**ECPAT’S SUBMISSION**

**Call for input: the nexus between the global phenomenon of prostitution and violence against women and girls.**

*31 January 2024*

**Introduction**

This submission by [ECPAT International](https://www.ecpat.org/)[[1]](#footnote-2) is in response to the call issued by the office of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to inform her forthcoming thematic report to the 56th session of the Human Rights Council in June 2024. This submission incorporates contributions made by several members of the ECPAT Network for the purpose of this call.[[2]](#footnote-3)

## Exploitation of children in prostitution: hidden forms

The exploitation of children in prostitution is one of the traditional forms of sexual exploitation of children. This phenomenon continues to evolve. However, certain situations and circumstances do make some children more vulnerable. The exploitation of children in prostitution often operates on the fringes of adult prostitution/sex work and while debates around its legalisation are a separate argument and not the focus of ECPAT’s work, it is important to highlight that adult prostitution/sex work, whether criminalised, decriminalised and/or regulated, has effects on the exploitation of children in prostitution. For more detailed information please refer to [ECPAT's Summary Paper on Exploitation of Children in Prostitution](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ECPAT-Summary-paper-on-Sexual-Exploitation-of-Children-in-Prostitution-2020.pdf).

Historically, work to end sexual exploitation of children had a strong focus on establishment-based prostitution, sometimes including in licensed brothels where adults sell sex. However, prostitution/sex work occurs in a wide range of establishment-based settings beyond the clearly defined spaces of brothels (licensed or otherwise). Consequently, exploitation of children in prostitution might occur in such establishments. ECPAT Norway and the Uganda Development Link shares how in their countries’ hidden forms of prostitution and exploitation happen through massage parlours where advertisements for messages are being used to disguise selling sex. According to ECPAT France, prostitution and sexual exploitation of children tend to take place in more discreet location mostly via private accommodation using platforms such as Airbnb, or also exclusively online, with photos/videos offered live. In Peru, CHS Alternativo, reflects on the use of online gaming and small money transfers tech solutions has enablers of exploitation of children in prostitution. According to ECPAT Germany, *taschengeld treffen* (pocket money meetings) are common among children who place offers for sexual services online in exchange for pocket money by their offender. In addition, in Germany, young girls are forced into social isolation by young men pretending to be in a love relationship to pressure them into prostitution.[[3]](#footnote-4)

ECPAT South Korea reports that exploitation of children in prostitution is often hidden in plain sight through the so-called Talk Bars to Room Salons,[[4]](#footnote-5) whose operation usually goes unchecked and condoned. Room Salons are private entertainment establishments where people go to socialise, drink, and eat.[[5]](#footnote-6) These establishments often serve as a front for prostitution, with customers and hostesses, using nearby motels for sexual services.[[6]](#footnote-7) Despite efforts by the government to curb their operation and functioning, many of them continue to thrive.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In Japan, two widespread phenomena are the JK (*jyoshi kousei* – high school girls) business in which high school girls provide sexual services to male customers[[8]](#footnote-9) ; and the "host clubs" which offer pseudo-romance/speed dating services for women/high school girls.[[9]](#footnote-10) Female customers mingle with male hosts and buy drinks only sold by the bottle.[[10]](#footnote-11) The alcohol is priced exorbitantly, with women/high school girls purchasing beyond their means and falling into debt, and ending up selling sex or working at sex shops to repay it.[[11]](#footnote-12)

An additional context where exploitation of children in prostitution may thrive is, according to EQUATIONS in India and SOS Violences Sexuelles in Côte d’Ivoire, the tourism and hospitality industry also with regards to areas famous for religious pilgrimages, for the case of India.

## The profiles of victims and offenders of exploitation of children in prostitution

When it comes to the exploitation of children in prostitution, there is no typical victim, nor typical offender. Indeed, ECPAT members who responded to this call for input shared diverse information with regards to the profile of victims and offenders.

With regards to victims, a common element remains that most detected victims of exploitation of children in prostitution are girls, often, as reported by EQUATIONS, Uganda Development Link, LifeLine/Child Line Namibia and Children’s Voice from rural areas, poor backgrounds and/or marginalised communities. While exploitation in prostitution overwhelmingly and disproportionately affects girls, boys are increasingly being identified as victims of sexual exploitation. However, masculine norms can lead to boys’ negative attitudes towards help seeking, also affecting their perception of whether they consider themselves a victim.

A trend of concern mentioned by some ECPAT members and other research in relation to exploitation of children in prostitution, is the occurrence of survival sex among children on the move; illegal migrants, internally displaced and refugee children, affected by conflict or humanitarian crises - both girls and boys. Facing inadequate humanitarian support and a lack of livelihood opportunities, combined with changing social expectations for children to contribute to family survival strategies, tolerance towards gendered-forms of child labour, girls and boys are under significant pressure to provide for themselves and their families and are pushed in survival sex, out of no other perceived alternatives, to secure resources to reach their final destinations, or because of stigma resulting from sexual abuse.

With regards to offenders, ECPAT members indicate how their profile varies across countries. In

Uganda, offenders encompass various groups, motivated by economic factors or seeking transactional relationships. In Peru, although extensive data is missing, a small study conducted by CHS Alternativo in Loreto indicates that offenders tend to be men who engage in sexual exploitation of children as an expression of power and control. In Japan, Taiwan and Côte d’Ivoire, offenders either operate in groups – for example through gangs facilitating the exploitation of women and girls – or individually. ECPAT’s recent research on exploitation of children in prostitution in humanitarian contexts (Kurdistan Iraq, Kenya, and Ethiopia) shows that offenders are usually men in power in the community, from businessmen, to tourists, local police; and intermediaries or facilitators also include women, bar owners, taxi drivers. Many seem to be ‘situational’ offenders –taking advantage of vulnerable situations of children, rather than necessarily specifically looking for children, although both profiles co-exist.

## Linkages between exploitation in prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation

ECPAT Members that responded to this call for input reflected on how contexts and manifestations of sexual exploitation of children are becoming increasingly complex and interlinked because of drivers like evolving digital technology and rapidly expanding access to communications. The lines between different manifestations of sexual exploitation are blurred and children may be victimised in multiple ways.

ECPAT Norway, ECPAT Austria, and Uganda Development Link explain how in their countries, the production, sharing and distribution of child sexual abuse material commonly happens on the side of the exploitation in prostitution. ECPAT Taiwan indicates that in the country, girls are often first groomed online and induced into self-generating sexual images for money and then further solicited and exploited in prostitution with the promise of increased profit.

EQUATIONS shares how in India child marriage and domestic work also often lead to the exploitation of girls in prostitution. In Ethiopia, girls sexually abused are reported to be pushed away by family and communities due to stigma and are found sexually exploited in prostitution in urban centres.

## How is the issue of consent dealt with? Is it possible to speak about meaningful consent for girls exploited in prostitution?

In discussion regarding consent to engage in prostitution/sex work, ECPAT remarks the importance of distinguishing between adults and children. Although most countries have established an age of sexual consent, this should only refer to consensual relationships between peers i.e. adolescents and not to situations where the other party is an adult. Children can never consent to their own exploitation, and it can be said that whenever adults are exchanging sex for anything with children, it always constitutes child sexual exploitation. When attitudes perceive children’s active engagement in their own sexual exploitation – for example in cases of transactional or survival sex - as conveying consent or complicity, there are a range of serious implications. It appears to shift the responsibility on the child, rather than focusing on the criminal responsibility of the abuser; children may internalise the supposed responsibility and thus not view themselves as victims. This then limits their likelihood to seek help and may even mean authorities and welfare services don’t support them if they do. In the worst-case scenario, children may even be prosecuted for prostitution when laws fail to explicitly protect children from being prosecuted. ‘Safe Harbor’ laws are an effective remedy to the issue of children being prosecuted for prostitution offences. The core idea behind ‘Safe Harbor’ is that all children involved in prostitution are victims, and that their involvement in prostitution should never be criminalised.[[12]](#footnote-13)

## Obstacles faced by organisations and frontline service providers in their mission to support victims and survivors of prostitution.

ECPAT members listed several obstacles faced by civil society and service providers when providing support to survivors of exploitation in prostitution during childhood. These include among others the lack of needs-based accommodation and financing of counselling centres (ECPAT Germany), ineffective justice systems marked by corruption (Uganda Development Link), social stigma during reintegration (ECPAT Taiwan), limited reporting (ECPAT France) and scarce financial resources for support services (ECPAT Austria).

ECPAT members also identify shortcomings in the collection of data on sexual offences and human trafficking, for example with regards to collaboration among different entities (law enforcement, intra-governmental agencies, civil society, etc.), lack of data in relation to specific offences and the absence of data that considers the perspectives of women and children exploited in prostitution.

Another obstacle mentioned is the varying levels of inclusion of frontline organizations and survivors' organisations in policymaking at both national and international levels. While there may be some involvement, particularly in the initial stages of consultation, the level of participation in policy formulation remains limited in certain countries. Efforts should be made to enhance and ensure meaningful inclusion, allowing the voices of frontline organizations and survivors to significantly influence policymaking processes.

## Lessons learnt and recommendations

According to the ECPAT members, a holistic approach to the prevention and response to the exploitation of children in prostitution is crucial. Such approach should consider sustainability, multi-stakeholders’ involvement, and survivor perspectives. Further, actions should be tailored keeping in mind the specific vulnerabilities children face; for example, (unaccompanied) migrant and refugee children are particularly vulnerable to engaging in survival sex and gender norms affect boys and girls differently. Successful strategies incorporate a combination of legal reforms, support services, and shifting narratives and public perceptions tailored to the specific context of each country. Importantly, survivors’ input plays a key role in understanding what works and tailoring interventions accordingly.

ECPAT Norway and ECPAT Germany, further remarks the importance of increasing available resources – financial but also training - for law enforcement as they play a pivotal role in identifying victims and referring them to specialized services. On this, ECPAT Germany also shares how specialised counselling services are mostly designed for adults -i.e. women exploited/forced in prostitution – and the specific needs of underage girls are not taken into consideration, also due to underfunding and reliance solely on committed volunteers. In this context, training must be provided to support and outreach workers to also identify male and gender-diverse victims of child exploitation in prostitution.

With regards to legal reform, ECPAT calls for the criminalisation of any form of transaction to obtain sexual services from a child, even when the adult is unaware of the child’s age, in compliance with international standards. In countries where prostitution, of both adults and children, is illegal, inconsistencies between laws can, and do, result in children being held responsible for engaging in prostitution. Every child needs to be protected, by law, from prosecution for any offence relating to prostitution. Enacting ‘Safe Harbor’ laws, decriminalising the involvement of children in prostitution, are a good approach to do so. Furthermore, legislative reforms need to ensure legislation that relates to exploitation of children in prostitution specifically extends to protect boys too.

Regarding establishment-based exploitation, civil society organisations can work with legitimate entertainment establishments to spot the signs of children being exploited in prostitution, and to raise standards of their own establishments so the exploitation of children in prostitution cannot be facilitated there. In general, various industries should be approached as playing a role in the exploitation or facilitation of exploitation in prostitution, including the travel, transport and tourism industry, entertainment industry, etc.

Services and responses also need to adapt to the evolving threat of the exploitation of children in prostitution being facilitated online, and as mentioned by ECPAT France, it is essential that private companies such as Internet service providers and social media companies engage in the issue. Preventive efforts can have a greater impact if there is proactive engagement and strong collaboration from the private sector.

Of relevance, recommendations identified by the ECPAT members align with those of 163 girls and young women who took part in national consultations in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali in the context of the SheLeads project.[[13]](#footnote-14) Indeed, cross-cutting recommendations raised by the girls and young women include 1) the need for national governments to increase funding for the implementation of policies against sexual exploitation of children, ensuring their effective enforcement; 2) community-driven solutions prioritising open communication with girls to create a safe and supportive environment for survivors; 3) activities by civil society and women/young girls themselves to fight stigma, discrimination and speak out on child sexual exploitation.

1. ECPAT International is a global network of civil society organisations working to eradicate all forms of sexual exploitation of children. Over the past 30 years, ECPAT has become the forefront international NGO network dedicated to end this severe form of violence against children, advocating for State accountability and more robust measures across sectors to enhance the protection of victims. ECPAT currently has 126 member organizations operating in 106 countries around the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [ECPAT Germany](https://ecpat.de/), [ECPAT South Korea (Tacteen Naeil)](http://www.tacteen.net/ecpat), [SOS Violences Sexuelles](https://www.facebook.com/SOSVSCI/?locale=fr_FR), [Uganda Youth Development Link (UYDEL)](https://www.uydel.org/), [ECPAT/STOP Japan](https://ecpatstop.org/), [ECPAT France](https://ecpat-france.fr/), [ECPAT Taiwan](https://www.ecpat.org.tw/), [ECPAT Norway](https://ecpatnorge.no/), [ECPAT Austria](https://www.ecpat.at/), [EQUATIONS](https://equitabletourism.org/), [Lifeline/ChildLine Namibia,](https://www.lifelinechildline.org.na/) [CHS Alternativo](https://chsalternativo.org/), [Children's Voice](https://www.children-voice.org/). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Based on research and activities conducted by ECPAT in the context of the [Global Boys Initiative](https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/) and others, in many countries this is also the case for boys. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The Telegraph (2023). [The intriguing world of Korea’s room salons: unveiling their secrets.](https://telegra.ph/The-Intriguing-World-of-Koreas-Room-Salons-Unveiling-their-Secrets-12-22) See also - The Korea Times (2021). [Room salon businesses run secretly in motels amid social distancing measures.](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/01/113_308237.html) Forbes (2017), [The escort bars that uber execs reportedly visited are a regular affair in South Korea.](https://www.forbes.com/sites/elaineramirez/2017/03/27/the-escort-bars-that-uber-execs-reportedly-visited-are-a-regular-affair-in-south-korea/?sh=aa444322f177) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Telegraph (2023). [The intriguing world of Korea’s room salons: unveiling their secrets.](https://telegra.ph/The-Intriguing-World-of-Koreas-Room-Salons-Unveiling-their-Secrets-12-22) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The Korea Times (2021). [Room salon businesses run secretly in motels amid social distancing measures.](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/01/113_308237.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Forbes (2017), [The escort bars that uber execs reportedly visited are a regular affair in South Korea.](https://www.forbes.com/sites/elaineramirez/2017/03/27/the-escort-bars-that-uber-execs-reportedly-visited-are-a-regular-affair-in-south-korea/?sh=aa444322f177) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ogaki, M. (2018). [Theoretical explanations of Jyoshi Kousei ("JK Business") in Japan.](https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/157776582.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Fitzsimmons, R (2021), [Selling intimacy under post-Industrial capitalism – an ethnography of Japanese host clubs](https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/selling-intimacy-under-post-industrial-capitalism-ethnography-japanese-host.). See also – The Guardian (2023). [Host clubs in Tokyo force women into sex work to pay off huge debts.,](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/dec/17/host-clubs-in-tokyo-force-women-into-sex-work-to-pay-off-huge-debts) The Mainichi (2023) [He brainwashed her : Tokyo woman says daughter was lured by ‘host’, ran up huge tab.](https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20231122/p2a/00m/0na/022000c) (2023) The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan. [Host Clubs accused of forcing women into prostitution.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ykdwf9wGnE) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. ECPAT International (2020). [Summary Paper on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Prostitution](https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ECPAT-Summary-paper-on-Sexual-Exploitation-of-Children-in-Prostitution-2020.pdf). Bangkok: ECPAT International. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. She Leads is a five-year programme (2021-2025) of Plan International, Defence for Children-ECPAT, African Women Development and Communication Network and Terre des Hommes, in strategic partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The programme is being implemented in East Africa (Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya), West Africa (Ghana, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia) and the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan). As part of the alliance, ECPAT aims at empowering girl and youth participation to ensure their right to participate in social change and work actively and meaningfully against sexual exploitation. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)