netherlands (TdH-NL). Running from 2021-2025, the programme aims to increase sustained influence of girls and young women on decision-making and the transformation of gender norms in formal and informal institutions.

In 2023, members of the She Leads Advisory Board, composed of girls and young women themselves, initiated a youth-led research project focused on online sexual exploitation, cyberbullying, and cybercrime targeting girls and young women in Africa. Conducted across seven countries, the research sought to understand the rising online risks youth face, particularly post-COVID, when internet use surged. Through surveys, they gathered crucial insights into the experiences of girls and young women, the impacts of online crimes, and their views on the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions.



During the Senegal Regional Workshop, these young leaders delivered a compelling call to action, urging collective efforts at all levels to protect girls and young women in digital spaces. Their recommendations focused on:
 To National Governments and Regional and International Institutions:

- Provide appropriate training to law enforcement bodies to enhance their understanding of sexual exploitation cases and strengthen laws and their implementation to provide better legal protection for victims and ensure efficient justice implementation.
- Promote digital literacy and safety among girls and young women, equipping them with the tools to navigate online spaces securely.
- Established safe spaces where girls and young women can report exploitation, access support services, and engage in empowerment activities. These spaces should offer confidentiality and a supportive environment for survivors to heal and rebuild their lives.
- Create safe employment opportunities for young women, providing them with economic independence and reducing their vulnerability to exploitation. These opportunities should be regulated to ensure safe working conditions and fair wages.

To Civil Society Organisations:

- Fight stigma, discrimination, and speak out on child sexual exploitation issues, contributing to a collective effort to combat exploitation.
- Promote cultural and societal change to challenge harmful norms and attitudes towards gender and sexuality, fostering an environment where victims feel safe to speak out and seek help.
- Launch vast public awareness campaigns to educate communities about the signs of commercial sexual exploitation on children, children's rights and the importance of reporting and intercepting cases of suspected exploitation.
- Increase funding for the implementation of policies and initiatives to support the efforts to fight child sexual exploitation
- CSOs and girls and young women are urged to equip themselves with knowledge on policies to advocate, defend and protect girls and young women against child sexual exploitation.

To the Community (parents, local leader, teachers):

- Prioritise open communication with girls, creating a safe environment for reporting and supportive environment for victims and survivors.
- Sensitisation of members of the community on child sexual exploitation and abuse issues and promote the community-driven solutions.

Click [here](#) to download the full Call to Action.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we look to the future, it's crucial to focus on innovative approaches that can create lasting change in the fight against the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, while ensuring that CSOs have the resources and capacity to continue their critical work.

The following components offer a roadmap for addressing current challenges, leveraging creative partnerships, expanding funding streams, and strengthening data collection systems to enhance protection efforts across sectors and communities.

INTEGRATING GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY DIMENSIONS IN CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Workshop discussions reinforced that the gender dimensions of child sexual exploitation are still significantly under addressed in the region. Much work is still needed to challenge harmful gender and social norms associated with masculinities and the sexual exploitation of boys. There is also a critical need to address the lack of gender-sensitive services and tailored interventions.

Moreover, effective prevention and response efforts can no longer overlook the growing impact of online and technology-facilitated forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. These forms are increasingly intertwined with in-person sexual abuse and exploitation. To combat this, it is essential to collect up-to-date data and research on emerging trends, practices, and interventions that can be contextually adapted in local child protection systems, as well as transnationally, given the cross-border nature of the online and migration trends.

Nigeria:

Action Against Child Sexual Abuse Initiative (ACSAI) partnered with Snapchat in conducting a survey to gather feedback on the digital experiences of Nigerian youth (Boys and Girls), contributing valuable insights into the fight against online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ghana:

UNICEF Ghana and The Nubian Foundation have both advocated for the strategic integration of child online protection into a system-strengthening approach to tackle online and offline manifestations of violence. For UNICEF Ghana, engaging CSOs has been key to mobilising nationwide support for awareness raising campaigns and empowering children, caregivers and practitioners to keep ensure child safety online. Building on their collaboration with The Nubian Foundation, UNICEF Ghana underscored the importance of multi-sectoral and cross-sectoral coordination, which successfully led to the establishment of essential pieces of legislation and institutional frameworks.



INNOVATION IN PARTNERSHIPS

While there are ongoing efforts to build partnerships with the private sector, participants emphasised the importance of also reaching the informal sector, which is often overlooked but vital in local economies. By working with informal networks, awareness can be raised at the community level where traditional approaches may not penetrate.

Burkina Faso:

In Burkina Faso, a partnership was formed with a fish distribution company to raise awareness about child sexual exploitation within the local supply chain, effectively reaching informal sector workers and local communities.



DIVERSIFICATION OF FUNDING

Expanding funding sources beyond traditional government and business channels is essential for the sustainability of CSOs, and can include engaging religious institutions, as well as seeking faith-based funding.

Sierra Leone:

During COVID-19, a Child Rights Consortium in partnership with UNICEF developed a guidance that expanded beyond security and health issues, leading to new funding made available for NGOs.



STRENGTHENING DATA COLLECTION SYSTEMS

Robust data collection is essential for understanding the full scope of child sexual exploitation and abuse and for implementing effective, targeted interventions.

Throughout the workshop, participants highlighted concerns about the lack of reliable data on child sexual exploitation and abuse in North, West, and Central Africa, emphasising the need for more comprehensive and disaggregated data collection systems. Strengthening collaborations with stakeholders, including educational institutions and grassroots organisations, was identified as a key strategy for addressing these gaps and building more resilient data collection frameworks.

Ghana:

In Ghana, the Hope Education Project partnered with the University of Texas (Austin) to add disaggregated data on the sexual exploitation of children in prostitution to the Walk Free Index.

Morocco:

ECPAT member AMANE partnered with the University of Rabat to build a data collection system with disaggregated data on child sexual exploitation.



CONCLUSION

Participants at the Senegal Regional Workshop highlighted the importance of partnerships and networking as key outcomes, with many expressing that the event helped them strengthen connections with other organisations across the region. The thematic discussions were particularly well-received, contributing to an increase in participants' knowledge of child-centred and safeguarding approaches. Participants also expressed that they planned to apply what they learned in their work, underscoring the importance of collaboration, continuous learning, and adapting strategies to effectively combat child sexual exploitation in an ever-evolving landscape.

The Senegal Regional Workshop stands as a crucial step in our shared journey towards a future where all children are protected from sexual exploitation. The ideas and strategies discussed here pave the way for future action grounded in collaboration, innovation, and the experiences of those most affected. With these collective insights and a united commitment, we can continue to build a safer and more just world for every child.



ABOUT ECPAT INTERNATIONAL:

ECPAT International stands as a united front of over 120 civil society organisations spread across more than 100 nations, each passionately committed to the shared vision of eradicating the sexual exploitation of children. Harnessing the power of over three decades of experience in multi-stakeholder engagement and partnership management, our expansive network operates on national, regional, and global levels. We relentlessly drive forward, fuelled by the conviction that every child deserves a world free from sexual exploitation.

ABOUT SAFE ONLINE:

Safe Online is the only global investment vehicle dedicated to keeping children safe in the digital world. With a focus on innovative solutions and research, Safe Online collaborates with partners to address digital threats and shape a safer digital world for all children and young people. Since 2017, Safe Online has invested nearly US\$100 million in over 100 projects with impact in more than 85 countries; it has also received substantial funding in the Southeast Asia region with 20 projects for over US\$ 20 million.

ABOUT ECPAT FRANCE:

ECPAT France began as a campaign in 1992 and was officially registered as an organisation in 1997. Groupe Développement, the principal member, provides the resources to carry out the activities of the organisation. These activities aim to raise awareness of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, train key actors, improve French laws and their implementation and support projects for children. Several activities also focus on preventing child sex tourism, and many links have been developed with tourism professionals in this regard.

ABOUT ECPAT LUXEMBOURG:

Established in 1995, ECPAT Luxembourg develops projects to combat the sexual exploitation of children in the following three regions of the world: Europe, West Africa and South Asia. ECPAT Luxembourg is officially recognised as a non-governmental organisation by Luxembourg's Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and is placed under the High Patronage of Her Royal Highness the Grand-Duchesse who was present at the first World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children organised in Stockholm in 1996.

ABOUT SHE LEADS:

She Leads is a joint programme from Plan International Netherlands, ECPAT International, Defence for Children – ECPAT the Netherlands (DCI-ECPAT), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), and Terre des Hommes the Netherlands (TdH-NL). The She Leads consortium, which runs from 2021-2025, aims to increase sustained influence of girls and young women on decision-making and the transformation of gender norms in formal and informal institutions.

ABOUT ASSOCIATION DES JURISTES SÉNÉGALAISES:

The Association of Senegalese Lawyers was founded in July 1974. Its members include law professors, magistrates, lawyers, bailiffs, notaries, labor inspectors, legal advisors and law PhD students. The organization has made an effective contribution to the development of law in general and the promotion of women and children in particular in Senegal.

