

TERRE DES HOMMES NETHERLANDS FOCUS BRIEF

**THE GENDER/
SOGIESC
DIMENSIONS
OF CHILD
EXPLOITATION IN
HUMANITARIAN
CONTEXTS**

DEFINITIONS



CHILD EXPLOITATION

is an umbrella term to describe various scenarios when a child is taken advantage of by an individual or group(s), where they are manipulated, coerced and/or deceived into actions that threaten their physical, psychological, emotional and social wellbeing and development, and the perpetrator(s) gain some advantage. At its core, it signifies an abuse of power over a child¹.



HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

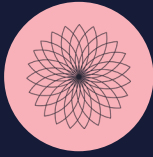
refers to situations where civilians' lives are threatened, mass displacement and an erosion of key familial, social and institutional protection structures occurs, due to instances such as armed conflict, epidemics, pandemics, famines, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes. The impacts of such crises are not experienced equally, with marginalised identities across gender, sexuality, race, class, religion and ability often facing heightened adversities due to pre-existing social, political and economic inequalities and exclusions².



GENDER

is an individual's identity, and the expression of that identity, as a boy/man, girl/woman or something beyond these binary categories, such as transgender, non-binary, queer and gender-fluid identities and expressions.

¹ TdH NL 2022, Listen Up! Strategy 2023-2030
² Care International 2018



SOGIESC

stands for sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics. The elements of this acronym are detailed below:

- **Sexual orientation** is an individual's emotional, romantic, physical and sexual desire and/or attraction to and relations with others of the same gender (homosexual, lesbian), opposite gender (heterosexual), both binary genders (bisexual), any gender (queer, pansexual) or none (aromantic or asexual)³.
- **Gender identity** refers to one's deeply felt sense of self as a male, female or something beyond these binary categories, which may or may not correspond with their biological sex assigned at birth⁴.
- **Gender expression** is the public presentation of one's gender identity through their appearance (dress, hairstyles, cosmetics and accessories), mannerisms, behaviours, names and preferred pronouns⁵.
- **Sex characteristics** are the biological and physical attributes, including hormones, chromosomes, reproductive organs, genitalia and other reproductive anatomy, that are assigned at birth (female, male or intersex) or develop from puberty⁶.



LGBTQIA+

stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual, representing non-dominant SOGIESC identities.

³ Diamond 2020; Greene et al. 2019; Maclaran 2017

⁴ Diamond 2020

⁵ Ibid; Paradiso et al. 2023

⁶ American Psychological Association 2012; Greene et al. 2019

TdH NL Position

At TdH NL, we recognise that:

- Child exploitation is a form of gender-based violence, as harmful gender norms, underlying gender and SOGIESC inequalities and a child's SOGIESC shape its manifestation, and perpetuate the problem⁷.
- Child exploitation, in its various forms, is a significant child rights and protection issue that requires urgent attention, as it violates children's rights to education, health, wellbeing, safety and freedom from all forms of violence and harm⁸.
- Humanitarian emergencies exacerbate child exploitation, due to increased displacement, social fragmentation, state collapse, impunity, and economic stress and desperation for basic survival needs (e.g. food, water and shelter)⁹.
- Humanitarian emergencies multiply and exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and injustices, including gender and SOGIESC inequalities¹⁰.
- Gender norms and power imbalances leave many children, especially girls and children with diverse, non-dominant SOGIESC identities, without key information or support to protect themselves or migrate safely in humanitarian contexts¹¹.
- Discrimination and social exclusion resulting from intersecting factors, including gender and SOGIESC, can drive some children, and parents/caregivers, towards negative coping mechanisms in humanitarian settings, increasing their risk of exploitation¹².
- Girls in humanitarian contexts face increased risk of sexual exploitation, child marriage and trafficking (mainly for sexual exploitation), as well as child labour for domestic and care-giving roles in displacement camps¹³.
- Boys in humanitarian contexts face increased risk of recruitment as child soldiers in conflict, child labour as porters, messengers and spies and sexual exploitation (though less reported)¹⁴.
- Children with diverse, non-conforming SOGIESC identities face heightened vulnerability to child exploitation in humanitarian settings, due to social and familial exclusion, destruction of key LGBTQIA+ services and safe spaces, lack of inclusive aid and humanitarian prevention and response, and limited training of frontline workers to support LGBTQIA+ children's specific needs and vulnerabilities¹⁵.
- Child exploitation is underreported in humanitarian settings, due to data collection challenges and diverse gender norms that deter children from disclosing based on their gender and SOGIESC.
- Gender and SOGIESC are key intersectional risk factors for child exploitation in humanitarian contexts that must be prioritised across all research, policy, advocacy and programme interventions¹⁶.
- There is a need for gender-transformative approaches to child exploitation in humanitarian settings, that work to address deeply entrenched gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms that perpetuate the problem¹⁷.

In response, we at TdH NL:

- Work through our Humanitarian Action Thematic Programme, along with our Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Labour Thematic Programmes where appropriate, to address root causes of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts, including harmful gender norms and inequalities that perpetuate the problem¹⁸.
- Centre gender-transformative and intersectionality approaches across all humanitarian interventions, proactively responding to gender and SOGIESC as key intersectional risk factors for child exploitation in such settings, and working to transform gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms¹⁹.
- Promote meeting the immediate survival and protection needs, as well as the rights to care, safety, and

7 TdH NL 2022, Theory of Change

8 UNCRC 1989

9 TdH NL 2024, Humanitarian Action Thematic Programme Brief

10 Ibid

11 Ibid

12 Ibid

13 ECPAT International 2024; UNODC 2018

14 Ibid

15 Dominey-Howes et al. 2017; ECPAT International; Goldsmith et al. 2022

16 TdH NL 2024, Humanitarian Action Thematic Programme Brief

17 TdH NL 2024, Gender Policy

18 Ibid

19 Ibid

physical, mental and social wellbeing for children of all gender and SOGIESC identities in humanitarian contexts²⁰.

- Advocate for equitable access to quality education and development opportunities for children of all gender and SOGIESC identities affected by humanitarian crises²¹.
- Create safe, inclusive spaces where children of all gender and SOGIESC identities are empowered to meaningfully participate in and influence humanitarian decision-making that impacts them²².
- Collaborate with partners and co-create child-centred humanitarian solutions that are responsive to the

gender and SOGIESC dimensions of child exploitation in emergency contexts²³.

- Conduct research to expand knowledge on intersectional risk factors of child exploitation in humanitarian settings, including gender and SOGIESC dimensions²⁴.
- Influence and hold governments, policy-makers and other duty bearers accountable to implement gender-responsive and gender-transformative approaches to protect children of all diverse gender and SOGIESC identities in humanitarian crises and address root causes that perpetuate the problem²⁵.

BACKGROUND

The risk and manifestations of child exploitation are distinctly influenced by a child's diverse identity, including their gender and SOGIESC, harmful gender norms, and underlying gender and SOGIESC inequalities²⁶. Failing to consider these diverse gender and SOGIESC dimensions of child exploitation risks misunderstanding the realities and nuances of child exploitation, and responding with ineffective, inadequate or even harmful interventions²⁷.

To achieve our mission to protect all children from child exploitation, and our vision of a world free from all forms of child exploitation²⁸, we must properly consider and address these gender and SOGIESC

dimensions of all forms of child exploitation across our work. Otherwise our efforts to end child exploitation fail to target root causes that perpetuate the problem, and are not grounded in the realities of children's diverse SOGIESC identities and experiences²⁹.

This brief focuses on child exploitation in humanitarian contexts, seeking to expand awareness around the gender and SOGIESC dimensions of this key form of child exploitation and, in turn, strengthen our responses to this issue, becoming more sensitive and responsive to such multifaceted dimensions to better protect and support children.

20 TdH NL 2024, Humanitarian Action Thematic Programme Brief

21 *ibid*

22 *ibid*; TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023

23 TdH NL 2024, Humanitarian Action Thematic Programme Brief

24 *ibid*

25 *ibid*

26 TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023

27 Conte et al. 2020; Josenhans et al. 2020

28 TdH NL 2023, Listen Up! Strategy

29 Conte et al. 2020

More information on Child Exploitation in Humanitarian Contexts

Global context and prevalence of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts

Global challenges of armed conflict and climate-change driven disasters, including earthquakes, droughts, tsunamis, floods and wildfires, are on the rise³⁰. This is exacerbating mass displacement, poverty, inequality and famines for communities around the world, especially in lower-income countries³¹. Such humanitarian crises also cause state collapse, deteriorating the rule of law and increasing impunity, social and family fragmentation, economic stress and desperation for basic needs, such as food, water and shelter³².

Children bear the brunt of humanitarian emergencies, whether caused by conflict or climate induced hazards, as such conditions increase the risk of child exploitation and abuse³³. Over 400 million children live in conflict zones, around 1 billion live in countries with increased climate change vulnerability, over 36 million are

displaced due to climate-inflicted emergencies, and over 47 million children have been displaced due to conflict and violence³⁴. Given the sensitivity and complexity of collecting accurate information in emergencies, no official data exists on the number of children facing exploitation in such contexts. Yet, evidence shows that humanitarian emergencies intensify the conditions and drivers that increase child exploitation and abuse³⁵. Despite this, efforts to protect children from exploitation in these contexts remain underfunded and neglected, especially those addressing gender- and SOGIESC-specific vulnerabilities³⁶.

Gender and SOGIESC dimensions of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts

All children in humanitarian settings face increased risks of child exploitation. However, the level of risk and the manifestation of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts is shaped by gender and SOGIESC, including harmful gender norms and gender and SOGIESC inequalities. Key aspects of these gender and SOGIESC dimensions of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts are detailed below.

FACTS & FIGURES

400 million
children live in **conflict zones**.

1 billion
children live in **climate-vulnerable countries**.

36 million
children displaced by **climate emergencies**.



47 million
children displaced by **conflict and violence**.



³⁰ ECPAT International 2024

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid; UNODC 2018

³³ UNICEF 2020

³⁴ UNICEF 2023; UNICEF 2024

³⁵ ECPAT International 2024

³⁶ Ibid; UNODC 2018



~20% increase
in **child marriage** in
conflict zones.



In humanitarian crises, girls seen as
sexual commodities or
domestic caretakers

Impacts:

- Increased risk of **unsafe and unwanted pregnancies**.
- Physical and psychological **trauma**.



Girls trafficked
for **sexual exploitation**
or **marriage** in exchange
for food, shelter, money.

Girls can be recruited as
child soldiers
yet mainly for **sexual**
abuse or SEC, not combat.

Pregnancy
& **rape**
as weapons
of war.

1

CHILD EXPLOITATION RISKS FACING GIRLS IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Girls in humanitarian settings face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, by male soldiers, aid workers or adult males in the general community, especially in displacement or refugee camps³⁷. They are also more vulnerable to child marriage, sold off to men in local or foreign contexts to become wives, fulfil domestic duties and often endure rape and other sexual abuses³⁸. In conflict zones, child marriage of girls increases by around 20%, as seen in Afghanistan, Syria, Africa, Pakistan and Lebanon³⁹. Girls are also more likely to be trafficked, especially for child marriage and sexual exploitation purposes in humanitarian contexts⁴⁰.

Girls are often forced into commercial sexual exploitation, child marriage and trafficked in exchange for money or basic needs, like food, water or shelter, as a negative coping mechanism for households in emergencies, to support the rest of the family during such difficult circumstances⁴¹. For instance, a study in the Middle East found families in refugee camps felt they had no option other than trading their daughters to be trafficked for sexual exploitation, or to be married off, in order to attain essential financial support for survival⁴².

The commonality of girls being trafficked or sold off for such exploitation invokes patriarchal gender norms that objectify women and girls as subordinate, sexual commodities that can be traded and sold. However, some families see marrying off their daughters as a way to secure a better life for them and to protect them from gender-based violence in humanitarian contexts⁴³. Yet, marrying off daughters for this reason is still shaped by harmful gender norms that perceive women and girls

as incapable of taking care of themselves, in need of support and dependence on a man for safety, protection and wellbeing. Therefore, pre-existing gender norms and inequalities that perceive women and girls as helpless, dependent, subordinate and sexual commodities are evidently exacerbated by humanitarian crises.

Girls are also often forced into domestic and care-giving child labour roles in humanitarian contexts, cooking, cleaning and providing care in refugee or displacement camps⁴⁴. This manifestation of child exploitation in emergencies evidently reflects gender norms that confine women and girls to such domestic and caring roles, in line with assumption of their naturally nurturing, homemaking instincts⁴⁵. Therefore, such gender norms that position women and girls in roles of domestic servitude and care-giving are likewise intensified within emergency situations.

There are instances of girls being recruited as child soldiers in conflict settings⁴⁶. Yet, when this does occur they are typically subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse by male soldiers and other military personnel, rather than being sent into combat⁴⁷. This again is reflective of harmful gender norms that reduce women and girls to sexual objects of men, which are exacerbated in such conflict settings.

Due to the increased sexual exploitation and abuse girls face in humanitarian emergencies, they are at increased risk of unsafe and unwanted pregnancies in such contexts⁴⁸. In conflict zones, forced pregnancy is also sometimes used as a weapon of war, with girls raped by rival groups, and detained until abortion is impossible, as seen in former Yugoslavia and Northern Uganda⁴⁹.

37 CARE 2018; ECPAT International 2024; UNODC 2018
38 ECPAT International 2024; Girls Not Brides 2024; Plan International 2013
39 Dalal 2022
40 UNODC 2018
41 CARE 2018; Plan International 2013; UNODC 2018
42 International Centre for Migration Policy Development 2015
43 ibid; UNODC 2018
44 Hossain et al. 2016
45 ibid
46 ibid; UNODC 2018
47 ibid
48 Ferstman 2020
49 Carlson and Mazurana 2006;



In conflict setting, boys face increased risk of being recruited as child soldiers and forced into combat⁵⁰. This is influenced by gender norms that assume the physical strength and courage of boys and men, and perceive male violence as a key component of masculinity. Boys' increased involvement in heavy fighting situations evidently increases their risk of facing short- and long-term physical injuries and death from combat.

In humanitarian contexts driven by natural disasters and climate change, boys are commonly forced into strenuous farming and land management work to help

address and recover from environmental damage caused⁵¹. This again is shaped by gender norms that assume physical strength and capabilities on behalf of men and boys. Boys who have survived natural and climate driven disasters in rural areas are also frequently forced to migrate to urban cities alone to find work and earn money for their families⁵². This invokes and exacerbates gender norms that expect men and boys to be breadwinners for their families, and sending them away from home at young ages for such purposes⁵³. In such circumstances, boys are also at increased risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited⁵⁴. Although this is a less researched phenomenon that requires further investigation. Further, it is common that such circumstances often lead boys in particular to turn to substance abuse as a negative coping mechanism⁵⁵, which in turn can increase their vulnerability to exploitation.

While comparatively less researched than sexual exploitation against girls in emergencies, there is evidence of boys in humanitarian settings experiencing increased sexual exploitation and abuse, as seen in regions such as Afghanistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cambodia, often perpetrated by male aid workers, warlords or military personnel⁵⁶. In conflict settings, boys recruited as child soldiers to rebel groups may also be forced to sexually abuse others, especially women and girls, to prove their loyalty to the armed group and reinforce their power⁵⁷. This reflects harmful gender norms around masculinity that encourage and reward male sexual dominance over and violence against women and girls⁵⁸.

⁵⁰ Ibid; UNODC 2018

⁵¹ Takasaki 2017; Guarcello et al. 2017

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ UNICEF 2020

⁵⁴ ILO 2020

⁵⁵ Peter-Hagene et al. 2015; UNICEF 2020

⁵⁶ Akhtar 2019; Josenhans et al. 2020; Verant 2021; UNODC 2018

⁵⁷ Akhtar 2019

⁵⁸ Blackbeard et al. 2015



DESTROYED SAFE SPACES

Loss of LGBTQIA+ services during emergencies removes vital protection.



INVISIBLE IN AID

Humanitarian responses often overlook the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ children.



ISOLATION = RISK

Social exclusion, displacement, homelessness increase vulnerability.



HETERONOR- MATIVITY

Aid structures exclude non-conforming identities.



MENTAL HEALTH GAPS

Support often overlooks identity-based trauma.



FEAR OF DISCLOSURE

Stigma forces children to hide identities.

3

HEIGHTENED RISK OF CHILD EXPLOITATION AMONGST CHILDREN WITH MARGINAL SOGIESC IDENTITIES TO IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS

Research shows children with divergent, non-conforming SOGIESC identities, such as LGBTQIA+ children, face increased vulnerability to child exploitation in humanitarian settings, particularly sexual exploitation and trafficking, due to a multitude of factors, including⁵⁹:

- Destruction of LGBTQIA+ community services and safe spaces during emergencies undermines protection for many individuals with marginalised SOGIESC identities.
- LGBTQIA+ children are continuously overlooked across humanitarian responses, neglecting to address their unique exploitation vulnerabilities and needs in such contexts.
- Social and familial exclusion, displacement, and increased homelessness experienced amongst children with diverse, non-conforming SOGIESC identities often isolates them from key protective structures and safety networks in emergencies, making them easier targets for exploitation offenders.
- Many aid and child protection systems are shaped by heteronormative assumptions and binary concepts of gender, excluding children with non-conforming SOGIESC identities, which may drive them towards exploitation for money and basic needs to survive.
- Mental health support services in emergency contexts often fail to consider the intersection between mental health issues and trauma, with identity-based discrimination, including SOGIESC discrimination.

- Frontline workers lack training to support children with marginal SOGIESC identities, and how to respond to their specific vulnerabilities and needs within such contexts.
- Some religious groups in certain contexts blame LGBTQIA+ individuals for causing humanitarian crises and disasters.
- In certain crisis-affected countries, same-sex relationships or having a non-conforming sexuality or gender identity is highly stigmatised, or even criminalised, resulting in the complete neglect of such individuals in humanitarian aid and responses.
- Due to strict cultural taboos and/or criminalisation of non-conforming SOGIESC identities, it is common that LGBTQIA+ children will not disclose their identity for fear of stigma or persecution, which results in them not receiving the specific support they may require within humanitarian contexts.

The increased vulnerability of children with diverse, non-dominant SOGIESC identities in humanitarian contexts is facilitated by gender norms that marginalise children with such non-conforming identities. Further, the full extent of child exploitation risks facing children with non-conforming SOGIESC identities in humanitarian contexts is unknown⁶⁰. This is largely due to the fact that being LGBTQIA+ in many humanitarian zones is highly stigmatised and sometimes even criminalised, as touched on above. This lack of data and knowledge around the specific vulnerabilities of children with marginal SOGIESC identities in emergencies leads to inadequate acknowledgement and responses to support such children in these contexts.

⁵⁹ Dominey-Howes et al. 2017; ECPAT International 2024; Goldsmith et al. 2022; Knight and Rumbach 2014
⁶⁰ ECPAT International 2024; UNICEF 2023

4 ISSUE OF UNDERREPORTING

Instances of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts are expected to be higher than what is documented, due to issues of underreporting⁶¹. Such underreporting is partly due to difficulty of capturing data in such complex and sensitive contexts. Yet, the influence of gender norms also prevent the reporting of exploitation experienced by children across all diverse gender and SOGIESC identities⁶².

Girls in humanitarian settings may avoid reporting exploitation due to fear of causing trouble, as controlled by gender norms expecting them to be quiet and cooperative. They may also avoid reporting sexual exploitation in particular due to shame, stigma and fear of being labelled 'unmarriageable' or 'impure' for losing their virginity or becoming pregnant before marriage, as influenced by gender norms that condemn female sexuality, especially prior to marriage⁶³.

Boys in humanitarian settings may avoid reporting exploitation due to fear of appearing weak and unmasculine, influenced by gender norms expecting their strength and invulnerability. They may avoid reporting sexual exploitation in particular due to shame, stigma and fear of being emasculated or labelled 'homosexual' for being sexually dominated by male offenders. This is shaped by heteronormative gender norms around

masculinity that expect men and boys to be heterosexual and sexually dominant over others, especially women and girls, not victims of such abuse⁶⁴.

Children with non-dominant SOGIESC identities in humanitarian contexts are less likely to report exploitation due to a common lack of safe spaces to report and fear of intensifying the stigma, discrimination and violence they already face for having divergent, non-conforming identities⁶⁵. As noted in the section above, it is also commonly illegal or criminalised to be LGBTQIA+ in many crisis-affected countries. This causes children with non-conforming SOGIESC identities to avoid reporting any exploitation they experience in such contexts, for fear of having their identity exposed and being punished accordingly⁶⁶. Such reduced reporting amongst children with non-conforming SOGIESC identities is evidently influenced by gender norms that marginalise and discriminate against individuals with such divergent identities⁶⁷.

The underreporting of child exploitation in humanitarian contexts, prevalent across children of all gender and SOGIESC identities, must be addressed, to better understand and respond to diverse vulnerabilities. This requires inclusive data systems and child-led reporting mechanisms in emergencies that create safe spaces for all children to report child exploitation in such contexts.

61 *ibid*
62 Dutta 2017; ECPAT International 2024
63 Verant 2021
64 Akhtar 2019
65 ECPAT International 2024
66 *ibid*
67 Dutta 2017; ECPAT International 2024

Child exploitation in humanitarian contexts is deeply shaped by harmful gender norms and structural inequalities related to gender and SOGIESC.



WHAT INCREASES RISK?

- **Harmful gender norms** and structural power imbalances
- Gender **inequality** and SOGIESC-based **discrimination**
- **Marginalisation** of diverse, non-conforming and intersectional gender and SOGIESC identities



WHAT IS MISSING?

- Gender- and SOGIESC-sensitive **protection measures**
- Inclusion of diverse identities in **data, research, and policies**
- **Trained staff** to address diverse needs



WHAT MUST BE DONE?

- Prioritise **inclusive and gender-transformative** approaches in research, policy, advocacy and programming
- Tackle **root causes**, not just symptoms
- Ensure **safety, dignity, and inclusion** for all children

Conclusion

Child exploitation in humanitarian contexts is evidently shaped by harmful gender norms and structural inequalities related to gender and SOGIESC identities. These dynamics exacerbate children's risks and shape the specific forms of exploitation they face and the support they can access. To effectively protect and support all children, humanitarian responses must

prioritise the diverse gender and SOGIESC dimensions of exploitation. This requires not only addressing immediate protection needs but also tackling the root causes of inequality and marginalisation. By centering these gender and SOGIESC dimensions in research, policy, and programming, we can build more inclusive and effective interventions that respond to the unique challenges faced by children in crisis, ensuring their right to safety, dignity, and empowerment in all humanitarian settings.

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