



**COLLECTIVE
ACTION**

End Child Sexual
Exploitation
and Abuse

Central
Asia

REGIONAL WORKSHOP

25-27 September - Tashkent, Uzbekistan



Brot
für die Welt

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Bread for the world.

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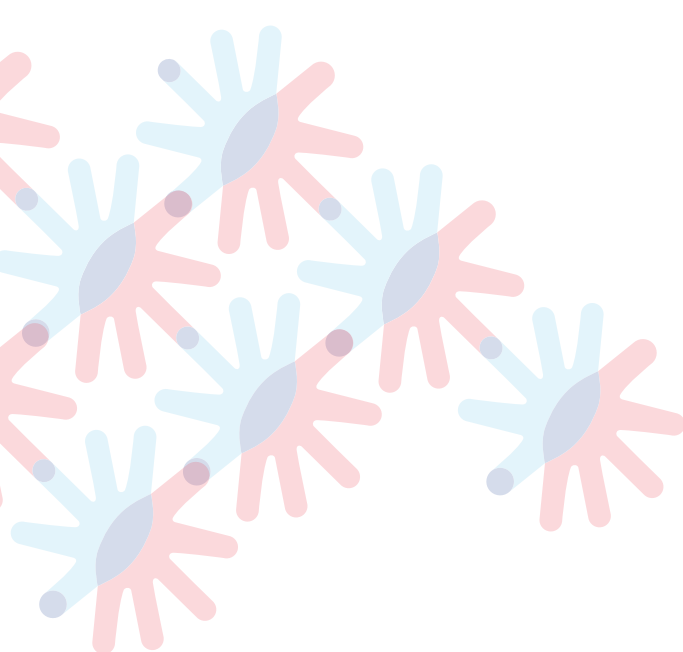
Designed by:

Manida Naebklang

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INTRODUCTION



The Central Asia Regional Workshop on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, held from September 25 to 27, 2024, at the Wyndham Hotel Tashkent, brought together a diverse and dedicated group of twenty-eight stakeholders to address the critical and complex challenges of child sexual exploitation and abuse across the region. Organised by ECPAT International, the workshop convened participants from civil society organisations, international bodies, to share insights, build capacity, and chart a collaborative path forward in protecting children from sexual exploitation.

Central Asia faces unique and multifaceted challenges related to child sexual exploitation and abuse, deeply influenced by socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks, and trends such as migration and the proliferation of digital technologies. This workshop provided a platform to explore these challenges in depth while fostering a shared understanding of the urgency and scope of addressing the issue. Discussions addressed topics ranging from the pervasive underreporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse and the gendered dynamics of victimisation to the dual role of technology as both a tool for abuse and a means of prevention.

Participants engaged in robust dialogue through plenary sessions, thematic group discussions, and detailed country-specific analyses. These formats enabled the sharing of best practices, the identification of systemic gaps, and the development of tailored, evidence-based solutions. A particular emphasis was placed on recognising the vulnerabilities of

children impacted by migration, the influence of traditional practices on disclosure and justice, and the importance of empowering children to have a voice in matters affecting their lives in manners that are safe, ethical, and contextually adapted.

The workshop also addressed the need for systemic reforms, highlighting the critical gaps in child protection systems, the absence of robust data and research, and the limited availability of specialised victim services. As one participant reflected, “This workshop has reminded us that safeguarding children is not just a policy issue—it requires cultural change, community engagement, and sustained collaboration.” By combining technical expertise with lived experiences shared through research with young survivors’ advocates and practitioners, the workshop reinforced the interconnected nature of the challenges and the need for multi-sectoral cooperation.

This report captures the outcomes of the workshop, presenting a comprehensive account of the discussions, insights, and recommendations that emerged over the three days. It aims to serve as a resource for stakeholders across the region, offering both a reflection on the current state of child protection efforts and a roadmap for future actions. By amplifying the voices of all participants and centering the experiences of children, the workshop highlighted the collective responsibility to ensure that every child in Central Asia is free from sexual exploitation and abuse.



EMERGING TRENDS AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES

Child sexual exploitation and abuse in the region is shaped by a complex interplay of societal, technological, and systemic factors, creating both opportunities and barriers for effective prevention and response. This section examines these dynamics, providing a deeper understanding of how emerging trends and local experiences influence efforts to protect children. From pervasive underreporting of cases to gendered dynamics of disclosure, the dual role of technology, and the impact of migration, these insights reflect the evolving challenges in combating sexual exploitation and abuse.

Attention and resources in the region have focused on tackling trafficking and domestic violence, which have indirectly contributed to protecting children from sexual exploitation and abuse. However, these efforts are often fragmented and lack a holistic approach to addressing the broader spectrum of child sexual exploitation. In some contexts, addressing child sexual abuse is seen as a safer entry point for intervention, avoiding the risks of government resistance that may arise from linking exploitation with organised crime. While this approach allows for continued engagement, it also highlights the need for comprehensive strategies that encompass all forms of sexual exploitation.

The diversity of settings where sexual exploitation occurs is also increasingly recognised, expanding beyond conventional locations to include summer camps, resorts, religious institutions, and residential schools. These varied contexts underline the necessity for tailored interventions and context-specific safeguarding measures to address risks across different environments.

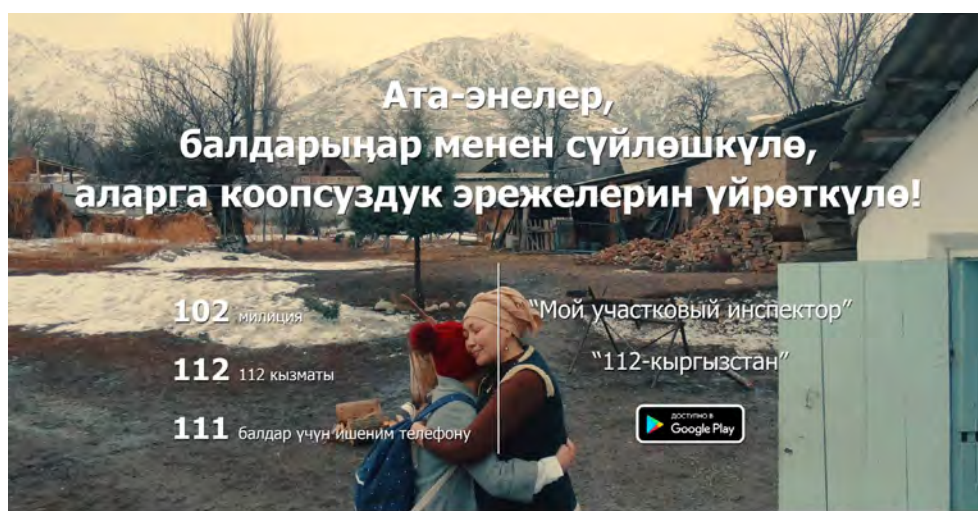
Efforts to collaborate with traditional and non-formal actors are often hindered by national security agendas and the perceived association of these actors with terrorism. This creates significant barriers to community engagement and limits the ability to address exploitation effectively at the grassroots level.

A pervasive lack of trust in public authorities—including law enforcement and justice systems—emerged as another

critical barrier. This mistrust, compounded by perceptions of corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency, discourages children, families, and communities from reporting abuse or seeking services. Easing disclosure in such a context requires systemic reforms to rebuild trust and ensure accountability in public institutions.

The shrinking operational space for civil society organisations poses additional challenges in combating all forms of child sexual exploitation. Restrictions on advocacy, research, and policy engagement, often under the guise of counterterrorism measures, have significantly hampered the ability of CSOs to address these issues effectively. Despite these barriers, CSOs remain trusted actors in many communities, leveraging their expertise to navigate sensitive political environments and continue providing critical advice and support. However, the introduction of new restrictive legislation in several countries threatens to further erode their capacity to respond.

The convergence of these trends underscores the complexity of addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse in the region. While there are areas of progress, such as increased recognition of diverse exploitation settings and innovative approaches to working within constrained environments, persistent barriers remain. These challenges demand collaborative, adaptive, and multifaceted solutions that engage all stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and local communities, to create a safer future for children.



ALARMING UNDERREPORTING OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE CASES:

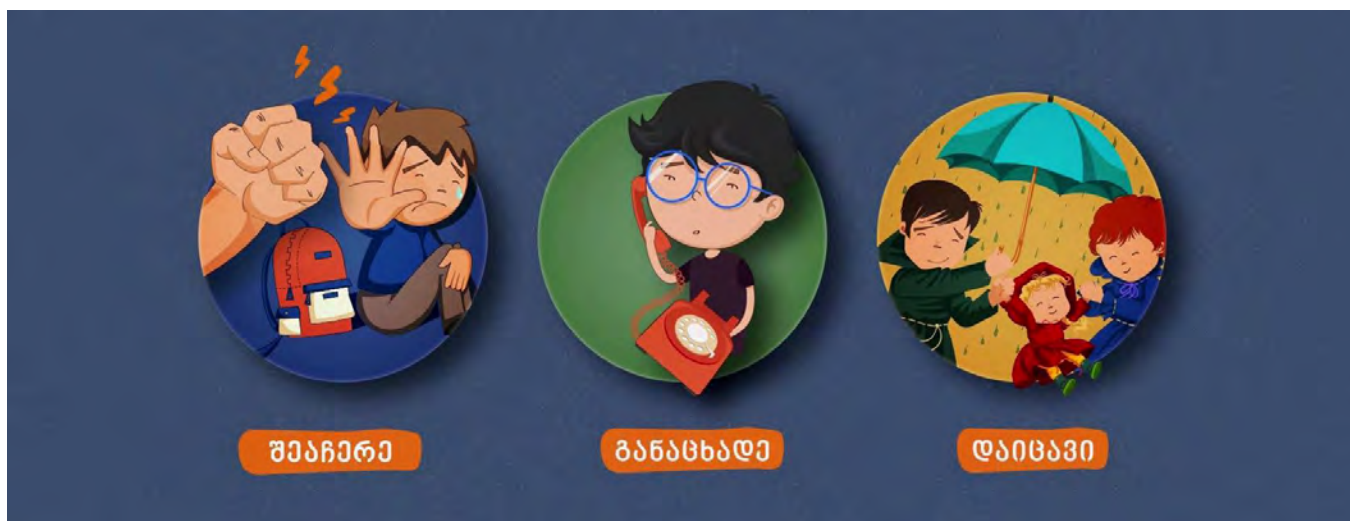
Underreporting of cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse remains one of the most pressing challenges across the region. Despite increasing awareness of the prevalence and harm caused by these crimes, systemic and societal barriers continue to prevent victims from coming forward, obscuring the true scale of the issue and undermining efforts to address it effectively.

A significant factor contributing to this underreporting is the pervasive shame and stigma associated with child sexual exploitation and abuse. Victims and their families often face intense societal judgement and condemnation, which not only silences survivors but also isolates them from crucial support systems. This stigma is deeply entrenched, with previous research from the Disrupting Harm project revealing that only 5% of cases are reported, while 30% of survivors do not disclose their abuse to anyone, even in private. Such social pressures create an environment where abuse is hidden, and perpetrators remain unaccountable.

Compounding this issue is a widespread lack of trust in law enforcement and judicial systems. Many victims and their families perceive these institutions as corrupt, ineffective, or indifferent to the needs of survivors. Concerns about insensitive treatment during the reporting and judicial processes

further deter individuals from seeking justice. Moreover, even when cases are reported, a lack of confidentiality presents a significant barrier. Fear of exposure and the potential repercussions often outweighs the perceived benefits of seeking legal recourse, leaving many cases unreported and unresolved. Another layer of complexity arises from the uneven focus on related issues within the region. While significant efforts have been made to address domestic violence and trafficking in persons, these initiatives have provided only a fragmented understanding of the sexual exploitation of children. The data and insights generated from such efforts often fail to capture the diverse forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse or the intersectional gender dynamics that influence how it manifests and is experienced.

This lack of a comprehensive approach leaves a critical blind spot in addressing the issue. Without a nuanced understanding of the diverse ways in which sexual exploitation of children occurs and how different groups, particularly girls and boys, are affected, interventions remain inadequate. The consequence is a systemic failure to meet the needs and uphold the rights of victims and to hold perpetrators accountable. Bridging these gaps will require not only addressing societal attitudes but also reforming systems to build capacities and trust, ensure confidentiality, and develop a robust evidence base for action.



GENDERED DYNAMICS OF DISCLOSURE AND VICTIMISATION:

The dynamics of disclosure and victimisation in cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse reveal significant gendered differences that must be addressed to ensure effective prevention and response efforts. While child sexual exploitation and abuse impacts both boys and girls, boys often face unique challenges in disclosing abuse, shaped by deeply ingrained societal norms and prejudices.

For boys, societal expectations of masculinity play a critical role in silencing their voices. The pressure to conform to traditional notions of strength and stoicism often discourages boys from acknowledging their victimisation or seeking help. This is further compounded by widespread homophobia, as boys may fear that disclosing abuse could lead to assumptions about their sexuality. These fears create an environment where shame is internalised, and abuse is left unreported, depriving boys of the support they need and leaving perpetrators unchecked.

To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt gender-sensitive approaches that recognise the distinct needs and vulnerabilities of both boys and girls. Prevention and response strategies must account for these differences, ensuring that all children feel safe and supported when coming forward. By addressing the societal barriers that hinder disclosure and tailoring interventions to the unique experiences of boys and girls, stakeholders can develop more effective and inclusive solutions to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse.

In some countries in the region, fears and stigma around violent extremism and trends of sexual exploitation perpetrated by children themselves are negatively impacting boys and make protective services even less inclined to recognize and understand the specific needs and ways of engagement with boys.



TECHNOLOGY'S DUAL ROLE:

Technology plays a complex and multifaceted role in the context of child sexual exploitation and abuse, acting as both a facilitator of harm and a tool for prevention and support. Its dual nature underscores the urgent need to address its risks while leveraging its potential for positive impact.

On the one hand, technology has opened new avenues for abuse, providing perpetrators with sophisticated tools to groom, exploit, and abuse children. Online platforms allow offenders to connect with victims anonymously, making it increasingly difficult to monitor content, identify perpetrators, and intervene in a timely manner. The scale and speed at which abuse can occur in digital spaces present significant challenges for law enforcement, service providers, and policymakers tasked with protecting

children in an evolving online environment.

One particularly concerning trend reported across all countries is the significant increase in blackmailing and the circulation of intimate and sexually explicit images, particularly among youth. Perpetrators often use these images to exert control over victims, perpetuating cycles of abuse and causing lasting psychological harm. Other issues related to suicide trends of young people enticed through online gaming and social media platform, misinformation or disinformation and the unsupervised access to pornography are raising concerns over the use of digital technologies by children in the region. This growing issue highlights the critical importance of strengthening online safety education in schools and by engaging caregivers.

However, technology also holds immense potential as a tool for prevention and support. Online safety education, easily accessible reporting mechanisms, and awareness-raising campaigns are just some of the ways in which technology can be harnessed to protect children. Effectively addressing the dual role of technology requires a balanced approach that mitigates

its risks while maximising its potential as a force for good. By investing in innovative prevention strategies and fostering collaborations across sectors, stakeholders can create safer digital environments and empower children with the tools they need to navigate them securely.



IMPACT OF MIGRATION:

Migration patterns across Central Asia are having a profound impact on the protective environments of children, exposing them to heightened risks of exploitation and abuse. These patterns, often defined by family separations and inadequate child protection mechanisms, leave many children without the support and safeguards they need.

In Kyrgyzstan, the consequences of migration are particularly stark. Reports indicate an increase in violence against children, intricately linked to the absence of parents who have migrated for work. The lack of parental presence not only leaves children more vulnerable to abuse but also reduces their access to care and protection.

Similarly, in Kazakhstan, cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse linked to labour migration highlight the specific risks faced by children in border areas, particularly along the border with Russia. The transient nature of labour migration and the socioeconomic pressures it creates often result in children being left behind or exposed to exploitative conditions. These circumstances demand urgent attention to address the vulnerabilities of children affected by migration and ensure robust protective measures are in place.

The impact of migration on children underscores the need for targeted interventions that address both the structural and immediate risks associated with family separation and mobility. Strengthening protection systems and developing programmes that provide support to children in migration-affected contexts are critical steps towards safeguarding their well-being.

Conclusion

The Emerging Trends and Local Experiences section underscores the need for a nuanced and adaptable approach to addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse. By understanding the specific contexts in which these crimes occur, stakeholders can design more effective interventions that respond to local realities while considering broader regional trends. From tackling systemic barriers to fostering innovation in prevention, the insights from this section highlight the critical need for collaboration, evidence-based strategies, and sustained commitment to safeguarding children across the region.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC TRENDS:

Our country-specific analysis provides a detailed exploration of the diverse challenges and opportunities faced by the countries in the region as they grapple with child sexual exploitation and abuse. Each country's unique social, cultural, and legislative context shapes its response to these issues, revealing both progress and persistent gaps. From legislative reforms and awareness-raising campaigns to entrenched societal norms

and systemic weaknesses, these snapshots highlight the complexities of addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse at the national level. By examining these individual contexts, the section underscores the importance of tailored approaches that respond to local realities while drawing on shared experiences and best practices across the region.



ARMENIA:

Armenia faces significant challenges in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse due to critical gaps in research, systemic weaknesses, and longstanding institutional barriers. For years, the absence of comprehensive studies on child sexual exploitation and abuse has hindered efforts to understand the scale, nature, and specific dynamics of the issue. This lack of evidence-based insights has made it difficult to design targeted policies and interventions.

The turning point came in 2017, when the United Nations Special Rapporteur conducted a country visit and identified the lack of evidence and data as a major impediment to progress. This visit prompted a shift in the government's approach, fostering greater openness to conducting research on child protection issues. Subsequently, a special report brought further attention to these gaps, leading to the initiation of a new study supported by the World Bank. Alongside this, Armenia has recently been participating in the Disrupting Harm research initiative, which is expected to generate vital data and actionable insights. These efforts are creating a stronger foundation for evidence-based policies to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse more effectively.

Another major development occurred in 2021 with Armenia's adoption of the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention). This landmark decision has significantly enhanced the country's legal framework for addressing sexual exploitation of children. The adoption of new laws and the inclusion of children's rights within the national human rights strategy demonstrate the government's growing commitment to strengthening protections for vulnerable children. These reforms provide an opportunity to implement comprehensive and systemic solutions to the issue.

Despite these advancements, Armenia's justice system continues to face substantial obstacles in addressing cases of sexual exploitation of children. Disclosure by victims remains limited due to societal stigma and fears of retribution. Moreover, there is a prevailing tendency toward informal settlements, which often sideline victims' needs and allow perpetrators to escape accountability. The lack of child-centered justice mechanisms exacerbates these challenges, deterring survivors from seeking help and justice.

Addressing these systemic issues will require continued investment in strengthening the justice system's capacity to handle cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Prioritising child-friendly procedures, ensuring sensitive treatment of survivors, and building trust between communities and legal institutions are crucial steps. By reinforcing these efforts with compelling evidence base and a responsive legal framework, Armenia can make meaningful strides in protecting children and holding perpetrators accountable.



AZERBAIJAN

In Azerbaijan, latest trends indicate an increase in the reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases among both boys and girls. This rise reflects growing awareness and a willingness to confront these issues, signalling progress in addressing the stigma surrounding such cases. However, this progress is accompanied by significant challenges, particularly regarding the capacity of services to adapt to the specific needs of child victims.

The country has taken notable steps to improve its justice system's response to child victims. Child-friendly interviewing rooms have been introduced in rehabilitation centres, demonstrating a commitment to creating a more supportive and accessible justice process for children. These measures are part of broader efforts to ensure that children's voices are heard and that they are treated with sensitivity during legal proceedings.

In addition to legal reforms, Azerbaijan has launched awareness-raising campaigns to educate key stakeholders about child sexual exploitation and abuse. These initiatives include the development of information materials targeted at school staff and parents. By equipping educators and caregivers with the knowledge to identify risks and respond effectively, these

campaigns aim to foster a safer environment for children and encourage preventive action at the community level.

However, significant gaps remain in understanding and addressing the full scope of sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse in Azerbaijan. The absence of comprehensive research continues to hinder the development of effective, evidence-based policies and programmes. Additionally, the rise of online exploitation presents new challenges. Cases involving the sharing of intimate images for monetary gain highlight the need for robust digital safety measures and stronger legal frameworks to combat these forms of abuse.

Conducting research in this environment remains particularly difficult due to societal and institutional barriers, leaving critical knowledge gaps unaddressed. Bridging these gaps will require a concerted effort to prioritise research, invest in digital literacy and safety education, and build systems that can generate actionable data. By combining these efforts with continued public awareness and systemic reforms, Azerbaijan can strengthen its response to child sexual exploitation and abuse and ensure more effective protections for vulnerable children.

KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan is facing a growing challenge in addressing sexual exploitation of children, with reports of such cases steadily increasing. While this rise may indicate improved identification efforts, it also underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to better protect children and provide them with the necessary support. Despite the enactment of various child protection laws, significant gaps persist. Notably, sexual violence against children is not explicitly addressed in existing legislation. Instead, it is subsumed under laws on trafficking in human beings. Similarly, amendments to the 2009 domestic violence law in 2024 failed to introduce specific provisions for child victims, leaving many children inadequately protected.

The justice system further compounds these challenges. Children under the age of ten are not allowed to have their voices heard during judicial proceedings, leaving their experiences excluded from legal considerations. Additionally, the lack of specialised psychologists within the justice system and the absence of child-friendly interviewing systems and units creates significant barriers to providing justice for child victims. This inadequacy not only limits the effective gathering of evidence but also risks re-traumatising victims who encounter insensitive and intimidating legal processes.

Cultural norms and practices also play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of cases involving child sexual exploitation and abuse. Intrafamilial abuse is frequently resolved informally within families, often through direct confrontation with the offender. In these situations, families are often blamed for failing to protect their children, which reinforces the tendency to handle cases as discreetly as possible. In cases where the offender is powerful, settlements are often achieved through financial retributions to the victim's family. When the offender and victim are close in age, marriage is commonly used as a resolution. Such practices are framed as protecting the girl's honour and ensuring her survival, but they perpetuate harmful gender norms and fail to deliver justice for victims.

Labour migration further exacerbates risks for children, particularly in border areas with Russia. Children left behind by migrating parents are especially vulnerable, often lacking adequate care and supervision. This absence of parental protection increases their exposure to exploitation and harm, highlighting the need for stronger child protection mechanisms to address these vulnerabilities.

Digital risks add another dimension to the challenges facing children in Kazakhstan. The rising incidence of teenage suicides linked to harmful online activities is deeply concerning. Campaigns propagated on social media platforms such as Telegram—including “Blue Whale” and “Red Dolphins”—have incited vulnerable youth to self-harm or suicide. These developments highlight the need for stronger regulation of digital spaces and the provision of tailored mental health support for at-risk children.

Efforts to address child sexual exploitation and abuse have included initiatives by local universities to develop profiling methods for perpetrators. While promising, these efforts face challenges due to the lack of robust methodologies in the local language, limiting their applicability and effectiveness. Strengthening research capacities and creating tools that are culturally and contextually appropriate could significantly enhance the understanding of offender behaviour and improve prevention strategies.

Kazakhstan's journey to address sexual violence against children requires a multifaceted approach. Legal reforms must explicitly prioritise the needs of child victims, ensuring they are fully protected under the law. The justice system must be equipped with child-friendly mechanisms and trained professionals to sensitively handle cases involving children. At the same time, tackling harmful societal norms and improving awareness about these issues are essential to driving cultural change. By addressing these gaps, Kazakhstan can take meaningful steps toward creating a safer environment for its children and ensuring justice for victims of exploitation and abuse.



KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan faces significant challenges in addressing violence against children, with migration and parental absence emerging as major factors contributing to increased vulnerabilities. Many children left behind by parents migrating for work are particularly at risk, as the erosion of family structures due to migration leaves them without adequate care and protection. This absence of parental oversight often results in children finding themselves in precarious situations, including street environments where they are exposed to exploitation and abuse.

Reports from tourist destinations, such as resorts near Issyk-Kul Lake, reveal troubling cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse in travel and tourism settings. Boys, in particular, have been increasingly targeted, highlighting the varied and complex forms of abuse that occur in these environments. For example, an incident at a summer camp involved two boys, aged 12 and 14, being sexually abused by older boys. Although they had access to phones and could have contacted their parents, they refrained out of fear and widespread societal shame, underscoring the deep cultural barriers that silence victims and prevent them from seeking help.

Efforts have been made to address these issues, including the placement of juvenile affairs inspectors and psychologists in schools to provide guidance and support for children. Guidelines have been adopted to educate and empower girls on how to protect themselves and seek help. However, these measures are insufficient, as they lack the broader scope needed to address systemic issues, including the absence of comprehensive sexuality education. This gap leaves children unprepared to navigate risks and inhibits their ability to advocate for their safety and well-being.

While legal reforms have strengthened punishment for offenders and expanded psychological and legal assistance for victims, the effectiveness of these measures remains unclear. According to the Prosecutor's Office, the number of reported cases of violence against children has decreased, but civil

society organisations report an increase in cases brought to their attention. This discrepancy suggests that children and families may lack confidence in law enforcement and formal justice systems, opting instead to seek support from alternative avenues. The capacity of law enforcement has been weakened by high staff turnover and a decline in training quality, further diminishing their ability to address cases effectively.

Traditional justice mechanisms also present a significant challenge. These systems often prioritise informal resolutions over formal legal processes, resulting in the silencing of victims and a lack of accountability for perpetrators. For example, in cases of sexual violence, some families opt for confrontation with the offender or financial settlements instead of pursuing justice through the courts. These practices perpetuate cycles of abuse, particularly when societal norms place the blame for abuse on families rather than on offenders.

Moreover, harmful gender norms continue to fuel violence in schools and other settings. Deeply ingrained attitudes regarding gender roles contribute to the normalisation of certain forms of abuse and discrimination, making it difficult to address violence at its root. Changing these societal attitudes will require sustained education campaigns, the involvement of community leaders, and a commitment to challenging harmful cultural practices that endanger children.

Kyrgyzstan's ability to tackle these issues depends on a multifaceted approach that strengthens formal child protection mechanisms while addressing the cultural and structural factors that contribute to abuse. Investments in comprehensive sexuality education, enhanced training for law enforcement, and the development of child-friendly reporting systems will be critical. At the same time, promoting community dialogue and engaging stakeholders in culturally sensitive ways will be essential to breaking cycles of silence and ensuring that children's rights are upheld.

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Thank you for the invitation, for communication and exchange of practices with other countries in Tashkent. We are confident that our cooperation will bring significant results in the fight against child exploitation and will strengthen our efforts to protect children's rights. Joining such a respected organization as ECPAT will open up new opportunities for sharing experiences, implementing best practices and working together with international partners to achieve our goals and objectives. We look to the future with confidence, expecting that this cooperation will contribute to improving conditions for children around the world and will support our desire to create a safe environment for the younger generation.”

”

*Kamala Ashumova,
Reliable Future SIPU, Azerbaijan*

TAJIKISTAN

Tajikistan has made strides in strengthening its legislative framework to address child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly with the 2021 law on child protection, which was recently amended in 2024 to explicitly include provisions on child sexual abuse. These legal advancements signal a growing recognition of the need for robust safeguards to protect children from exploitation. However, challenges in implementing and enforcing these laws persist, leaving many children vulnerable and without access to justice or support services.

Despite increased awareness and legal reforms, the prosecution of child sexual abuse cases remains limited. Only around 16 cases per year are prosecuted, reflecting both the underreporting of abuse and significant systemic barriers. For instance, cases cannot be received without the consent of parents, which creates additional hurdles for children who lack supportive caregivers. Evidence collection is another critical challenge, hindered by a lack of criminal forensic expertise, lengthy legal processes, and insufficient capacity within law enforcement and the judiciary.

Social media has emerged as a concerning space for peer-on-peer abuse and grooming of children as young as 12 years old. Perpetrators exploit platforms to lure children with promises of luxury and material goods, engaging in blackmail and coercion to manipulate and exploit them. Reports of online abuse, including grooming and the circulation of sexually explicit content, highlight the urgent need for enhanced online safety education.

A notable case illustrates the deeply entrenched challenges faced by victims and their families. A 17-year-old girl, whose mother worked in Iran, was sexually abused by her father for five years, starting when she was 12. The girl, believing the abuse to

be normal father-daughter behaviour, confided in a peer, which led to the discovery of the case. The father was prosecuted and sentenced to 30 years of imprisonment, demonstrating that justice is possible, though rare, when systemic barriers are overcome.

The lack of expertise and resources in Tajikistan's child protection system significantly hampers the ability to respond effectively to child sexual exploitation and abuse. There are no specialised social workers, rehabilitation services, or psychological support systems for children. Collaboration with the government on training programmes for law enforcement and the judiciary has yielded limited results, reflecting a need for more sustained and targeted efforts to build institutional capacity.

Addressing these issues will require a comprehensive approach. Strengthening evidence collection processes, expanding access to child-friendly reporting mechanisms, and ensuring children receive psychological and rehabilitative support are critical steps. Moreover, developing expertise in criminal forensics and equipping law enforcement with the necessary skills to handle cases sensitively will improve the overall response to abuse. Digital safety initiatives, combined with education campaigns, are essential to protecting children in online spaces.

Tajikistan's progress in amending laws is a crucial step, but significant work remains to translate these legislative changes into meaningful protections for children. By addressing systemic gaps and fostering a coordinated, child-centered approach, the country can make strides toward safeguarding its most vulnerable populations and ensuring justice for survivors.



UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan has made significant strides in raising awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse, with the government showing an increased commitment to addressing this critical issue. Despite this progress, systemic challenges continue to undermine the country's ability to provide effective support and protection for victims. Reports of sexual violence against children have risen, reflecting either an increase in incidents or improved reporting. However, the absence of specialised services for victims remains a major shortcoming, leaving many without access to the psychological, legal, and rehabilitative support they need to recover and rebuild their lives.

Data collection and analysis are another critical challenge in Uzbekistan. While various government agencies collect data on child sexual exploitation and abuse, there is no harmonisation or consolidation of these statistics. Local government units often gather data, but these are not analysed, shared, or integrated into a broader evidence base. This fragmentation limits the ability to fully understand the scope and dynamics of child sexual exploitation and abuse, impeding the development of evidence-based policies and interventions. Addressing this issue will require the creation of a centralised data system to enable better coordination and informed decision-making.

Compounding these systemic issues is a pervasive lack of trust in the justice system, which significantly impacts victims' willingness to pursue legal action. Victims often prefer to file cases in district courts, which are perceived as less corrupt than rural local courts. However, these cases are frequently redirected back to local courts, reinforcing distrust in the judicial system and discouraging others from seeking justice.

Additionally, the misuse of such cases by journalists and defence lawyers for personal gain or public profiling further undermines the justice process, prioritising sensationalism over the best interests of the victim.

Entrenched social norms also exacerbate the situation. A deeply rooted tolerance towards violence perpetrated by boys against other children reflects broader societal attitudes that normalise abusive behaviour and perpetuate cycles of violence. Initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism have explored the vulnerabilities of teenage boys, but these efforts often fail to address the broader culture of acceptance surrounding male-perpetrated violence. Breaking these cycles will require targeted interventions to challenge harmful gender norms, promote non-violence, and empower communities to reject abusive behaviours.

The challenges facing Uzbekistan highlight the need for a comprehensive, child-centered approach to tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes establishing specialised victim services, creating centralised and accessible data systems, and reforming the justice system to build trust and ensure accountability. Strengthening public awareness campaigns and addressing cultural attitudes that tolerate violence will also be essential to fostering a safer environment for children.

By addressing these interconnected issues with a coordinated and systemic response, Uzbekistan can make meaningful progress in protecting children, supporting survivors, and holding perpetrators accountable.



Conclusion

The country-specific insights illuminate the shared and unique struggles of nations in combating child sexual exploitation and abuse. While progress has been made in areas such as legislative reform, awareness-raising, and justice system strengthening, significant gaps remain in service provision, data consolidation, and societal attitudes. These challenges demand a multifaceted approach that combines stronger legal protections, enhanced support services, and targeted efforts to shift harmful societal norms. By fostering regional collaboration and leveraging these insights, stakeholders can develop more effective, locally informed strategies to safeguard children and uphold their rights.

THEMATIC DISCUSSIONS

The thematic discussions section delves into the core issues and recurring patterns that shape the landscape of child sexual exploitation and abuse across the region. By examining challenges in reporting, gendered dynamics, gaps in data and research, the role of technology, migration, and traditional practices, the section provides a comprehensive analysis of the systemic barriers and opportunities for intervention. It highlights how societal norms, institutional shortcomings, and emerging trends intersect to influence the prevalence and response to child sexual exploitation and abuse. This thematic exploration underscores the urgent need for coordinated, child-centered, and evidence-based approaches to tackle these multifaceted challenges effectively.

CHALLENGES IN REPORTING AND ADDRESSING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

One of the most persistent challenges in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse in the region is the pervasive difficulty victims face in reporting their experiences. Societal shame and stigma surrounding these issues create significant barriers to disclosure. Many victims, along with their families, choose silence or seek informal resolution mechanisms within their communities rather than approaching formal channels for justice. This is exacerbated by victim-blaming attitudes, which are especially directed towards girls, further marginalising those already traumatised.

Compounding this challenge is a deep-seated lack of trust in law enforcement and judicial systems. Many communities perceive these institutions as corrupt, ineffective, and insensitive. Lengthy processes and the risk of re-traumatisation discourage victims from seeking justice, reinforcing cycles of silence and impunity. Even when cases are brought forward, the inadequacy of child protection systems undermines the likelihood of meaningful outcomes. The lack of specialised services, child-friendly procedures, and trained professionals frequently leaves victims without proper support and contributes to a sense of hopelessness for families seeking justice.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DISCLOSURE AND VICTIMISATION

The experience of child sexual exploitation and abuse is shaped by gendered dynamics, with boys and girls facing distinct barriers and vulnerabilities. For boys, societal expectations of masculinity present unique challenges in disclosing abuse. Fear of being perceived as weak or labelled as homosexual often leads to internalised shame, self-blame, and a reluctance to seek help. This silence perpetuates their victimisation and leaves them without adequate support.

The need for gender-sensitive approaches in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be overstated. Tailored strategies that account for the specific experiences and

vulnerabilities of boys and girls are essential to prevention and intervention efforts. This includes gender-sensitive training for professionals, the development of specialised services, and public campaigns that challenge harmful gender norms while fostering a supportive environment for all survivors to come forward.

GAPS IN RESEARCH AND DATA

A lack of comprehensive research and data collection on child sexual exploitation and abuse represents a significant barrier to progress. While some data exist, it is often fragmented, lacks methodological rigour, and is not easily accessible. This scarcity hinders advocacy efforts and the development of effective policies and programmes. Moreover, limited resources for research and the absence of integrated systems for data sharing exacerbate the problem, leaving critical gaps in understanding the full scope and impact of these crimes.

Publishing research findings adds another layer of complexity. Government control, political sensitivities, and concerns about data protection make it challenging to disseminate evidence that could inform interventions. Overcoming these barriers will require concerted efforts to prioritise research, ensure transparency, and create environments that support the collection and sharing of reliable data on child sexual exploitation and abuse.

THE NEED FOR CHILD-CENTERED AND CHILD-FRIENDLY POLICIES AND JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Existing justice systems are often intimidating and fail to prioritise the needs of child victims. Courtrooms and legal procedures are frequently designed with little consideration for the sensitivities of girls and boys, resulting in re-traumatisation and a lack of trust in the judicial process. Introducing child-friendly mechanisms—such as specialised courts, trained professionals, and child-friendly interviewing rooms—would ensure that children's voices are heard while protecting their rights and dignity.

Empowering children's participation in policy and programme development is another critical component of a child-centered approach. Creating platforms for children to share their experiences, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute to child-led initiatives can enhance the effectiveness and relevance of interventions. However, this must be done with caution, especially in government-controlled environments, to ensure children's safety and well-being.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN BOTH FACILITATING AND PREVENTING CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Technology plays a dual role in the context of child sexual exploitation and abuse, acting both as a facilitator of harm and as a tool for prevention. Online platforms have opened new avenues for perpetrators to groom, exploit, and abuse children. The anonymity provided by the internet complicates efforts to monitor content, identify offenders, and intervene promptly. Challenges such as the blackmailing and circulation of intimate images further illustrate the dangers of digital spaces, necessitating stronger regulations and proactive measures to protect children online.

Conversely, technology offers significant opportunities to enhance prevention and support efforts. Online safety education, the development of reporting mechanisms, and social media campaigns for awareness-raising are powerful tools for protecting children. Collaborations with private sector entities, such as the In-Drive taxi company educating drivers on identifying and reporting exploitation, demonstrate how technology can be harnessed for positive change.

THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION – PLACING CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

Migration patterns in the region are deeply intertwined with the vulnerabilities of children to exploitation and abuse. Children left behind by migrating parents often face increased risks due to the lack of parental care and oversight. Factors such as language barriers, uncertain legal status, and limited access to support services compound the challenges faced by migrant children.

Addressing these risks requires a comprehensive approach that tackles the root causes of migration, such as poverty and armed conflict, while also ensuring robust protection mechanisms for migrant children. Collaborative efforts between countries of origin and destination are essential to uphold the rights of migrant children and reduce their susceptibility to exploitation.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The private sector's involvement in preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse has been limited, despite its significant potential to contribute. A lack of regulations, tax incentives, and awareness among businesses often prevents meaningful engagement. However, the private sector holds valuable resources—including technology, financial support, and communication channels—that could be leveraged for prevention and support efforts.

Positive examples of private sector engagement further demonstrate this potential. For instance, the In-Drive taxi company has taken proactive steps to educate its drivers on how to identify and report signs of sexual exploitation of children, highlighting how businesses can contribute meaningfully to prevention efforts. Examples such as this highlight the untapped potential of corporate social responsibility in this area.

THE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL AND CUSTOMARY PRACTICES

Traditional and customary practices in the region often exacerbate the risks of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Practices such as child marriage and bride kidnapping are deeply rooted in gender norms and power imbalances, placing girls at heightened risk. These harmful traditions also hinder access to justice, as community norms often prioritise informal resolution mechanisms over formal legal processes.

Addressing these practices requires culturally sensitive and community-based approaches. Engaging with traditional leaders and community members to promote dialogue, education, and alternative solutions is essential to shifting harmful norms and upholding children's rights.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is critical for preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse. Local communities, religious leaders, media influencers, and other stakeholders play a vital role in raising awareness and fostering a culture of accountability and protection.

Peer-to-peer education programmes are highlighted as particularly effective, enabling children and young people to engage in discussions about safety and broader child rights issues. These initiatives help create a supportive network for children while empowering them to advocate for their rights and well-being.



Conclusion

The thematic discussions highlight the interconnected nature of the challenges surrounding child sexual exploitation and abuse, emphasising that no single intervention can address the issue in isolation. From strengthening legislative frameworks and justice systems to fostering cultural change and leveraging technology, the need for holistic, multi-sectoral approaches is clear. These discussions serve as a roadmap for prioritising action areas, advocating for systemic reforms, and fostering regional collaboration. By addressing these themes with urgency and commitment, stakeholders can create safer environments for children and ensure that their rights and dignity are upheld.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that builds on current efforts while responding to emerging challenges. This section outlines key priority areas for action, emphasising evidence-based strategies, systemic reforms, and collaboration across sectors to safeguard children's rights and well-being. By tackling legislative gaps, strengthening child protection systems, empowering communities, and fostering regional collaboration, these future directions chart a path towards meaningful progress.

INVEST IN ROBUST DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND RESEARCH

Reliable data and robust research are fundamental to understanding the scope and impact of child sexual exploitation and abuse and crafting effective responses. Comprehensive studies on the prevalence, trends, and risk factors associated with these issues are essential, with data disaggregated by gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other relevant demographics. Such insights will enable the design of evidence-based policies and interventions that address the diverse needs of children.

Methodological rigor must be prioritised to ensure that research findings are accurate, reliable, and actionable. High-quality research practices should be supported by adequate funding, training, and collaboration with academic institutions. Furthermore, accessibility to administrative data—such as hotline records, crime statistics, and court cases—is critical. Stakeholders should advocate for data-sharing mechanisms that allow universities and other institutions to analyse and utilise this information effectively. A harmonised approach to data collection and analysis will provide the evidence base needed for impactful child protection strategies.

PROMOTE CONTEXTUALLY ADAPTED COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Education is a powerful tool for prevention, equipping children with the knowledge and skills to understand respectful relationships, sexuality and sexual exploitation and abuse. Advocating for the inclusion of age-appropriate, culturally sensitive sexuality education in school curricula is an essential step. Such education should address topics like consent, personal boundaries, online safety, and recognising abusive behaviours, tailored to the developmental stages of children.

In contexts where resistance to comprehensive sexuality education exists, alternative approaches should be explored. For example, integrating child safety education into existing curricula or implementing digital literacy and online safety

programs can provide children with practical knowledge to navigate risks. Partnerships with teachers, parents, and community leaders are vital to fostering acceptance of these initiatives and ensuring their successful implementation.

STRENGTHEN CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEMS

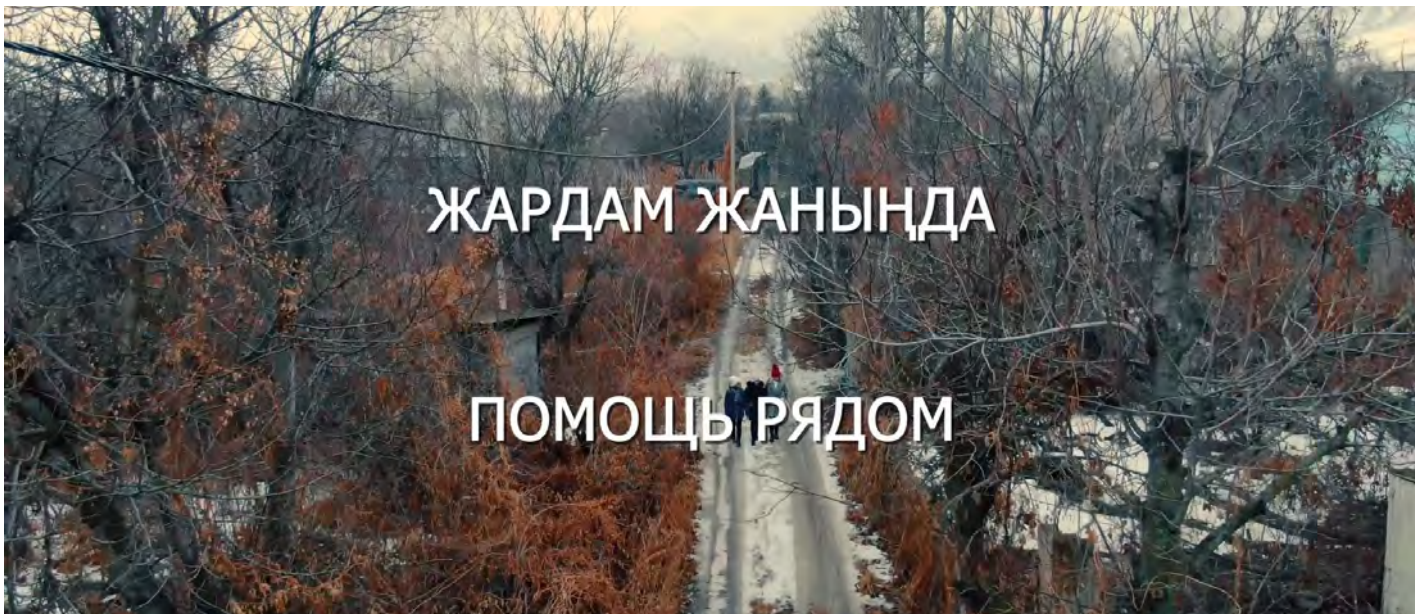
A robust child protection system is the backbone of any effective strategy to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse. Strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration among law enforcement, healthcare providers, social services, and educational institutions is essential. These systems must feature clear reporting mechanisms, specialised services for victims and offenders, and trained professionals who can respond sensitively and effectively.

Accessibility and child-centeredness are critical to encouraging victims to come forward. Reporting mechanisms must be designed to protect children's confidentiality while providing safe and supportive environments. At the same time, victims require timely access to psychological, medical, and legal assistance to support their recovery and ensure their rights are upheld.

EMPOWER CHILDREN AND PROMOTE THEIR PARTICIPATION

Children's voices must be central to efforts addressing sexual exploitation and abuse. Creating platforms where children can safely share their experiences and perspectives is vital for understanding their needs and developing effective responses. These platforms must be designed with sensitivity to the specific context, particularly in environments where government control may pose risks to participants' safety.

Child-led initiatives, such as peer-to-peer education programs, offer significant potential for raising awareness and promoting positive social norms. Empowering children to lead and participate in these efforts fosters their resilience, builds confidence, and creates a sense of ownership in protecting their peers. These initiatives also play a critical role in breaking cycles of silence and promoting open dialogue about safety and rights.



ENGAGE THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The private sector has a critical role to play in combating child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly in the digital sphere. Partnerships with technology companies, internet service providers, and other private sector entities can drive innovation in preventing online exploitation. These collaborations should focus on developing robust monitoring systems, improving reporting mechanisms, and promoting corporate social responsibility. Tax incentives and regulatory frameworks can further encourage businesses to invest in child protection initiatives.

Civil society organisations are indispensable in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse. They often provide direct support to victims, raise awareness, and advocate for systemic change. However, the shrinking space for civil society in many contexts has limited their ability to operate effectively. Advocacy efforts must prioritise creating a more conducive environment for these organisations while building their capacity to adapt to restrictions. Collaboration between civil society and international organisations can amplify their impact and sustain their critical work.

ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND MIGRATION

Technology is both a risk and an opportunity in the fight against child sexual exploitation and abuse. On the one hand, it has enabled perpetrators to exploit children more easily, necessitating stronger online safety education programs and enhanced regulation of digital spaces. Online safety initiatives

must teach children how to identify risks, protect their privacy, and respond to harmful situations. At the same time, collaboration with social media platforms and internet providers is crucial to monitor content, identify offenders, and respond effectively to cases of online exploitation.

Migration poses unique vulnerabilities for children, particularly those left behind by migrating parents. These children often lack adequate supervision and care, leaving them at increased risk of exploitation. Specialised support services must be developed to address the unique challenges faced by migrant children and families, including language barriers, legal status, and access to education and healthcare. Regional collaboration between countries of origin, transit, and destination is essential to safeguarding the rights of migrant children.

CHALLENGE HARMFUL TRADITIONAL AND CUSTOMARY PRACTICES

Harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage and bride kidnapping, remain significant drivers of child sexual exploitation and abuse. These practices are often deeply rooted in gender norms and power imbalances, perpetuating cycles of harm. Addressing them requires culturally sensitive approaches that engage communities and traditional leaders in dialogue and education. Promoting alternative solutions that uphold children's rights and well-being is essential to creating lasting change.

Efforts to challenge harmful practices must strike a balance between respecting cultural traditions and advocating for children's rights. This includes working collaboratively with local stakeholders to build trust and ensure that interventions are both effective and sustainable.

ADVOCATE FOR CHILD-CENTRIC JUSTICE SYSTEMS

Justice systems must prioritise the needs of child victims, ensuring that they are treated with dignity and sensitivity. Child-friendly procedures—such as specialised courts, trained professionals, and support services—are critical to minimising trauma and ensuring fair outcomes. Access to justice must be guaranteed for all children, with mechanisms in place to hold perpetrators accountable through transparent and effective legal proceedings.

By investing in reforms that make justice systems more accessible and child-centered, stakeholders can build trust and confidence among victims and their families. These changes will also strengthen accountability and send a strong message that child sexual exploitation and abuse will not be tolerated.

ADDRESS THE SHRINKING SPACE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society organisations are essential partners in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse, yet many face increasing restrictions that undermine their work. Advocacy efforts should focus on creating an enabling environment for civil society to operate freely and effectively. Raising awareness about the impact of restrictions, collaborating with international bodies to exert pressure on governments, and exploring alternative advocacy approaches in restrictive environments are critical strategies.

Capacity-building initiatives can help civil society organisations adapt to challenges, build resilience, and continue their work despite external pressures. Strengthening these organisations will ensure that they remain at the forefront of child protection efforts and advocacy for systemic change.



Conclusion

Future efforts to combat child sexual exploitation and abuse must be bold, comprehensive, and inclusive. By investing in data collection, enhancing child protection systems, addressing cultural norms, and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration, stakeholders can tackle the root causes of exploitation and create safer environments for children. Empowering children to play an active role, engaging the private sector and civil society, and addressing emerging challenges such as technology and migration will be key to sustaining progress.

This roadmap for future action underscores the urgency of coordinated efforts and systemic reforms to protect children from harm. By committing to these directions, stakeholders can create a future where every child is safeguarded, their rights are upheld, and their potential is fully realised.

CONCLUSION

The Central Asia Regional Workshop on Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse concluded with a resounding call to action for all stakeholders to renew their commitment to protecting children across the region. Over three days of dialogue and collaboration, participants acknowledged the noteworthy progress achieved in some areas, such as legal reforms, awareness-raising campaigns, and emerging partnerships. However, the workshop also underscored the persistent and interconnected barriers that hinder comprehensive responses to child sexual exploitation and abuse. These include systemic gaps in child protection frameworks, entrenched societal norms, and limited coordination across sectors.

The workshop emphasised the urgency of addressing these barriers by adopting integrated and multifaceted approaches. Discussions highlighted the importance of building robust child protection systems, supported by clear reporting mechanisms, specialised services, and professionals trained to respond sensitively to the needs of children. Participants also stressed the critical need for comprehensive and age-appropriate sexuality education to empower children with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves, while recognising the importance of culturally sensitive implementation strategies.

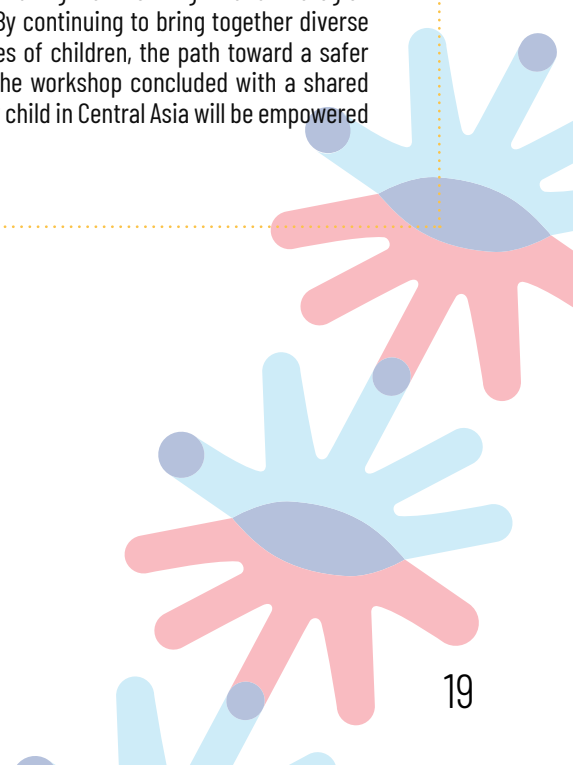
Technology emerged as both a challenge and an opportunity. While digital platforms have provided new avenues for exploitation, they also offer significant potential for prevention, awareness-raising, and reporting. Collaborative efforts with technology companies, internet service providers, and other private sector actors were identified as key to addressing online risks. Similarly, the vulnerabilities faced by children impacted by migration were a recurring theme, with participants calling for targeted support services to address the unique challenges of family separation and displacement.

The discussions also delved into the influence of traditional practices, such as child marriage and bride kidnapping, on perpetuating cycles of abuse and hindering access to justice. Tackling these harmful practices will require deep engagement with communities and traditional leaders, fostering dialogue and promoting alternative solutions that respect local contexts while firmly upholding the rights of children.

Participants highlighted the critical role of civil society organisations, whose work often bridges the gap between government initiatives and community needs. However, the shrinking space for civil society in many countries poses a significant challenge. Advocacy efforts must prioritise creating an enabling environment for these organisations to operate freely and effectively, ensuring their capacity to support victims and advocate for systemic change.

The recommendations that emerged from this workshop provide a roadmap for future action. These include prioritising research and data collection, strengthening child-centred justice systems, empowering children to participate in shaping policies, and fostering multi-sectoral collaboration. At the heart of these recommendations is the recognition that every child has the right to live free from fear, harm, and exploitation, and that achieving this goal requires sustained commitment, innovation, and collaboration from all stakeholders.

ECPAT International remains committed to supporting these efforts, ensuring that the insights and strategies developed during the workshop are translated into tangible actions. By continuing to bring together diverse perspectives, leveraging regional cooperation, and centring the voices of children, the path toward a safer and more just future for children in Central Asia becomes clearer. The workshop concluded with a shared vision: that through collective action and unwavering dedication, every child in Central Asia will be empowered to grow, thrive, and live a life free from exploitation.





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für die Welt