

# Using Research in Your Work

Addressing barriers for boys accessing care for sexual violence

## About this Brief

This brief is based on an article published in the [Special Issue of Child Abuse and Neglect - Global Insights on the Sexual Exploitation of Boys](#). In this issue, you can find a systematic scoping literature review and six empirical studies, which portray survivor narratives and insights from service providers. The research highlights the impact of gender norms, describes risk factors, and emphasizes the need for trauma-informed care. The Special Issue aimed to raise awareness and improve responses to the sexual exploitation of boys.

This brief describes data from the article [“Frontline support services for boys who have experienced child sexual exploitation: A thematic review of survey data from seven countries”](#) by Marie Nodzenski and Jarrett Davis. Citations are not used; however, all findings and conclusions are drawn from this article.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) affect all children, but research on the experiences of boys and their needs for support is lacking. Support services for boys can be limited, and workers frequently lack specialized training to meet their specific needs.

The study was part of the [Global Initiative to Explore the Sexual Exploitation of Boys](#), a landmark research project led by ECPAT International. An online survey containing 121 questions was administered to 404 frontline support workers in seven countries (Bolivia, Hungary, India, Morocco, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka) between April and September 2021 who were working with young survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation.

The survey enquired into knowledge and beliefs related to CSEA and their experience working with young survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, with a specific focus on boys under 18.



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## What could support workers' insights tell us about boys' experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly in relation to their vulnerabilities and the barriers they face to disclose an experience of sexual abuse?

Interestingly, despite social, economic, and cultural differences between the seven countries surveyed, the study also showed essential learnings common to all contexts.

### 1. Rigid gender norms and the culture of silence that surrounds CSEA not only increase boys' vulnerability to abuse but also complicate disclosure of such experiences and shape access to support resources.

'Gender norms' dictate socially appropriate and acceptable behavior connected to our gender. Gender norms for boys differ across contexts but typically hold that boys are strong and invulnerable. In relation to CSEA, gender norms can dictate that if they are targeted sexually, boys will be less seriously and negatively impacted than girls.

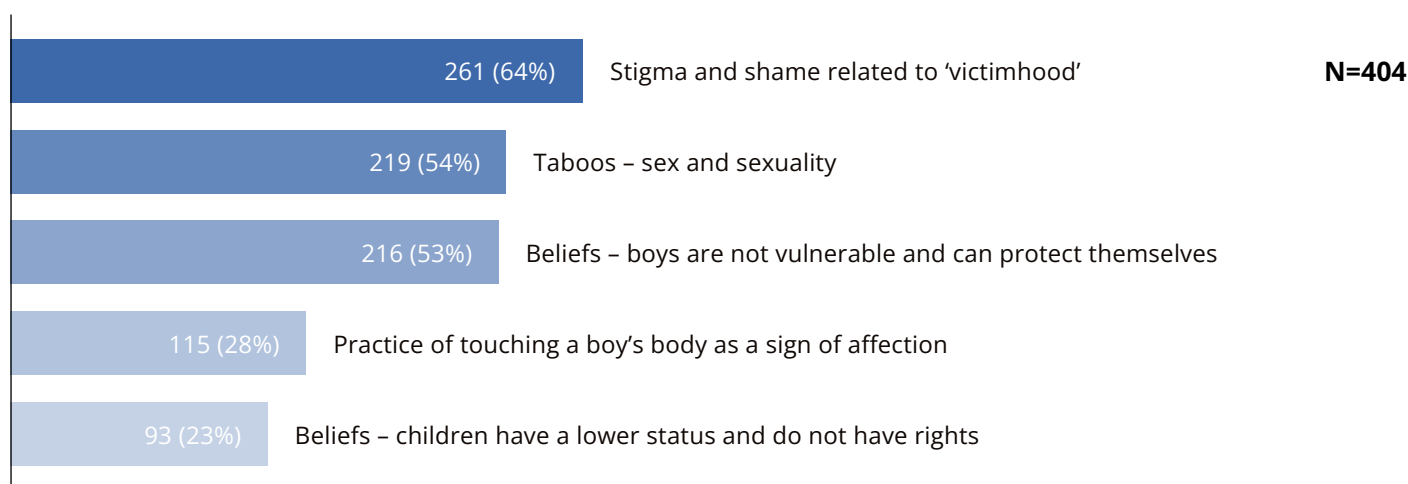
Support workers in all seven countries indicated that rigid gender norms and harmful stereotyping increased boys' vulnerability to CSEA but also complicated the possibility to disclose such experiences. The survey data also showed that gender norms also conditioned boys' entitlements to protection, opportunities to seek help and access to support resources.

In many contexts, while boys tend to benefit from more freedoms, they are also awarded less protection and supervision than girls, which can paradoxically increase their vulnerability to CSEA. Beliefs that boys are strong and resilient contradict the idea that they could be a victim of sexual abuse.

**53% of surveyed support workers reported that the belief that "boys are strong and can protect themselves" was a top vulnerability factor for boys.**

Such beliefs also create an additional layer of vulnerability for those boys who already face socio-economic challenges. Support workers perceived extreme poverty as the top socio-economic factor contributing to CSEA for boys. Working or living on the street and family violence were also commonly cited factors. Finally, in several countries, the considerable impact of economic migration (e.g., 'children having to migrate for work' or 'being left behind by migrating parents') was also considered key vulnerabilities.

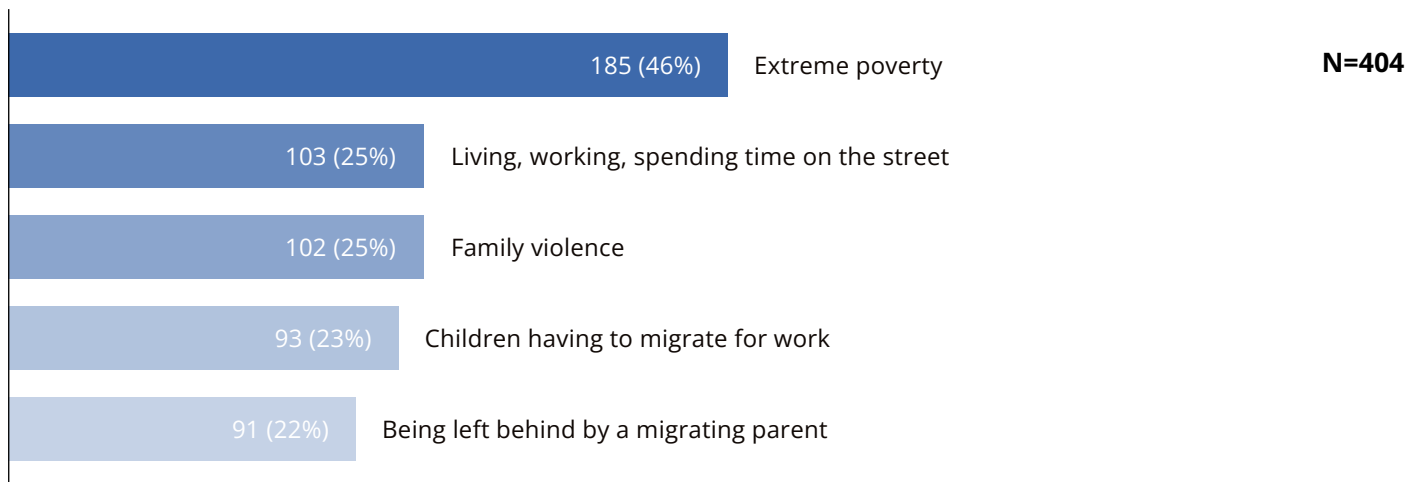
### Top 5 factors increasing boys' vulnerability to CSEA [traditional beliefs and practices]



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## Top 5 factors increasing boys' vulnerability to CSEA [socio-economic factors]



Being raised to be independent and self-reliant also prevents many boys from disclosing experiences of abuse, sometimes preventing boys from seeing themselves as victims or because seeking help is seen as a sign of weakness. These traditional beliefs and practices create a “culture of silence” around the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys.

This culture of silence is reinforced by taboos or discomfort around discussions of sex and sexuality that exist in many countries which were also perceived by workers to increase vulnerability to abuse and prevent disclosure. Such taboos obstruct healthy conversations between children and trusted adults, which could better equip children to recognize abuse and exploitation. Taboos contribute to an environment where children are shamed and fear reporting harmful experiences to parents or other adults.

Many boys further fear the negative or harmful response that could arise from disclosing an experience of sexual abuse (e.g., not being believed, being blamed, being punished, being judged, or in some cases being criminalized).

**Shame and stigma about the abuse were cited by nearly half of support workers surveyed as a top barrier to disclosure.**

Offenders may also capitalize on feelings of shame to silence boys. Such feelings may be particularly heightened for children with diverse sexuality or gender identity, particularly in contexts where homosexuality is criminalized. Prejudices against boys perceived as being homosexual can also limit the likelihood of them reporting crimes to the authorities or seeking access to support services. Many boys believe that there are many risks and very little to be gained by disclosing that they have been sexually exploited.

Normalizing physical violence (‘boys will be boys’) and emotional neglect (‘boys don’t cry’) or assuming that boys have more freedom and agency in all aspects of their lives, all influence how societies, families, and institutions understand the risks and vulnerabilities of boys to CSEA. Survey responses often implied assumptions that sexually abused or exploited boys were weak, were not perceived to be coerced, or even ‘willingly’ participated in their own exploitation, particularly when transactions (such as money) were exchanged. Such perceptions portray false circumstances of choice for boys forced to survive and can harmfully also lead boys to view themselves as responsible, or even as offenders. These circumstances can be used by offenders to manipulate boys into believing that they are “consenting” to their own abuse or exploitation.

Survey responses indicated that frontline support workers generally had a good understanding of the vulnerabilities towards CSEA that boys face, but that subtle and invisible biases still continued to impact the way they encountered and worked with boys.

This will not only increase boys’ vulnerability but also negatively impact the likelihood that they will receive support.

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## Use the Data in Your Work

**Promote public health-based and stigma-reducing awareness campaigns that dismantle or reframe harmful gender norms.**

This will help reduce vulnerabilities for boys, encourage boys to disclose, and promote a more positive response from providers.

Key messages include:

- Boys can be – and are – victims of sexual violence.
- There are a million different ways to ‘be’ a boy. All are valid despite the more dominant norms.
- Sexual exploitation and abuse of boys are real and a serious issue.
- Boys are never willing participants in their own sexual abuse, even when transactional exchange is present.
- Boys should not be expected to protect or defend themselves, especially in situations of sexual abuse.
- Boys have many fears about effects of disclosure. Boys may need time to know they can trust you before they are ready to open about an experience of sexual violence.

**Develop age-appropriate learning resources and encourage open conversations between boys and trusted adults** so that young people safely access information related to sexual development, their rights to protection, and their right to live a life free of exploitation and abuse.

This information will empower boys to recognize sexual abuse and exploitation and to feel comfortable seeking help.

## 2. Availability of gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive services for young survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse remains limited globally.

Misconceptions and biases about the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys unfortunately translate to limited or low-quality services for boys with such experiences in most parts of our world. Limited visibility of boys as victims by many support services was also evidenced in our study.

Support workers across countries were likely to report that boys first experienced sexual exploitation or abuse at a young age. In contrast, support workers encountered fewer boys aged 16–17 than girls in that age range.

**40% of support workers indicated that boys with an experience of CSEA were between 11 and 15 years of age, and 30% believed they were between 6 and 10 years of age, at the first time of abuse.**

Existing support services may not be visible or perceived by boys as welcoming – boys see them as intended for children, women, and girls. Support workers also faced difficulties in identifying the boys they encounter as victims of CSEA. Support workers tended to see boys as holding agency and making clear decisions to ‘trade sex’ rather than as children succumbing to exploitation from adults from the profound lack of choices brought on from their circumstances. These barriers could be exacerbated for older boys.

**Support workers found it particularly difficult to identify sexual abuse among boys presenting with other intersecting challenges (such as living or working on the street) or in the context of poverty, with some workers ascribing greater agency to boys being sexually exploited for money.**

Finally, the lack of familiarity of working with boys for many practitioners globally can also create challenges in offering boy-sensitive support even if they are identified as victims. In this study, 6% of practitioners supported boys exclusively. These practitioners were considered to be specialists and received referrals from others. While helpful, this could paradoxically limit access to general support services for boys – who are half of the population of children and perhaps should not be viewed as an area of specialty. To remove barriers, all practitioners should be equipped to offer support to children of all genders.

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Psychological support to boys for CSEA can differ from support to girls. Boys subjected to CSEA must find ways to externalize their strong emotions (with anger being a socially acceptable emotion for boys to display). Such externalizing behaviors should be understood by support workers, as these may also be used by boys to attract attention in the hope that adults will reach out and offer support. This also partly explains why boys tend to be referred to support services for behavioral problems that might receive justice-based rather than social care-based interventions. The range of individual reactions and responses to CSEA that any child has varies greatly. While we can learn about a range of responses, we must remember to tailor each helping response to the individual child that sits in front of us.

The data in this study with support workers articulates an urgent need for specific training on common behavioral indicators of CSEA for boys, the range of approaches to providing support, and in particular, training that helps practitioners to understand the wide range of individual responses to CSEA, on trauma-informed care, and on strategies to connect and maintain relationships with boys.

## Use the Data in Your Work

- **Care practitioners must make their services visible, approachable, and accessible to boys.** This includes developing communication strategies and messaging that use boy-friendly language and conducting outreach activities that specifically connect boys to support services in ways that are comfortable and account for the needs of boys – in other words, that are “boy-friendly”. Seeking help should not be the sole responsibility of boys.
- **Practitioners should encourage proactive identification of boys who may have experienced sexual violence in their practice by becoming familiar with trauma-related symptomatology for boys.** Boys may often be referred to services for issues related to anger, hostility, running away from home, substance misuse, etc. Practitioners should acquire the knowledge and skills to consider if these issues may be linked with experiences of sexual violence.
- **All practitioners (not just specialists) should receive fundamental training on CSEA of boys and additional resources to provide gender-sensitive support to children of all genders.** This includes the implementation of trauma-informed care principles in their practice with boys. Prevention, protection, and support initiatives for boys should be trauma-informed. While developing specialist services is important to accommodate the specific needs of boys, this should not result in the exclusion of boys from general children’s services.

## Good Practice

The drop-in centre run by Urban Light (Chiang Mai, Thailand) operates a drop-in centre with and for the boys and the activities conducted by the organisation have gained a good reputation amongst boys, families and communities. This is reinforced by the regular presence of the staff of the organisation in the streets and in vulnerable communities. A high proportion of boys are indeed usually introduced to Urban Light by other boys or young men.

## Summary

While the findings presented here represent the views (and possible biases) of support workers, they nevertheless present fascinating insights into the vulnerabilities and barriers to caring for boys who have been subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse.

Support workers across diverse study settings consistently highlighted the impact of harmful gender norms on boys’ vulnerability to abuse and opportunities to receive the support they need.

Increased awareness and understanding of this serious, yet under-researched and under-resourced, child protection issue among care professionals and the wider public is essential to challenge problematic attitudes and practices.

## Useful Resources

Care practitioners should build on existing resources addressing boys and men’s healthcare and help-seeking preferences to enhance service uptake and results. Examples include:

- Bridging the Gap (Down to Zero, 2020) a comprehensive training resource on the sexual exploitation of boys.
- Supporting Survivors of Violence (Women’s Refugee Commission & UNICEF, 2021) includes modules on how to appropriately receive and manage disclosures of sexual violence by male survivors.
- Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men (APA, 2018), explores the complexity of masculinity and work with boys in their development.