



METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Study on the sexual exploitation of children in the context of Venezuelan migration in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru

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STUDY ON THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF VENEZUELAN MIGRATION IN BOLIVIA, COLOMBIA AND PERU

Within the framework of the Down to Zero – SUFASEC project, ECPAT International carried out qualitative research between August 2024 and February 2025 on the accessibility, quality and effectiveness of prevention and care services against the sexual exploitation of Venezuelan children and adolescents on the move in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru. The study included the perceptions of 34 survivors (1 male) and frontline professionals through 70 interviews and 118 surveys. The research was implemented by member organisations of ECPAT International, the [Fundación Munasim Kullakita](#) in Bolivia, [Fundación Renacer](#) in Colombia, and [CHS Alternativo](#) in Peru.

CONVERSATIONS WITH SURVIVORS

Conversations with survivors of sexual exploitation during childhood in the context of human mobility were a key element of this project. They were conducted to highlight the gaps that persist when survivors' voices are excluded from efforts to develop policies and legislation in humanitarian contexts. Through these dialogues, their perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of existing support services were explored, as well as their recommendations for improvement.

Rationale

Involving survivors of sexual exploitation during childhood in research processes requires a high level of care to address a range of ethical considerations. This type of research must place great value on survivors' right to participate safely, actively and meaningfully in discussions on issues that directly

affect them. For this reason, the design of the conversations with Venezuelan survivors was based on the principle that participants should have, and feel they had, meaningful control over the entire process, including the decision of what to share and what not to share. Multiple measures were implemented to ensure that this control was genuine and respected, allowing participants to share only what they wished, on their terms.

Over recent years, ECPAT International has developed an ethical, survivor-centred and trauma-sensitive approach to ensure that survivors' perspectives are authentically included in research projects. This approach was replicated and applied in the present project, with the support of an expert with extensive experience working with survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

The approach was also conceived as a respectful dialogue with Venezuelan survivors on issues they considered necessary, exploring their experiences with the support services they had accessed. Survivors were invited to speak freely about their recovery process and the services they had received. At the same time, facilitators engaged in active listening to understand their stories, identify information gaps, and capture key details to represent their perspectives faithfully. Exploratory questions were used only responsively, to encourage dialogue, while avoiding a structured interview format that could be perceived as an interrogation. At all times, survivors shared only what they wished.

Although the requirements for facilitators already included relevant professional training and experience in working with children, they also participated in preparation and coordination meetings. During these

¹ For more information about the survivors and frontline professionals involved, as well as the results of the study, see [here](#).

meetings, they received training on the participatory, trauma-sensitive approach before conducting the conversations with survivors.

Muestra

Conversations were held with Venezuelans on the move who had been sexually exploited during childhood. These took place in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, where ECPAT International member organisations carefully identified participants. In most cases, survivors were reached through the services provided by these organisations; in Peru, however, additional participants were identified through external organisations with which close collaborative relationships existed.

The inclusion criteria considered, among other aspects, being between 16 and 25 years of age, having migrated in the context of the Venezuelan crisis, and having experienced sexual exploitation before the age of 18. In addition, participants needed to have received some form of support for their recovery (whether governmental or not) and not be in a current situation of exploitation nor present a level of distress that could pose a risk to their participation (assessed through a trauma-informed approach).

In total, 34 survivors took part in the conversations (7 in Bolivia, 20 in Colombia and 7 in Peru). The initial plan was to include 20 survivors in each country; however, several challenges arose in identifying participants. In Bolivia, obstacles were mainly related to identifying potential participants who were still in situations of victimisation or in the early stages of care, which did not allow for ensuring their emotional preparedness to participate in the study. In Peru, the main barriers were linked to access restrictions imposed by institutions responsible for state-run shelters, and to the difficulty of including young people who had returned to Venezuela, as their safe participation could not be guaranteed. To explore possible reasons behind these challenges in participant identification, additional interviews with key informants were conducted in both countries.

Overall, research teams in all three countries faced difficulties in identifying boys and male adolescents. Only in Colombia was one participant included. The three organisations noted that reported cases of Venezuelan boys and male adolescents who had

been sexually exploited are very scarce. The section on results dedicated to the invisibility and lack of attention towards this population explores these gaps in greater depth across the three countries.

Conversations approach

As mentioned earlier, the conversations were carefully designed to be interactive and unstructured, rather than following the traditional format of a research interview. The advantages of this approach lie in its sensitivity to the nature and complexity of the subject, while also promoting choice and empowerment by placing high value on participants having – and perceiving themselves as having – meaningful control over what they chose to share with the research team. In this way, participants were able to contribute verbally but also through various visual tools that supported the development of the conversations. Survivors were also asked whether they preferred to take part in individual or small group conversations (for example, in cases where they already knew other participants from attending the same support groups). All 34 survivors chose to take part in individual conversations.

Once participants had initially agreed to take part, the conversations were conducted in two stages: first, a pre-conversation, followed a few days later by the main conversation. This two-step approach was intentional, aiming from the outset to foster a relationship of trust in which survivors retained control over the process. During the pre-conversation, the activity was explained, questions about consent were addressed, and survivors' preferences were collected regarding the logistics of the main conversation (such as timing, location, room arrangement and who would be present). These decisions remained open and flexible, allowing facilitators and survivors to agree on what best suited their needs.

The spaces used for the conversations were primarily shelters, offices of ECPAT International member organisations, or the premises of organisations providing support to participants. In every case, survivors were asked during the pre-conversation about their preferred location. In addition, guidance was sought from the organisations and professionals who facilitated contact with survivors to select venues that met ethical standards, such as ensuring confidentiality.

Throughout the conversations, facilitators took all possible measures to ensure survivors felt comfortable. The conversational style, use of open questions, respect for response times and constant validation of the right not to answer helped create a safe environment. As part of the approach, survivors were also invited to express themselves through drawings to illustrate their feelings and experiences while speaking. However, the study did not aim to explore in depth the specific details of the exploitation or abuse experienced; having facilitators with expertise in trauma work allowed for direct and timely support.

Analysis

Following the conversations, facilitators analysed the findings and prepared a short draft report in Spanish focused on specific themes (for example, identifying barriers to access, service quality, and recommendations for improvement). A basic thematic analysis was used, which also highlighted relevant examples. As will be detailed later, validation and discussion sessions were organised with survivors to present the findings, gather feedback and receive further input through a structured consultation.

Ethical considerations

Before starting the research, ECPAT International convened a panel of three experts in research with children and in the context of Venezuelan migration. The panel reviewed the research protocol, which included specific measures to mitigate ethical risks, along with the first drafts of the methodological tools. The panel's feedback was carefully incorporated before the project began.

As mentioned earlier, facilitators also took part in a planning and contextualisation meeting prior to the conversations, to review the methodology and align strategies. In addition, the process for obtaining informed consent was carried out in two stages: this allowed survivors time to reflect on their participation (avoiding the need to sign immediately before the activity) and allowed them to decide on certain conditions of the conversation, thereby strengthening their sense of control over the process.

INTERVIEWS WITH FRONTLINE PROFESSIONALS

The participation of frontline support professionals provided a more nuanced understanding of the sexual exploitation of children on the move. Their direct casework experience offered valuable insights into their perceptions of how services operate.

Rationale

Given the key role of frontline professionals in supporting sexually exploited children on the move, qualitative interviews were conducted to understand the context, the existing institutional response to their exploitation, and the challenges and opportunities for providing quality care to survivors. This helped to identify the main challenges, gaps and opportunities to strengthen prevention and response.

Sample

In each of the three countries, ECPAT International member organisations drew on their national networks to identify frontline professionals providing support to children on the move. Twenty interviews were conducted in each country, involving child protection workers (such as social workers and psychologists), as well as staff from various services including shelters, temporary reception centres, community organisations, health services, justice systems and law enforcement, among others. To participate, individuals had to meet the following criteria:

- Be over 18 years of age;
- Have worked for at least the past 12 months in social work, psychology or another form of social support, or in a field related to child protection (e.g. health care, legal assistance);
- Have had a caseload in the past 12 months that included at least some children who had migrated in the context of the Venezuelan migration crisis;
- Have had a caseload in the past 12 months that included at least some individuals who had migrated in the context of the Venezuelan migration crisis and who had been sexually exploited or abused during childhood.

The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of the countries as a whole; however, ECPAT International member organisations sought to include a range of key governmental and non-governmental entities relevant to the issue. As mentioned earlier, in both Bolivia and Peru, five additional interviews were conducted with key informants, including representatives of organisations working with children on the move.

The interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline professionals. This method was chosen as it allowed for the collection of information on predefined topics relevant to the research, while also offering flexibility to incorporate emerging issues raised by participants.

Following ethical approval, the interview guide went through several rounds of revision to ensure it was contextualised and aligned with the needs of the project. The proposed topics were reviewed through a consultative process that included an in-person workshop for design, contextualisation and planning. Those consulted included ECPAT International member organisations and DTZ-SUFASEC project partners, who provided valuable input and made adjustments based on local context and terminology.

Once the final document was approved, ECPAT International teams and DTZ-SUFASEC partners invited a small sample of professionals to participate in a pilot test of the tool. Further revisions were made based on this test to ensure the interview was clear and appropriate to the context. Only after completing these steps did the formal data collection begin.

Analysis

After data collection, the research teams responsible for gathering the information shared the audio recordings or transcripts with ECPAT International through an online platform. ECPAT International conducted a general thematic analysis of the qualitative responses. Once preliminary results were obtained, a workshop was held in each country with stakeholders to review and discuss the initial findings.

SURVEY OF FRONTLINE PROFESSIONALS

The participation of frontline professionals through a survey aimed to complement the overall understanding of the sexual exploitation of children on the move.

Rationale

Given the limitation in the number of interviews, a short survey was conducted to gather the views of a wider group of frontline professionals. The aim was to collect data on the needs, existing challenges and opportunities to improve support services for survivors of sexual exploitation during childhood in situations of human mobility.

Sample

In each of the three countries, ECPAT International member organisations drew on their national networks to identify frontline professionals providing support to children on the move. This included child protection workers (such as social workers and psychologists) as well as staff from other services such as shelters, temporary reception centres, community organisations, health services and the justice sector, among others.

A convenience sample was used and, therefore, should not be considered representative of the diversity of frontline professionals in each country. However, efforts were made during the sampling process to include different types of services.

- To be eligible to complete the survey, professionals had to meet the following criteria:
- Be over 18 years of age;
- Have worked for at least the past 12 months in social work, psychology, another form of social support, or in a field related to child protection (e.g. health, legal assistance);
- Have directly managed their caseload for at least the past 12 months;
- Have had a caseload in the past 12 months that included at least some Venezuelan children on the move;
- Have had a caseload in the past 12 months that included at least some individuals who had been sexually exploited during childhood.

A total of 118 professionals supporting migrant child survivors of sexual exploitation completed the survey: 50 in Bolivia, 28 in Colombia and 40 in Peru. Notably, 124 respondents were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria, according to the initial screening questions. An analysis of these excluded responses showed that the most common unmet criterion was having provided direct support to children on the move during the past 12 months. ECPAT International member organisations involved in the project noted that this high number of exclusions may partly reflect the limited provision of services available to children on the move.

The survey

The survey was based on surveys designed and used by ECPAT International in previous projects, such as *Disrupting Harm, Voices of Survivors* and the *Global Boys Initiative*, but with a shorter structure, with multiple-choice questions and a small number of open-ended questions. The combination of question types allowed for answers that represent different shades of experiences,² thus contributing to a better understanding of the circumstances of providing support to children and adolescents in a situation of mobility.

Following ethical approval, the survey design was reviewed during an in-person workshop on design,

contextualisation and planning, which allowed for the necessary adaptations to be made. Once the document was approved, ECPAT International members and DTZ Alliance partners invited a small sample of professionals to pilot the tool and to adapt the survey to the local context. The average completion time for the questionnaire was 20 minutes.

Analysis

Data were stored in the online tool, with regular back-ups made on ECPAT International’s server. Using a standard online tool had the advantage of incorporating multiple consistency and logic checks into the script, meaning that the data were automatically cleaned.

Once data collection was completed, the information was cleaned and analysed, disaggregated at the local level. A simple descriptive analysis was carried out, along with a general thematic analysis of the qualitative responses.

VALIDATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In addition to the analysis conducted by the research teams, validation and discussion sessions were held with both survivors and frontline professionals.

Country	Methodology used for validation and discussion	
	With survivors	With frontline professionals
Bolivia	Two validation and discussion workshops were held, with 2 and 5 participants respectively. The findings from Bolivia were presented	Two in-person workshops were held with 18 and 26 frontline professionals, respectively, where the results of the survey, interviews and conversations were presented
Colombia	A virtual workshop was held with 12 survivors (11 women and one man) to present the general findings from the three countries. In addition, the findings from Colombia were shared by email, with feedback requested	Two in-person workshops were held with 10 and 7 frontline professionals, respectively, where the results of the survey, interviews and conversations were presented
Peru	Individual meetings were held with three survivor participants to present the findings from the conversations conducted in Peru	An in-person workshop was held with 46 frontline professionals, where the results of the survey and interviews were presented.

² Allen, Mike. (2017). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. 4 vols. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

LIMITATIONS

Given the qualitative nature of the study, although a research protocol was in place, clearly outlining the processes to be followed, each country was allowed to adapt these processes to its specific context, taking into account logistical and contextual conditions. This flexibility resulted in some differences in data collection.

For example, in Bolivia and Colombia, only survivors linked to the services provided by ECPAT International member organisations could be reached. This may have influenced the extent to which some participants

felt free to express critical views, as the facilitators of the conversations were also part of these organisations. Although efforts were made to include survivors with different trajectories, their participation could not be secured.

The number of participants also varied across countries, both in the case of survivors and frontline professionals surveyed. As described earlier, in Peru and Bolivia the target of 20 survivors per country was not reached, and only one male participant was included in Colombia. Similarly, in Colombia and Peru the target of surveying 50 frontline professionals was not met.





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