



**COLLECTIVE
ACTION** End Child Sexual
Exploitation
and Abuse

Europe

REGIONAL WORKSHOP

30 September to 3 October 2024 in
Vienna, Austria



MEETING
DESTINATION
VIENNA

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Bread for the world.

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:

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INTRODUCTION



The Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children in the Europe Regional Workshop, held from 30 September to 3 October 2024 in Vienna, brought together an exceptional group of forty-nine stakeholders from thirty countries united by a shared commitment to protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse. Hosted by ECPAT International, the workshop convened a diverse range of participants, including ECPAT members, partners, civil society organisations and child rights advocates.

The workshop aimed to address the urgent and complex challenges associated with combating child sexual exploitation and abuse in Europe, a region facing heightened risks due to evolving migration patterns, technological advancements, and systemic inequities. Participants engaged in dynamic plenary sessions, thematic working groups, and expert panels, exploring critical issues such as the vulnerabilities children face on the move, the dual role of technology in facilitating and preventing sexual exploitation, and the importance of survivor-centred justice systems.

Throughout the workshop, emphasis was placed on identifying systemic barriers to adequate child protection and collaboratively developing actionable strategies to overcome them. The discussions ranged from procedural barriers within

legal frameworks to the role of cultural and societal norms in perpetuating harm. Participants shared local experiences, highlighted successful practices, and proposed innovative approaches to tackling shared challenges.

This report consolidates the insights, outcomes, and future directions emerging from the workshop. It is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of key themes, including the voices of survivors, procedural and systemic barriers to justice, the role of law enforcement, and the importance of engaging the private sector. The report also highlights the collective learning and collaboration fostered during the workshop, offering a roadmap for strengthening child protection systems across the region.

At its core, the workshop reaffirmed the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse. It called for a commitment to survivor-centred, data-driven, and culturally sensitive interventions. By bringing together a diverse array of expertise and perspectives, the workshop underscored the collective responsibility of all stakeholders to ensure that every child is protected from harm and that no child is left behind.



KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOP

The workshop brought together a diverse range of stakeholders to delve into the pressing issues surrounding child sexual exploitation and abuse. Through rich dialogue and collaborative analysis, participants identified key insights that reflect the realities faced by children across the region. These insights provide a foundation for addressing systemic gaps and informing future interventions to safeguard children's rights and well-being.

Migrant Children and Cross-Border Vulnerabilities

“Children are humiliated, blackmailed, and this is an additional exploitation on top of the physical one they experienced.”

- Participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina

The ongoing migration of unaccompanied children, particularly boys, towards and within Europe significantly exposes them to sexual exploitation. National protection systems often do not address their unique vulnerabilities and needs, with a lack of coordinated case management across borders, without consideration for the child's life project. The absence of harmonised responses leaves these children without sufficient support, creating gaps in care that traffickers and exploiters can exploit.

Migration Policy Versus Child Protection

“The route is very quick; one minute they are here, and one minute they are gone.”

- Participant from Slovenia

The European Union's migration policies often prioritise political objectives over child protection and the rights and best interests of unaccompanied minors. This imbalance has profound implications for children on the move, who are frequently treated as part of broader migration management strategies rather than as individuals needing specialised protection. The workshop discussions stressed the critical need to re-centre child rights in migration policy frameworks.

Gender Dynamics in Technology Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation

Gender dynamics in the technology facilitated sexual exploitation of children remain a pressing issue. Boys and girls face distinct challenges in accessing services, disclosing their experiences, and benefiting from prevention and response measures tailored to their needs. The discussions emphasised the need for greater support to address these gender-specific barriers, ensuring that interventions effectively meet the diverse needs of all children.

Neglect and Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation

Children left behind by migrating parents face increased risks of neglect and exposure to harm. This vulnerability is compounded by the surge in technology-facilitated sexual exploitation, which infiltrates both school and family environments. The discussions highlighted how the absence of parental care and inadequate supervision leave these children particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced protective measures in both domestic and educational settings.

Supporting Children of Diverse Identities

While some countries are beginning to adopt distinct approaches to working with children of diverse sexual and gender identities, significant disparities remain across Europe. The lack of uniform acknowledgement of the need for tailored interventions limits the ability of systems to adapt to these children's realities. These gaps leave many children without the support they require to navigate sexual exploitation risks effectively.

Addressing Peer-on-Peer Abuse

Cases of peer-on-peer abuse are on the rise, but systems tasked with addressing these incidents often lack the training and guidance necessary to provide nuanced responses. Instead, repressive approaches are frequently adopted, treating children displaying harmful sexual behaviours primarily as offenders rather than victims. This approach fails to account for the complexities of their situations, including the need for rehabilitative support alongside accountability measures.

Decline in Regional Civil Society Collaboration

Regional collaboration among civil society organisations has waned in recent years due to reduced funding opportunities and growing restrictions on organisations working in areas such as migration, gender, and sexual and reproductive health. These limitations hinder civil society actors' ability to effectively address transborder phenomena and stifle the exchange of lessons learned, weakening collective responses to shared challenges.

Technology Regulation and Privacy Tensions

The regulation of technologies has become a contentious policy debate in Europe, with privacy rights advocacy often framing measures to protect children as threats to personal freedoms. This framing presents significant challenges for policymakers, who must navigate the tension between safeguarding children and upholding privacy rights. The discussions highlighted the need for balanced approaches prioritising child protection without undermining personal integrity.

Disengagement of Historical Donors

The withdrawal of historical development agencies and donors from Europe has had far-reaching effects on efforts to combat the sexual exploitation of children both regionally and globally. This disengagement has diminished resources and support for initiatives addressing these issues, leaving critical gaps in funding and advocacy.

Academic Efforts and Collaboration Gaps

Academic research has increasingly invested in the fight against the sexual exploitation of children, but collaboration and knowledge-sharing across disciplines and regions remain limited. The lack of organic cross-fertilisation between academic efforts and practical interventions reduces the potential impact of these initiatives and highlights the need for stronger partnerships.

New Regulations and Risks of Dilution

New European Union regulations on due diligence in human rights offer significant opportunities for large enterprises in the travel and tourism sectors to improve their practices. However, there is a risk that these regulations may dilute the specific focus on sexual exploitation of children by subsuming it into broader child rights concerns. Ensuring that the specificities of sexual exploitation are not overlooked will be essential to maximising the impact of these regulations.

Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism

Children continue to be exploited in the context of travel and tourism, including through unregulated voluntourism and the misuse of the transport sector. While some good practices are emerging, they remain limited in scope and reach. Creating protective environments in these sectors requires stronger regulations, industry engagement, and the promotion of ethical alternatives to exploitative practices.



Conclusion

The key insights from the workshop illuminate the interconnected challenges and opportunities in tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse. Stakeholders can create meaningful change by addressing systemic barriers, fostering collaboration, and centring the voices of survivors. These insights underscore the urgent need for action and offer a pathway for building stronger, more effective child protection systems across the region.

EMERGING TRENDS AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES

The workshop highlighted a range of emerging trends and local experiences that are reshaping the landscape of child sexual exploitation and abuse. From the impact of technology and migration to evolving societal attitudes, these discussions revealed critical dynamics that influence both the risks children face and the effectiveness of responses. Understanding these trends is essential for designing interventions that address current realities while anticipating future challenges.

Increased Risks Faced by Boys

See our case study conducted with ECPAT France in Calais, France [here](#)



Discussions during the workshop highlighted a significant shift in understanding the dynamics of sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly as they relate to boys. Boys are often placed in precarious situations due to societal and systemic factors. Societal expectations surrounding masculinity create substantial

barriers to reporting abuse. Boys frequently fear being perceived as weak or vulnerable, a fear that perpetuates silence and isolates them from potential sources of help. These pressures are further compounded by narratives and misperceptions rooted in their countries of origin and the contexts of migration and settlement in destination countries.

For example, in Türkiye, cultural norms within entrepreneurial families discourage reporting abuse, as there is a strong emphasis on preserving the boy's future role in the family business. In Ukraine, the ongoing war has created an alarming shift in trafficking trends, with increasing reports of boys being trafficked, marking a departure from previous patterns.

In Norway, boys as young as 11 have been reported to engage in the sale of self-produced sexually explicit content online, illustrating how societal and systemic factors can drive children into exploitative situations. Similarly, in Bulgaria, boys have become frequent targets of technology facilitated sexual extortion, with some cases tragically leading to suicide.

Migration emerged as a central theme in the discussions, particularly regarding unaccompanied children, the vast majority of whom are boys in Europe. These boys often face heightened risks due to the precarious nature of their circumstances, both during their journeys and upon arrival in destination countries. The societal norms of their countries of origin and misperceptions and stereotypes in their new environments further complicate their ability to seek help and protection.

To address these dynamics, it is crucial to focus on the external societal and systemic factors that place boys at risk rather than framing them as inherently vulnerable. Efforts must prioritise creating safe reporting mechanisms, challenging harmful societal narratives, and providing targeted support systems to ensure that boys have access to the help they need without fear of stigma or judgment.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN FACILITATING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The workshop underscored the increasingly significant role technology plays in facilitating child sexual exploitation and abuse. The accessibility of online platforms, combined with the anonymity they provide, has created new avenues for perpetrators to groom and exploit children. These dynamics pose significant challenges for prevention, detection, and intervention, highlighting the urgent need for robust strategies to address tech-facilitated abuse.

One concerning trend discussed was the “*Loverboy*” method, which was reported in Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania. In this method, children are groomed online by traffickers who manipulate them emotionally before coercing them into sexual exploitation. This practice underscores the need for targeted interventions to identify and disrupt grooming behaviours early in the online environment.

Online gaming platforms also emerged as a shared concern across multiple countries. These platforms, which often lack adequate safeguards, are increasingly used by perpetrators to connect with and exploit children. While discussions highlighted the potential of age assurance mechanisms to mitigate

risks, concerns were raised about their effectiveness and implementation challenges.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants highlighted cases where traffickers used technology not only to control and exploit children but also to monetise abuse by disseminating videos of sexual exploitation for financial gain. This example illustrates the intersection of child sexual exploitation with broader issues of organised crime and technology facilitated financial abuse.

These discussions reinforced the urgent need for multi-sectoral collaboration to combat technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes strengthening monitoring and enforcement mechanisms on digital platforms, advocating for stronger regulations to protect children online, and investing in digital literacy programs to empower children and their caregivers to navigate risks safely. The role of technology in child sexual exploitation and abuse is complex and evolving, requiring innovative and adaptive strategies to address its many facets effectively.

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Migrant children, particularly those who are unaccompanied, face a range of heightened risks as they navigate precarious journeys and uncertain futures. Workshop discussions underscored the systemic and societal challenges these children encounter, which often leave them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the legal, cultural, and political factors that shape the experiences of children on the move across different contexts.

One of the complexities discussed was the need to balance providing appropriate support for children while considering their agency and autonomy. This tension is particularly pronounced in countries such as France and Poland, where children’s intended destinations are unknown to the frontline workers. While children often lack the legal liberty of movement outside of established frameworks, efforts to balance care with respect for their decision-making and the parental expectations and hope carried by the children on the move must remain a priority to ensure their protection, well-being, and dignity.

Responses to the needs of children on the move frequently focus on immediate assistance, such as food and shelter, while neglecting their long-term futures. In Calais, for example, some organisations are working to provide English lessons to equip children with skills that can serve them in the years ahead. However, such efforts are uneven and often shaped by broader political will and societal attitudes toward diverse

groups of migrants. Adolescent boys from the Middle East and North Africa, for instance, are frequently perceived as “adults” due to their physical appearance and are often associated with criminality. These biases lead to a diminished sense of their need for protection and result in fewer supportive interventions compared to other migrant groups.

The issue of unequal treatment extends further to disparities based on nationality. Across multiple countries, children from Ukraine were reported to benefit from more favourable attitudes than those from other regions. This trend reflects systemic inequities shaped by historical, political, and societal biases, which influence how children on the move are perceived and supported.

In Croatia as well as Ireland, gaps in monitoring and tracking systems for unaccompanied children were highlighted as a critical issue. Many children who enter the system simply disappear, with little to no follow-up or investigation into their whereabouts. This alarming failure not only leaves children vulnerable to sexual exploitation but also reflects broader weaknesses in child protection frameworks that must be urgently addressed.

In Bulgaria, over 4,000 unaccompanied children are currently out of school due to barriers such as registration difficulties, language challenges, and systemic inefficiencies. This exclusion from education denies children their right to learn and is

a critical source of stability and protection during times of upheaval.

In Croatia, the placement of children on the move in correctional centres rather than in care settings that address their specific needs was highlighted as a significant concern. Such practices further marginalise already vulnerable children and fail to provide the support required to address their physical and emotional well-being.

The situation in Greece highlighted another critical dimension: the difficulty of identifying abuse among boys in migrant camps. Cultural expectations surrounding masculinity often create barriers to disclosure, with boys fearing stigma or dismissal if they speak out about sexual exploitation. Furthermore, professionals working in these settings frequently lack awareness of the risks of sexual exploitation and abuse faced

by boys, making it harder to identify and respond to such cases effectively.

The workshop discussions underscored the urgent need for equitable, child-centred approaches to addressing the challenges faced by migrant children. These approaches must go beyond addressing immediate needs and tackle systemic and cultural factors that perpetuate unequal treatment. Ensuring that all children, regardless of nationality or background, have access to protection, education, and support is critical to safeguarding their rights and well-being. Collaborative efforts must aim to dismantle biases, strengthen tracking systems, and enhance the capacity of professionals to respond sensitively and effectively to the needs of all children on the move.



RISKS AND REALITIES OF VOLUNTOURISM

“

Regulation and advocacy are crucial in addressing these issues.”

- Participant from France

Voluntourism, a growing travel market segment, offers unskilled volunteers opportunities to travel and work in distant communities. Promoted as an attractive alternative to mass tourism, voluntourism often involves activities with children and is perceived as a positive, altruistic endeavour. However, workshop discussions shed light on the inherent risks of sexual exploitation associated with voluntourism, particularly in settings lacking adequate safeguarding measures. These risks underscore the urgent need to raise awareness among European tourists and advocate for regulated programs prioritising child protection.

One of the primary concerns highlighted during the workshop is the prevalence of unregulated voluntourism programs that expose children to potential harm. Volunteers often lack the skills, qualifications, or background checks necessary to work with children, leading to scenarios where children's safety and well-being are compromised. Advocacy efforts across multiple countries are focused on increasing awareness of the negative impacts of unregulated voluntourism and promoting professional volunteering programs. These regulated programs emphasise skills transfer, capacity building, and alignment with formal international cooperation for development objectives.

In Ireland, considerable progress has been made in addressing the specific issue of orphanage voluntourism. This form of voluntourism often perpetuates harmful systems, such as fake orphanages established solely to attract foreign volunteers and funding. The Irish government has incorporated this issue into its travel advisories, warning citizens against such practices. These advisories aim to educate travellers about the broader implications of orphanage voluntourism and encourage more responsible behaviour.

The Netherlands has also taken proactive steps to address the risks of voluntourism, particularly among young people. Communication campaigns have been launched to challenge the perception of voluntourism as a harmless or beneficial activity. These campaigns emphasise the risks associated with short-term volunteer opportunities that do not require relevant skills or qualifications. A particular focus has been placed on discouraging participation in orphanage tourism, highlighting how these activities can inadvertently harm the children they are meant to support.

The workshop discussions reinforced the need for greater regulation and oversight of voluntourism programs, particularly those involving children. Efforts must focus on raising awareness about the risks, ensuring that volunteering opportunities are designed with safeguarding measures and promoting programs that genuinely contribute to community development. By prioritising child protection and advocating for responsible practices, stakeholders can work to mitigate the harm caused by unregulated voluntourism while fostering ethical and impactful alternatives.

HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN

The workshop shed light on the increasing prevalence of harmful sexual behaviours among children, which may emerge at a young age. This trend calls for a nuanced and multifaceted approach to address the underlying causes and contributing factors. Workshop participants emphasised the complexity of this issue, which intersects with trauma, mental health challenges, societal influences, and exposure to inappropriate content.

In the Netherlands, discussions focused on the role of trauma as a potential root cause of harmful sexual behaviours in children. Experiences of abuse, neglect, or other forms of trauma can shape how children interact with peers and process their own experiences, sometimes manifesting in behaviours that mimic their victimisation.

Across multiple countries, the influence of mental health issues, popular culture, and early exposure to pornography were identified as significant factors contributing to these

behaviours. In Slovenia, early exposure to adult content is of particular concern, with pornography often providing children with distorted and harmful ideas about sexuality and relationships. This exposure, combined with a lack of comprehensive sexual education, exacerbates the problem by leaving children without the tools to process or challenge what they encounter.

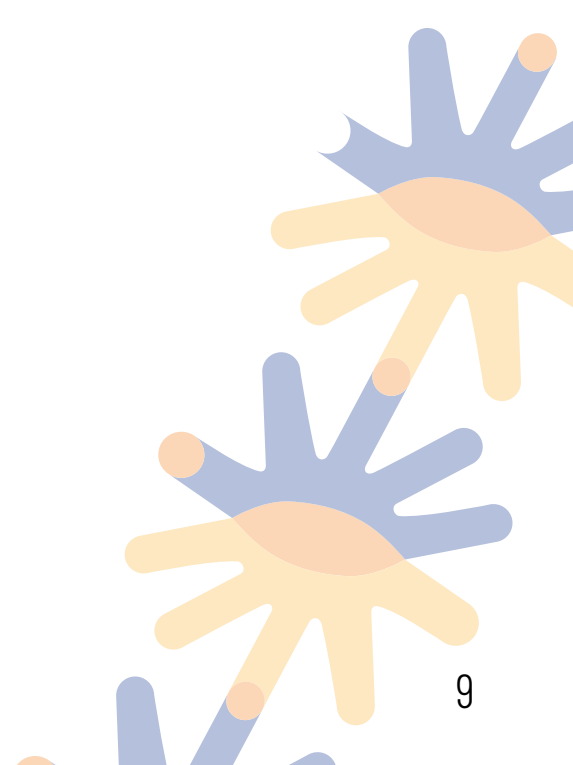
Peer-on-peer abuse, another manifestation of harmful sexual behaviours, is on the rise in many countries. In some, such as Finland, peer-on-peer abuse now constitutes most of the sexual exploitation and abuse cases. These incidents highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions in schools and communities to address these behaviours early and provide children with appropriate guidance and support.

In Albania and Romania, traditional gender stereotypes contribute to a culture where harmful sexual rhetoric and

behaviours are normalised. These stereotypes perpetuate unhealthy dynamics, particularly among boys, who may feel pressure to conform to dominant narratives of masculinity that encourage aggressive or harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours.

The discussions underscored the need for holistic approaches to address harmful sexual behaviours among children. This includes investing in trauma-informed care, improving access to

mental health support, and implementing comprehensive sexual education programs. Efforts must also focus on challenging societal norms perpetuating harmful behaviours and equipping children with the tools to navigate relationships in healthy, respectful ways. By addressing the root causes and fostering environments that promote understanding and support, stakeholders can work to prevent and reduce the prevalence of harmful sexual behaviours and their long-term impact on children and communities.



ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The workshop highlighted the critical role of the private sector in advancing child protection efforts while acknowledging the challenges in fostering meaningful engagement. Many businesses, particularly larger corporations, are increasingly falling under due diligence regulations, particularly the New EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence, encompassing social issues, providing an opportunity to integrate child protection into broader compliance frameworks. However, smaller businesses often face less regulatory scrutiny and are frequently less compliant, creating an accountability gap. To address this, workshop participants emphasised the importance of targeted strategies that leverage existing regulations while fostering partnerships with businesses of all sizes.

Across multiple countries, leveraging due diligence laws and regulations has driven successful engagement with the private sector. These frameworks have compelled larger companies to adopt socially responsible practices and provided pathways to engage smaller businesses through their participation in supply chains. By focusing on the interconnectedness of businesses, child protection advocates have been able to influence smaller entities indirectly while reinforcing compliance at all levels.

In Croatia and Finland, organisations have positioned themselves as recognised experts in child protection, partnering with proactive companies that prioritise social responsibility. These partnerships have a ripple effect, influencing other businesses within the same sectors to adopt similar practices. By aligning their expertise with corporate social responsibility

initiatives, child protection organisations in these countries have demonstrated the value of collaborative approaches to safeguarding children's rights.

While benefiting from existing regulations like the Transparency Act, Norway illustrates the limitations of regulatory frameworks when they do not explicitly prioritise children's rights. The Transparency Act focuses on supply chain analysis and modern slavery yet fails to mandate the study of businesses' impact on children. This gap reflects a broader challenge in aligning corporate due diligence with comprehensive child protection goals, underscoring the need for more child-focused advocacy within regulatory contexts.

The discussions reinforced the importance of engaging businesses of all sizes in child protection efforts. While larger companies are often easier to influence through regulatory compliance, smaller businesses require tailored approaches that reflect their unique challenges and capacities. This includes engaging them through their supply chains and demonstrating the value of integrating child protection into their operations.

The success of private sector engagement hinges on fostering partnerships that prioritise the well-being of children, supported by clear regulations, expert guidance, and sustained advocacy. By working collaboratively with businesses to align their practices with child protection principles, stakeholders can drive meaningful change across industries and ensure that children's rights are upheld at every level of the economy.



Conclusion

The trends and experiences shared during the workshop underscore the importance of context-specific and adaptive approaches to child protection. By drawing on local realities and emerging global patterns, stakeholders can craft innovative solutions that are both effective and sustainable. These shared insights reinforce the need for continuous learning, collaboration, and vigilance to ensure that interventions remain relevant and impactful in the face of evolving challenges.

THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

Thematic discussions during the workshop provided a platform for deep dives into critical issues surrounding child sexual exploitation and abuse. From procedural barriers to justice and survivors' perspectives to the complexities of engaging law enforcement and addressing harmful societal norms, these focused conversations offered valuable insights into systemic gaps and potential solutions. These themes form the backbone of strategic efforts to protect children and support survivors effectively.

CHILD-CENTRIC MEASURES AND SAFEGUARDS

The workshop discussions highlighted the critical importance of child-centric measures and safeguards in ensuring justice and protection for children affected by sexual exploitation and abuse. While child-centric justice systems were identified as a cornerstone of adequate child protection, participants emphasised the persistent challenges that undermine their consistent implementation.

Across multiple countries, inadequate professional training for those involved in child protection cases remains a significant issue. Professionals often lack the knowledge and skills necessary to apply child-centric procedures effectively, leading to inconsistencies in their implementation. Moreover, engaging with marginalised communities continues to be challenging, limiting the inclusiveness and reach of child-centric approaches.

Specific country examples underscored these challenges. In Romania, a case involving a pastor who abused children after previously being sued in the United Kingdom revealed glaring failures in international collaboration and information-sharing mechanisms. In Bulgaria, although "Blue Rooms" are designed to create a child-friendly environment for interviews, police have occasionally conducted interrogations improperly, including late at night, undermining the very principles of these safeguards.

In Hungary, Barnahus institutions—a leading model for child-centric justice—was highlighted as a positive development. However, these institutions are significantly understaffed, limiting their capacity to provide comprehensive support. Similarly, in Moldova, the absence of formalised training for interviewers and high turnover in the social sector impede efforts to build a reliable and consistent child protection system.

The discussions underscored the urgent need for investments in professional training, the consistent application of child-centric procedures, and enhanced collaboration across borders to close gaps that allow perpetrators to exploit system weaknesses.

REMEDIES FOR CHILD VICTIMS

“

It is a way to give something to the child to continue their life. ”

The workshop also explored the importance of providing holistic remedies for child victims of sexual exploitation, emphasising that support must extend beyond financial compensation to address the full spectrum of impacts. Effective remedies must include provisions for emotional, psychological, and social recovery tailored to the diverse needs of victims.

In Belgium, participants stressed the importance of recognising the unique experiences of victims, particularly those from marginalised groups, and ensuring they receive adequate educational and psychological support. This recognition was critical to empowering victims and enabling them to rebuild their lives.

However, Norway raised concerns about potential setbacks in victim support due to new legislation that could reduce

- A Participant during the Child Victims Discussion

protections and compensation. This discussion highlighted the need to guard against policy changes that might inadvertently weaken the safety net for victims.

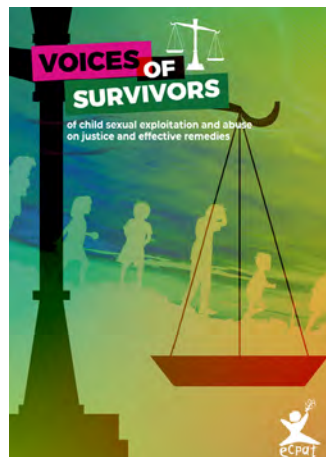
In the Republic of North Macedonia, innovative approaches to integrating psychosocial activities into legal processes were seen as a promising practice. By embedding these activities within judicial frameworks, professionals aim to reduce the risk of re-traumatising children and ensure their well-being throughout the legal process.

Challenges faced by children on the move emerged as a recurring theme across multiple countries. Language barriers and systemic discrimination often prevent these children from accessing the support they need, compounding their vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires tailored

interventions that account for the unique experiences of children on the move and ensure equitable access to remedies.

The discussions reinforced the necessity of a comprehensive, child-centred approach to remedies prioritising victims' long-term recovery and empowerment. Investing in education, psychological support, and systemic inclusivity will be essential to achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes for child victims and survivors of sexual exploitation.

See our Voices of Survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse on justice and effective remedies report [here](#).



PROCEDURAL BARRIERS TO JUSTICE

“

A tiny proportion of victims have access to justice... the system should be able to identify the victims much earlier.”

- Workshop participant.

The workshop highlighted numerous procedural barriers that hinder access to justice for children affected by sexual exploitation and abuse. Chief among these were statutes of limitations for sexual crimes against children, which many participants strongly advocated abolishing. Survivors often require years to disclose their abuse due to trauma, fear, or societal stigma, and arbitrary legal deadlines frequently prevent them from seeking justice. The lack of consistency across countries regarding statutes of limitations poses further challenges, leaving victims and survivors in some jurisdictions unable to pursue legal recourse.

Another significant barrier discussed was the varying definitions of the age of sexual consent across countries. Inconsistent standards complicate cross-border protection efforts and leave gaps in safeguarding children. Workshop participants called for greater harmonisation of consent laws to ensure a consistent and robust legal framework prioritising children's rights and protection.

Country-specific examples underscored the complexity of these issues. In Austria, children with disabilities face unique barriers to justice, including limited access to tailored support and representation within the legal system. In Türkiye, a case was highlighted in which a child victim was initially denied justice due to procedural failures, including disregarded evidence, illustrating how systemic flaws can exacerbate the challenges survivors face. These discussions reinforced the urgent need for systemic reforms to eliminate procedural barriers and uphold victims and survivors' rights to justice.



VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS' PERSPECTIVES

“

We must never place the blame on children for their protection; it's about creating safer systems.”

- Participant from Germany

Centering the voices of victims and survivors emerged as a pivotal theme during the workshop, with discussions revealing significant gaps in the availability of psychosocial services across multiple countries, particularly from a gender perspective. Victims and survivors consistently highlighted the need for accessible and high-quality mental health support to address the long-term impacts of sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite the demand, existing services are often insufficient, leaving many victims and survivors without the resources to heal and restore their lives.

The specific needs of boy victims and survivors also came to the fore. Boys often face unique challenges in accessing support, compounded by a lack of frontline workers with specialised knowledge and skills of male victimisation. This gap underscores the importance of targeted training for professionals to understand better and respond to the experiences of boy victims and survivors.

Shelters were another focus of the discussions, with victims and survivors sharing mixed experiences. While some children found safety and comfort in these spaces, others felt confined

and deprived of their liberty. These divergent perspectives highlighted the necessity of individualised care within shelter settings, ensuring that trauma-informed practices are consistently applied to create an environment conducive to recovery.

In Bulgaria, particular challenges were identified among Roma communities, where access to both legal consultation and psychosocial support remains limited. Concerns were raised about the continued existence of “socio-pedagogical boarding schools,” which participants argued should be closed due to their failure to provide appropriate care and their potential to marginalise vulnerable children further.

The workshop reinforced the need for survivor-centred approaches prioritising accessible, tailored, and culturally sensitive support systems. By addressing gaps in psychosocial services, enhancing frontline training, and adopting trauma-informed care practices, stakeholders can better support victims and survivors in their journey toward healing and justice.

VOICES OF SURVIVORS

“

It's time shame changes side.”

- Participant from Cyprus

The workshop underscored the transformative potential of integrating survivors' perspectives into all facets of child protection. Survivor testimonies are invaluable for raising public awareness, driving service improvements, and advocating for systemic reforms within the justice system. Participants highlighted how listening to survivors helps to uncover gaps in existing frameworks, enabling stakeholders to design more effective, victim-centred responses. Survivor accounts also humanise the issue, fostering greater empathy and understanding among policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public.

Despite these benefits, cultural and social barriers to disclosure remain significant obstacles, particularly for boys. In many contexts, deeply entrenched societal norms perpetuate stigma and shame, discouraging victims from coming forward. In Türkiye, for example, boys are often deterred from reporting abuse due to fears of dishonour, retaliation through honour-based violence, or forced marriage. These barriers not only silence survivors but also perpetuate cycles of abuse by enabling perpetrators to act with impunity.

Workshop discussions stressed the need to address these cultural and societal barriers through targeted interventions. This includes creating safe, non-judgmental environments where survivors feel empowered to share their experiences and receive support. Efforts must also focus on educating communities to challenge harmful attitudes, dismantle stigma, and normalise open discussions about abuse. By elevating the voices of survivors, stakeholders can ensure that child protection policies and practices are grounded in lived experience and responsive to the realities faced by victims.

LAW ENFORCEMENT COLLABORATION CHALLENGES

Collaboration with law enforcement remains a critical yet challenging aspect of addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse. The workshop highlighted how decentralised police services, as seen in North Macedonia and France, can lead to significant inconsistencies in service delivery. In these contexts, the lack of coordination across jurisdictions creates gaps in accountability and hampers efforts to establish cohesive responses to abuse cases. Victims and their families are often left navigating fragmented systems, further exacerbating their trauma.

In France, participants noted that tensions between law enforcement and other child protection services frequently undermine collaboration. These tensions can result in delayed responses, insufficient support for victims, and missed opportunities to hold offenders accountable. Addressing these dynamics requires fostering trust and cooperation between police and other support services, ensuring that all actors work towards shared goals of safeguarding children and securing justice.

LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING AND ENGAGEMENT

The workshop discussions identified a pressing need to enhance law enforcement training and engagement to improve responses to child sexual exploitation and abuse. Comprehensive training programmes are essential for equipping officers with the knowledge and skills required to handle cases sensitively and effectively. However, participants noted that limited access to training opportunities remains a widespread challenge, with many jurisdictions lacking standardised approaches to educating police on child-centric procedures and recognising signs of abuse.

Examples of successful initiatives were shared, offering insights into practical strategies for engaging law enforcement. In Lithuania and Switzerland, school-based training programmes have introduced police officers to the principles of child protection, fostering awareness and understanding. In tourist areas such as North Macedonia, targeted engagement with law enforcement has effectively addressed sexual exploitation risks unique to these settings. Luxembourg's BeSECURE platform, which provides online resources for police and the public, represents another innovative approach to enhancing awareness and capacity.

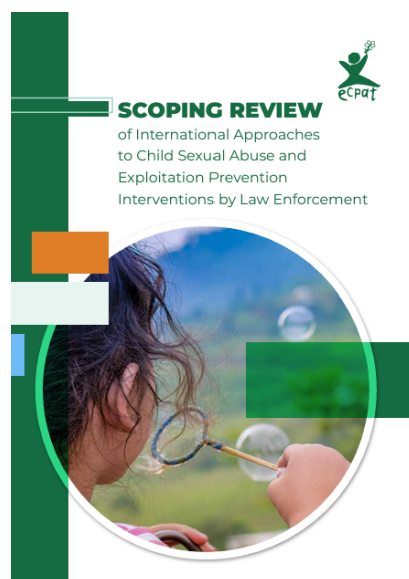
Despite these successes, significant gaps remain. In France, the need for specialised law enforcement units dedicated to addressing child sexual exploitation was highlighted as a critical area for improvement. Switzerland demonstrated how inconsistencies in service quality across jurisdictions, such as between cantons, can undermine the effectiveness of child protection efforts. These disparities highlight the need for national or federal standards to ensure consistency and accountability in law enforcement responses.

Conversely, some countries have adopted innovative approaches to mitigate these challenges. In Lithuania, for example, professionals with specialised training in trauma-informed care are tasked with frontline responses to child victims, reducing the risk of re-traumatisation and providing more empathetic support. This model highlights the value of involving experts who understand the unique needs of child victims and can navigate complex cases with sensitivity.

Participants emphasised the importance of integrating law enforcement efforts into broader child protection systems, ensuring that police work collaboratively with social workers, psychologists, and legal professionals. By addressing systemic weaknesses and fostering cross-sector partnerships, stakeholders can create more effective and holistic responses to child sexual exploitation and abuse.

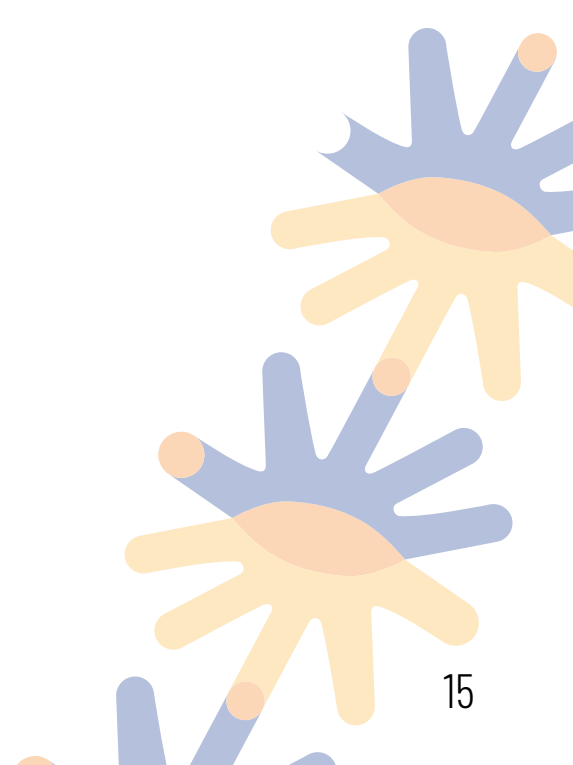
Participants also stressed the importance of investing in specialised units and providing ongoing professional development for law enforcement officers. By equipping police with the necessary tools and knowledge, stakeholders can strengthen their ability to recognise, respond to, and prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse. Enhanced collaboration between law enforcement and other child protection actors will create a more integrated and effective response system, ensuring that children are safeguarded and supported at every stage.

You can see our Role of Police in Prevention – Global Scoping Report [here](#).



Conclusion

The thematic discussions served as a powerful reminder of the multifaceted nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach that integrates survivor voices, strengthens systems, and challenges societal norms. By engaging with these themes, stakeholders are better equipped to tackle the complexities of child protection and create a future where every child is safe, supported, and empowered to thrive.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The workshop discussions culminated in a well-defined set of priorities aimed at tackling the persistent and emerging challenges of child sexual exploitation and abuse. These future directions highlight the critical need for systemic reforms, community collaboration, and sustained advocacy to ensure that children's rights and well-being are comprehensively safeguarded across varying contexts.

TIMELESS JUSTICE CAMPAIGN

ECPAT International has launched the “Timeless Justice” campaign, a bold advocacy initiative calling for the abolition of statutes of limitations for sexual crimes against children. Survivors of such crimes often face significant barriers to disclosing abuse due to trauma, fear, or societal stigma, and many are unable to come forward until years later. The campaign seeks to address these challenges by urging legislative reforms that remove arbitrary deadlines and ensure survivors have access to justice regardless of the time elapsed. The “Timeless Justice” campaign aims to catalyse global action by focusing on survivor-centred advocacy, fostering a legal environment that adapts to the realities of trauma and disclosure timelines.

ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND ADDRESSING POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES

“
In the private sector, it's about will – they have responsibilities like any other organisation working with children – so they must understand it's their duty as well.”
– Participant from Finland

A critical area for future action involves more profound engagement with the private sector to address systemic risks and foster protective measures for children. The new EU Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence” (for consistency and because only one directive. Specifically, the private sector can play a pivotal role in implementing more substantial information and communications technology regulations to mitigate technology facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse risks. At the same time, the political sensitivities surrounding children on the move in Europe

require urgent attention. Many children on the move face reduced access to services and are denied fundamental child rights, leaving them particularly exposed to sexual exploitation. Addressing these intersecting challenges will require concerted efforts to leverage private sector influence, advocate for rights-based equitable access to services, and ensure that child rights remain at the forefront of political decision-making and fully integrated in private sector strategies.

STRENGTHENING DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

The need for robust data collection and targeted research was a recurring theme during the workshop. Participants highlighted several critical knowledge gaps, including the unique experiences of boys as victims, the role of migration in exposing children to various risks, and the comparative effectiveness of different intervention strategies. Without comprehensive data, designing effective, evidence-based responses remains challenging. Strengthening research efforts will allow stakeholders to understand better the nuanced realities of child sexual exploitation and abuse, enabling them to create tailored, impactful programs. These efforts must prioritise collaborative approaches to data collection, ensuring that findings are shared widely to inform coordinated responses across sectors and borders.

ADVOCACY AND POLICY REFORM

Advocacy emerged as a cornerstone of the future directions discussed at the workshop. Participants stressed the importance of integrating gender perspectives into child protection frameworks to address the specific vulnerabilities faced by boys, girls, and children with diverse sexual and gender identities. This includes challenging entrenched gender stereotypes that perpetuate harmful attitudes and practices. Legal reforms were also identified as essential, with calls to strengthen protections for children and ensure international collaboration is robust enough to address cross-border sexual exploitation effectively. Additionally, the promotion of child safeguarding policies in various settings, from schools to workplaces, was highlighted as a key strategy for fostering safe environments and preventing sexual exploitation.

TRAINING AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Developing the capacities of professionals who work with children is fundamental to improving responses to child sexual exploitation and abuse. Workshop participants underscored the need for comprehensive and institutionalized training programs targeting law enforcement officers, social workers, educators, and other frontline professionals. These programs should equip participants with the skills to identify victims, provide trauma-informed care, and deliver adequate support. Specialised training tailored to the complexities of sexual exploitation cases, including gender differences and the various intersectional drivers of sexual exploitation, is particularly important for ensuring professionals are prepared to handle sensitive situations effectively. By prioritising training and capacity development, stakeholders can strengthen the overall support system for children and ensure that interventions are empathetic and impactful.

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

The role of communities in preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be overstated. Workshop discussions highlighted the importance of collaborating with

various actors, including parents, caregivers, religious leaders, and influencers, to raise awareness and drive cultural change. Social norms often play a pivotal role in enabling or protecting against sexual exploitation, and efforts to shift these norms must be at the heart of community engagement strategies. Inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches ensure all community members feel empowered to contribute to child protection efforts. By fostering dialogue and building trust, stakeholders can create protective environments where children are valued, supported, and safeguarded from harm.

ENSURING CHILDREN ARE MEANINGFULLY AND SYSTEMATICALLY ENGAGED

The necessity to engage children in meaningful ways through sustained structures that allow for their systematic participation has been highlighted as a condition to adequately ensure children are protected in all contexts, including online, and their rights are respected. The participation of children has to start from early ages and be institutionalized to ensure the needs and lived realities of children, including children victims and survivors of sexual exploitation, are at the center of policies and interventions to protect them, and children can influence and monitor their effectiveness and quality. Various promising experiences exist in Bulgaria or Romania in this regard.



Conclusion

The future directions outlined during the workshop reflect a collective commitment to addressing the persistent and emerging challenges of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Focusing on survivor-centred advocacy, robust data collection, and targeted capacity building, these strategies aim to create systemic change while ensuring that responses are grounded in the lived realities of children and survivors.

Equally critical is the engagement of diverse stakeholders—from policymakers and community leaders to the private sector—in driving collaborative and innovative solutions. Efforts must be bold, inclusive, and adaptable to evolving risks, particularly for children on the move and those facing systemic inequities. As the “Timeless Justice” campaign and other initiatives take shape, they remind us that protecting children requires sustained advocacy, comprehensive frameworks, and unwavering dedication.

By aligning resources, expertise, and shared purpose, stakeholders can work together to build a future where all children are free from sexual exploitation, their rights are upheld, and their voices are heard. This vision is not only possible but necessary, and it will require continued collaboration, perseverance, and action from every corner of society.

CONCLUSION

The Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children in Europe Regional Workshop concluded with a renewed sense of purpose and determination to tackle the persistent and emerging challenges in child protection. Over four days of intensive discussions, participants recognised both the progress achieved and the significant gaps in safeguarding children's rights and well-being. The workshop served as a potent reminder that while progress has been made, much work lies ahead to ensure no child is left vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

A key outcome of the workshop was recognising the need for systemic reforms that address procedural barriers to justice, enhance survivor support, and foster cross-border collaboration. Participants underscored the importance of prioritising survivor-centred approaches, where victims' voices and experiences shape policies, services, and advocacy. The discussions also highlighted the urgent need for legal reforms, such as the abolition of statutes of limitations for sexual crimes against children, to ensure that justice systems are responsive to the realities of trauma and disclosure.

Engagement with the private sector emerged as a critical focus, with discussions on the role of corporate accountability in mitigating risks and fostering protective environments. The workshop highlighted the potential of the European Union Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence to drive meaningful change, particularly in the travel, tourism, and technology sectors. However, participants stressed the importance of ensuring that these regulations are implemented effectively and do not dilute the specific focus on child protection.

The workshop also illuminated the systemic vulnerabilities faced by children on the move, particularly unaccompanied minors. Political sensitivities surrounding migration have led to a reduction in services for these children, leaving them increasingly exposed to harm. Participants called for a stronger focus on coordinated case management and equitable access to child rights, irrespective of nationality or migration status.

The report emphasises the importance of continuous advocacy, capacity building, and data collection to address these multifaceted challenges. It highlights the need for multi-sectoral collaboration that brings together governments, civil society, academia, and the private sector to create sustainable solutions. Participants also stressed the value of integrating community voices, including those of parents, caregivers, and religious leaders, to foster protective environments that challenge harmful norms and prioritise child rights.

The workshop's conclusions reaffirm the collective responsibility to act decisively and collaboratively. ECPAT International and its partners are committed to transforming the insights and strategies developed during the seminar into tangible actions that safeguard children across Europe. The report serves as a testament to the power of collective learning and as a call to action for all stakeholders to build a future where every child is safe, valued, and empowered to thrive.



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