

# 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 [“She was willing to send me there”: Intrafamilial child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking of boys”](#) by Ena Lucia Mariaca Pacheco, Andrés Eduardo Buenaventura and Glenn Michael Miles. Citations are not used; however, all findings and conclusions are drawn from this article.

This study explored the unique characteristics of intrafamilial child sexual abuse and exploitation through the sex trafficking of boys. It also assessed the barriers to disclosure and recovery experienced by male survivors. The study used an exploratory methodology to uncover insights into the trafficking techniques used by familial perpetrators instead of looking into a specific research question.

Over one year, six rounds of interviews were conducted with 10 people who all met three characteristics: 1) They were born a biological male; 2) They reported being sexually abused by their family members during their childhood; 3) They reported being trafficked by family members to be sexually exploited by perpetrators outside of their families.

Through this process, survivors were given the opportunity to share their first-hand experiences and their views on how other potential victims may be better identified and supported by frontline professionals such as teachers, child protection specialists, law enforcement officers and medical professionals.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the research team employed ethical and trauma-informed interviewing techniques over 12 months to gradually build trust with the survivors. The slower process allowed the participants to answer interview questions at a pace that was comfortable for them, allowing them more control in the research process when they experienced emotional triggers and dissociative episodes. The co-productive study also tailored the methodology after each round of interviews by incorporating feedback from the survivors themselves.

The majority (8) of the participants were based in North America, representing different ethnicities and sexual orientations.

## 1. Barriers to Disclosure for Boys and Visual Indicators to Identify Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

The male survivors in this study faced numerous complex internal and external barriers to disclosure, reaffirming previous research suggesting that these barriers result in the sexual exploitation of boys to be considerably underreported.

The internal barriers mentioned by the survivor participants were trauma bonds and a sense of loyalty to the family members who were abusing them. Perpetrators exploited the boys' natural familial bonds, taking advantage of the natural imbalance of power favoring the parents and/or other adult family members. The perpetrator family members used emotional manipulation by gaslighting, lying and denying their active involvement in the sexual abuse and exploitation of the boy victims. This confused the victims, ultimately resulting in their dissociation and suppression of the memories of their victimization.

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"I tried opening up a little to my mother in the years that followed, and though not much was said, she would gaslight my memories. But, I could see in her face that she knew I was remembering ... When she passed away, and when my parents' belongings were being packed so the house could be sold, the camera my father had used to take pornographic photos of me and my female cousin was found. I claimed it, and having it in my hands brought the final walls down that were holding back my deepest traumas." – Survivor Participant

These vulnerabilities were exacerbated by external barriers to disclosure, such as the dominant narratives on heteronormative masculinity, which discourage boys from showing emotion or seeking out help for problems.

To help address barriers to disclosure, the study resulted in the creation of a tool kit for frontline professionals to use when working with potential male victims. The tool kit provides a comprehensive list of 32 behavioral, emotional, physical and psychological indicators of child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. It also includes 32 additional indicators present in adult male survivors.

The survivor participants stated that frontline professionals in their cases were not effective in recognizing visible and behavioral indicators of their trauma.

## Use the Data in Your Work

- **Enhance Awareness of Complex Barriers:** Professionals should recognize and address the multifaceted internal and external barriers faced by victimized males, as understanding these complexities is crucial in providing effective support. Recognize the societal norms around masculinity, as these expectations may hinder disclosures. Model and encourage emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors, and avoid gender stereotypes that discourage men and boys from openly discussing their traumatic experiences.
- **Promote Safe and Trusting Environments:** Create environments where survivors feel psychologically safe. Be mindful of potential triggers, acknowledging that certain investigative procedures or examinations may lead to distress. Examinations should be fully explained in detail beforehand, proceed very slowly and always account for the person's emotional fragility. Carefully consider individual sensitivities to avoid re-traumatization. Establish a safe space (in-person or online) where survivors can disclose their experiences without fear of judgment or retribution.
- **Utilize Comprehensive Toolkit for Identification:** Embrace the developed toolkit for identifying male victims, which includes a broad spectrum of visual signs covering behavioral, emotional, physical, and psychological indicators of abuse. This comprehensive approach goes beyond conventional indicators, providing a nuanced understanding for frontline professionals.

[Access to the Tool Kit from this research can be found here](#)

## 2. Perpetrator Profiles

This research demonstrated that female perpetrators can be actively involved in sexual abuse, trafficking, and exploitation, challenging common beliefs. In this study, female perpetrators were present in almost all cases. These women played various roles, serving as sexual abusers, traffickers, exploiters, and buyers. Notably, six participants disclosed that their mothers played leading roles in trafficking them. The study uncovered widespread active participation by female perpetrators in exploitative sexual activities, including sadistic abuse, paying for sexual exploitation of boys, and trafficking them to other perpetrators.

These findings differ from previous studies, where female perpetrators are frequently described as coerced by male perpetrators. In contrast, our research highlights the active and direct involvement of women in the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Our study reveals a diverse range of severity in violence displayed by female perpetrators.

"Women were absolutely relentless. It seemed the more I cried and tried to plead with them the more it would turn them on and the more abuse I would suffer." – Survivor Participant

Familial sexual abuse of male children and trafficking often coincided with generational sexual trauma. The tactics employed were focused on grooming communities and concealing trafficking. For instance, family perpetrators frequently used activities like "camping trips" or "family holidays" as cover stories to move children without raising suspicion. To outside observers, these activities may seem like routine family outings, eliciting no suspicion.

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Furthermore, familial perpetrators employed misleading terminology when engaging in sexual abuse, making it difficult for children to disclose the abuse. In one case, a child told his kindergarten teacher that he and his mother “were having a dream, and my mother would touch me here.” Unfortunately, his claim was immediately dismissed, highlighting the challenge children can face when attempting to disclose.

## Use the Data in Your Work

- **Increase Awareness of Female Perpetration and Culpability:** Practitioners should be aware that they may hold a gender bias that downplays female culpability. Female perpetrators may exhibit a diverse range of severity in violence during their sexual crimes against boys, including sadistic abuse. Never assume that a mother or female family member is a safe person when investigating a potential case of child sexual abuse or exploitation.
- **Familial Grooming Tactics towards the Child and Community:** Recognize that grooming tactics employed by familial perpetrators can include use of deliberately misleading terminology during sexual abuse. This can lead to children not being believed when they disclose abuse, emphasizing the need for careful and non-judgmental investigation of suspicions.
- **Believing and Validating Survivors:** Take disclosures seriously, regardless of the gender of the perpetrator or the person disclosing. The stories in this research underscore the importance of validating experiences and understanding the realistic fear of being disbelieved, especially if the perpetrator is female or a family member.

## 3. Gender Biases against Male Victimization.

All ten participants consistently reported encountering substantial gender bias and skepticism regarding their victimization when interacting with law enforcement, medical staff, and mental health professionals. They shared that service providers often doubted their claims and they were frequently dismissed by the very individuals tasked with assisting them.

Among the survivor participants, four disclosed instances of familial sexual abuse or trafficking to the police, only to be met with skepticism, disbelief, and a lack of understanding of grooming tactics and trauma bonds. This was compounded by overt gender biases, where officers explicitly dismissed the concept of boys being victimized and, in some instances, denied the possibility of female culpability. Unfortunately, these attitudes resulted in the police taking no action on behalf of the survivors.

Survivors reported receiving more effective support from service providers who were knowledgeable in implementing trauma-informed practices. When professionals were trained to recognize indicators and support victims of child sexual exploitation, survivors experienced significantly improved support.

## Use the Data in Your Work

- **Challenge Gender Biases:** Professionals should actively work to challenge and address gender biases within their own beliefs and practices, ensuring that survivors of all genders are treated with the same level of empathy and credibility.
- **Trauma-Informed, Victim-Centric Training:** Police, medical staff, child protection specialists and mental health professionals should access training regarding trauma-informed practices, focusing on recognizing indicators and understanding grooming tactics and trauma bonds, particularly in cases of familial child sexual exploitation and trafficking.

## Summary

This study illuminates the profound impact of familial child sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking on victimized boys, highlighting the enduring psychological and physiological consequences. The findings not only reveal the barriers to disclosure but also challenge prevalent gender biases, especially regarding female perpetration. The significance of trauma-informed training for frontline professionals cannot be overstated, as it clearly improves the support survivors receive.