

Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography on Addressing the vulnerabilities of children to sale and sexual exploitation in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Netherlands, March 14, 2022

With this submission, Defence for Children - ECPAT Netherlands, The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children, the Dutch Centre against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking ('CKM') and Terre des Hommes Netherlands, respond to the call for input on addressing the vulnerabilities of sexual exploitation in the framework of the SDGs. This submission will particularly focus on the identified vulnerabilities of children in relation to sexual exploitation and the current practices in place in view of protecting children from sexual exploitation in the Netherlands. As research demonstrates, vulnerabilities are influenced by individual, family-related, community-related and social factors. This submission provides an overview of the current knowledge and understanding of risk factors and vulnerabilities of children to sexual exploitation in the Netherlands. The risk factors have been identified based on research conducted in the Netherlands between 2016 to 2021.

1. Vulnerabilities of children in relation to sexual exploitation

Childhood (sexual) abuse/repeated victimization

The National Rapporteur found that 50% of child and adolescent human trafficking victims in the Netherlands from 2016 – 2020 becomes a victim of another crime within five years. Police records show that child victims of exploitation have a higher chance of revictimization, compared to victims who were older than 23 years during their victimization. Research of CKM elucidates that child victims of sexual exploitation are more likely to have experienced multiple and prolonged forms of adversity during childhood.¹ These experiences of cumulative and co-occurring victimizations can reduce resiliency and cause mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, and other emotional and behavioural problems.

Early initiation

A vulnerability found in a study on boy victims by CKM is early sexual initiation, which may stunt healthy sexual development. Therefore, minors who had their first sexual experience at a young age may fail to recognize their experience as unwanted, unsafe or exploitative, which may lead them to not ask for help.²

Poverty, debt and financial pressure

Victims stated in another study done in the Netherlands that financial pressure was a reason to engage in 'survival sex'. Survival sex may bring minors into high-risk situations and cause them to interact with individuals who can abuse these economic vulnerabilities to force them into exploitation.³

No stable home or homelessness, and multi-problem issues

Not having a stable roof over your head increases the vulnerability of children to be recruited, conned, and sexually exploited. In some cases children have run away from home or a shelter.⁴ Furthermore, not

¹ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd)Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland.*

² Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd)Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland.*

³ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel, (2021) *Daders van binnenlandse seksuele uitbuiting.*

⁴ Geld en geweld, <https://www.swpbook.com/boeken/1/geestelijke-gezondheidszorg/2120/geld-en-geweld> en Fier, Een dubbeltje op zijn kant, <https://www.fier.nl/blog/een-dubbeltje-op-zn-kant/8>.

having a stable home can push minors in the Netherlands into survival sex.⁵ It is also recognized in the Netherlands and confirmed by multiple studies that living in a home with multi-problem issues such as addiction, psychiatric issues, coping and attachment problems, sexual abuse and domestic violence, increase the likelihood of sexual exploitation.

Mild intellectual disability

Children with mild intellectual disability have a higher risk of becoming a victim of sexual exploitation. The lack of knowledge and skills regarding relationships and sexuality makes it harder for children with intellectual disability to recognize dangerous situations and inappropriate manners.⁶ As a result of the latter they are vulnerable for being recruited, conned, and exploited. Research shows that child victims of criminal exploitation are predominantly victims with mild intellectual disability that in some cases are also sexually exploited.⁷

Unaccompanied migrant children

Migration puts children in a vulnerable position for human trafficking. The National Rapporteur found and flagged in 2016 that unaccompanied migrant children in the Netherlands may find themselves in a precarious situation. Unaccompanied migrant children usually have very little knowledge of the Dutch language and society and their own rights. In addition, they have a limited social network to rely on and do not know whom to trust. In some cases, they need to earn money quickly, because of debts or for family. Furthermore, their legal status is unclear; they do not have a residence permit and are not allowed to work. Finally, they have experienced vulnerable situations in their country of origin.⁸

Children with the eating disorder anorexia nervosa

It appears that this group of predominantly girls that suffer from anorexia do not see themselves as a patient and often suffer from low self-esteem. They also do not often talk to their parents or friends about their wish to lose weight, because of fear of taboo and stigma. These girls therefore look for information and like-minded people outside of their social environment, often online, on pro-anorexia websites. In some cases they also search for or enter in touch with 'pro ana coaches'. Research shows that these so-called coaches are usually men with sexual intentions.⁹ Social isolation, psychological problems and the search for acceptance increases vulnerability. This vulnerability is further increased because some of these girls search the internet for like-minded people who 'understand' them and strive for perfection.

Gender-related risks

In the Netherlands, the perceived stereotypical SEC victims tend to be girls who are tricked into sexual exploitation. There are however some traditional beliefs surrounding masculinity which can make boys more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Boy victims are less likely to be acknowledged in society. They are also not being recognized as victims by social services and during police investigation, because of gender bias and the stereotype that men cannot be victims of sexual exploitation. Furthermore, boys in the Netherlands usually do not identify themselves as victims of sexual exploitation.¹⁰ For that reason,

⁵ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd) Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland*.

⁶ Amelink Q, Roozen S, Leistikow I, et al, *Sexual abuse of people with intellectual disabilities in residential settings: a 3-year analysis of incidents reported to the Dutch Health and Youth Care Inspectorate*. *BMJ Open* 2021;11:e053317. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2021-053317

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, *Zicht op kwetsbaarheid. Een verkennend onderzoek naar de kwetsbaarheid van kinderen voor mensenhandel*. Den Haag: Nationaal Rapporteur 2016.

⁹ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel 2020, *De wereld van pro ana coaches*, <https://www.hetckm.nl/databank/misbruik-meisjes-met-eetstoornissen/22>

¹⁰ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd)Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland*.

they do not ask for help or report a crime, which allows the exploitation and abuse to continue. Research indicates it is not uncommon for male victims of sexual exploitation to start transactional sex in exchange for money at a very young age.¹¹ Research shows that boys that are homosexual or bisexual have a higher risk of experiencing sexual violence than heterosexual or lesbian youth. Thus, there is a higher risk among this group to experience repeated victimization and to be sexually exploited.¹² This is also found to be caused by the use of social media, where they establish sexual relationships and more often share sexually explicit material, which then can be used to blackmail them. Moreover, boys that grow up in a society in which homosexuality and bisexuality is not accepted (for example in some strict religious or migration communities) run an even higher risk of becoming a victim of sexual exploitation. They are vulnerable to societal and family rejection. The latter puts them at risk in developing mental health issues and minority stress. Consequently, they tend to search and develop a connection with like-minded individuals outside of their communities. Research of the National Rapporteur indicates that this increases the risk of being vulnerable and falling into exploitation.¹³

Regarding girls' victims, often five risk profiles are mentioned:¹⁴ (1) Problems in the development phases during puberty which results in conflict with parents and the conflict they experience when growing up in two different cultures; (2) Girls that are easily influenced because of minimal cognitive development, special needs, psychiatric issues, or dependency problems because of backgrounds in religion, culture, taboos, parenting styles. (3) Furthermore, having experienced trauma and (4) multi-problem issues, such as addiction, psychiatry issues, mild intellectual disability, coping and attachment problems, sexual abuse, domestic violence, increases vulnerability. (5) Also girls from cultures and families within which 'honour' is the core principle and are therefore easy subject to blackmail after having sex with boys.

As mentioned above, homelessness increases the vulnerability of children to become victim of sexual exploitation. Studies reported that LGBTIQ+ children have a high risk to end up homeless, and boys have a higher risk to be engaged in survival sex because they often do not have a social network to rely on. Because they find shelter with the perpetrator, the perpetrator creates a situation in which he has a predominance over the victims, resulting from factual circumstances.¹⁵

- 2. (Practical) measures taken to address the vulnerabilities in institutional, family and online settings to ensure no child is left behind with respect to protection against sale and sexual exploitation. Examples of good practices are kindly requested to be as concrete as possible and preferably include a description of practical outcomes or results.**

Child victims of sexual exploitation often receive youth care, sometimes as a response to their victimization and to address their (wider) vulnerabilities. It is argued below that help is fragmented, that whether a child receives appropriate care is highly dependent on where in the Netherlands the child resides and that there is not enough emphasis on prevention. Lastly, there is too little evaluation of what works well.

Second, the practical projects, initiatives and measures taken at present in the Netherlands are listed.

¹¹ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd)Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland*.

¹² Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, *Zicht op kwetsbaarheid. Een verkennend onderzoek naar de kwetsbaarheid van kinderen voor mensenhandel*. Den Haag: Nationaal Rapporteur 2016.

¹³ Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, *Zicht op kwetsbaarheid. Een verkennend onderzoek naar de kwetsbaarheid van kinderen voor mensenhandel*. Den Haag: Nationaal Rapporteur 2016.

¹⁴ Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, *Aanpakken in Nederland, Engeland, en België- Vlaanderen bij de hulp aan meisjesslachtoffers van mensenhandel/loverboys*, Rapportage Europese Expertmeeting, 7 april, 2017.

¹⁵ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel en Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & (jeugd)Prostitutie van Lumens, (2021) *Discretie te allen tijde. Een onderzoek naar jongensslachtoffers binnen de prostitutie in Nederland*.

Youth care ¹⁶

55% of the child victims known to the police received youth care within a year after the end of the crime. According to youth care coordinators, the purpose for providing youth care is not always directly linked to victimization, but more often because of underlying vulnerabilities. However, findings show that victims often do not receive the help they need.

Providing specialized community-based youth care for vulnerable child victims is essential for long-term recovery success and preventing repeat victimization. However, specialized care is not always procured by municipalities¹⁷, and expertise to provide that support is often lacking. As a result, the support children receive, often depends on the municipality where they live (and their residence status) instead of on their needs.

Placement in a secured institution is a regular occurrence among child victims of human trafficking. In total, 41% of the victims that received youth care were placed in a secure setting.¹⁸ Placement of children in a secure institution is a measure of last resort, to ensure their safety. However, it is questionable whether it is applied like that, whether it is an effective security measure and whether secure placement can provide the support the child needs. In total, 10% of the victims of human trafficking have stopped receiving youth care prematurely. Youth care coordinators in the Netherlands share that children in some cases run away from the secure placement because they do not receive support in line with their needs at that moment.

The central Youth Care Authority ('Jeugdzorg Nederland') indicates that it has no specific insight into crisis placements and the forms of residence that child victims of human trafficking receive, and to what extent this has changed in recent years. An insight into the different forms of support victims of human trafficking receive is necessary to be able to evaluate which interventions are effective in improving the safety of the victims. In addition, it is important to know what kind of help this specific group receives and whether this addresses vulnerabilities and contributes to the prevention of repeated victimization.

Addressing the needs of child victims during investigation and criminal prosecution

The special consideration for particular groups of victims in investigation and criminal prosecutions, including child victims, required by EU Directive 2012/29¹⁹ is not explicitly taken up in the Dutch Decision on Victims' Rights²⁰. Although Dutch law has implemented the requirement for individual assessment of a victim's needs within criminal proceedings, this does not seem to recognize the vulnerable position of child victims of sexual exploitation. Research shows that more should be done to respect the rights of child victims, including with regards to individual assessments in practice, the prevention of emotional, psychological and physical harm, and procedural rights, e.g. limiting the number of interviews and making sure interviews take place in a child-friendly manner.²¹

¹⁶ Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen (2021). *Slachtoffermonitor Mensenhandel 2016-2020*. Nationaal Rapporteur.

¹⁷ In the Netherlands, youth care has been decentralized as of 2015. As of that year, municipalities bear the responsibility for youth care.

¹⁸ Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen (2021). *Slachtoffermonitor Mensenhandel 2016-2020*. Nationaal Rapporteur.

¹⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:315:0057:0073:EN:PDF> DIRECTIVE 2012/29/EU OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA.

²⁰ Besluit slachtoffers van strafbare feiten. <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0038468/2021-07-01>

²¹ https://www.defenceforchildren.nl/media/5710/def_rapport-capisce_web.pdf

Overview of practical measures addressing vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation of children

Project A Good Future²²

In this pilot project, the trajectory approach is being observed in 15 cases. A trajectory approach refers to the support services (transition between authorities) and also support in different areas (not only during the treatment, but also at work, school, participation). One of the pilots, of the expertise and treatment centre of Fier²³, focuses on the integration of care/education and participation and also the development of a plan for the future with victims of sexual exploitation. The project pilot that has been running in the other institutions pairs victims to peer support that accompanies them during their process.

Asja care programme

Asja care is a High Safety & High Intensive Care & Intensive Education residential programme of Fier for child victims of sexual exploitation and forced prostitution. Under the motto that it is the exploiters, not the victims who should hide from society, it offers traumatised girls age 12 to 23 a place where they are safe from (potential) exploiters and from themselves – as girls regularly want to return to the person who threatens or exploits them. Girls receive therapy to deal with traumas and trainings to make them less vulnerable, more autonomous and independent. Parents are included in the programme in an extensive manner.²⁴

A research project examines the effects of the High Safety & High Intensive Care & Intensive Education on the lives of girls,²⁵ and focuses on the prevention of repeat out-of-home placements and secure placements. Research results which includes several interviews with girls who had previously resided in a secure institution will be published in 2022.

Chat with Fier

Chat with Fier is an online helpline where children and young people can chat anonymously with certified social workers and can be referred to “offline” care if they would like to. Chat operating hours are from late afternoon and through the night – when youth struggle most with whatever is bothering them. The digital helpline has proven to be effective in reaching part of the youth population that was before part of the “dark number” of victims of trafficking in human beings, as first disclosure regularly happens here.²⁶

Online outreach to (potential) victims of exploitation

A downside to our digital society is the fact that technology has made it easier than ever for exploiters to abuse technology by finding and grooming children and young people online. CKM has developed an online outreach programme consisting of digital tools and trained social workers which is aimed at finding potential victims online, and subsequently offering them a way out of the situation of violence and exploitation.²⁷ This can be used on all sorts of online platforms where potential victims are exploited or at risk of being exploited. Actively searching for potential victims in the online places they hang out in, is not something regularly done by care institutions in the Netherlands yet.

²² <https://www.zonmw.nl/nl/onderzoek-resultaten/jeugd/programmas/project-detail/kindermishandeling/een-goede-toekomst-onderzoek-naar-een-geslaagde-trajectbenadering-voor-slachtoffers-van-loverboys/>

²³ Fier, the national expertise- and treatment center for sexual exploitation, honour-related violence, human trafficking, child abuse, domestic violence, sexual violence and (early childhood) trauma: <https://www.fier.nl/english>

²⁴ [Asja - opvang slachtoffers mensenhandel/loverboys - Fier.nl](https://www.fier.nl/nieuws-en-publicaties/zorgprogramma-asja-opgenomen-in-databank-effectieve-jeugdinterventies/9), <https://www.fier.nl/nieuws-en-publicaties/zorgprogramma-asja-opgenomen-in-databank-effectieve-jeugdinterventies/9>

²⁵ <https://www.fier.nl/mediadepot/2634d726bb9c/Metopenarmen-alternatievenvoorgeslotenjeugdzorg.pdf>

²⁶ Centrum tegen Kinderhandel en Mensenhandel (2021) *Onzichtbare slachtoffers van mensenhandel in 2020*.

²⁷ Online Outreach programma, <https://www.hetckm.nl/projecten-en-onderzoek/online-outreach-program/4>

Pilot project with police and public prosecution service

This project is aimed at early protection of victims, strengthening their faith in the criminal justice process and preventing secondary victimization before, during and after legal proceedings against the perpetrator. It is expected that this will increase willingness on the part of the victim to cooperate with the police and, in turn, reinforce criminal investigations. The results of this pilot are expected at the end of 2022.²⁸

Project Money and Violence ('Geld en Geweld')

This project of Fier addresses the link between financial issues and violence. Many victims of violence experience financial problems and many social workers do not know how to address them, was found in research done by Fier. Victims can experience financial problems, for example, because they do not have enough experience to manage their money. The project provides insights for social workers into the relationship between money and violence, and dependence relationships. It furthermore provides tools to social workers to early signal these issues and be able to discuss these with clients.²⁹

Project 'Pro ana' Fora

This pilot project is an online outreach program by CKM for children with the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. It aims to help to identify potential victims on pro-anorexia websites and refer them to appropriate support service. The results of this project are expected to be published at the end of 2022.

In conclusion

Defence for Children – ECPAT, The National Rapporteur Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence against Children, CKM and Terre des Hommes note that comparative analysis between countries on vulnerabilities of children to become victim of sexual exploitation, as well as on the good practices in addressing these, is necessary.

It is a cause of concern that in the Netherlands, there is at present no central overview on the accommodation, care and reintegration that children victims of human trafficking placed into secure and crisis placements receive. It is therefore not possible, at present, to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in terms of improving the safety and wellbeing of the victims. Child victims often face long waiting lists before accessing specialist care. It is as yet unknown to what extent interventions are helpful in addressing vulnerabilities and preventing repeated victimization.³⁰ Moreover, access to good quality and appropriate care for child victims of sexual exploitation in the Netherlands is fragmented and dependent on the municipality a child lives in.

The abovementioned organizations call upon the relevant stakeholders in the Netherlands to address these gaps and issues and offer their collaboration therein, and request the UN Special Rapporteur to support the facilitation of comparative analysis between countries e.g. with her report towards the UN General Assembly.

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²⁸ Proeftuin aangiftebereidheid, <https://www.hetckm.nl/projecten-en-onderzoek/update-proeftuin-aangiftebereidheid/4>

²⁹ Fier, 2018, <https://www.fier.nl/nieuws-en-publicaties/slachtoffers-van-geweld-kampen-vaak-met-financiele-problemen/9>

³⁰ The Dutch institute for quality and innovation research in health (Zonmw) is currently researching this. <https://www.zonmw.nl/en/about-zonmw/organisation/>