

Sexual Exploitation of Children

Thematic Programme

Sexual Exploitation of Children encompasses myriad manifestations and contexts, and is overlapping with, or accompanied by, other forms of violence against children, child abuse and child exploitation. It includes commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC), sexual exploitation in travel and tourism (SECTT), trafficking for sexual exploitation, online forms of sexual exploitation (OCSE) and exploitative child, early and forced marriage (CEFM).

The Challenge: Facts & Figures

Recent estimates for sexual exploitation include:

14,121

persons were found to be trafficked for sexual exploitation worldwide in 2020.

35%,

or one in three, were children.

Children were **1.7%** more likely to experience physical or extreme violence than adults.¹

1.7 million

children were commercially sexually exploited in 2021.²

Between

1 and 20%

of all children experience online sexual exploitation, depending on the country.³



The US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children received

105.6 million

child sexual abuse materials files in 2023.⁴ A **300%** increase in online enticement (grooming and sexual extortion) as well as an increase in AI generated CSAM. The 3 top hosting countries are **India, the Philippines and Bangladesh.**

Examples of online sexual exploitation include grooming, dissemination of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), either from abuse that took place offline or from enticing, pressuring or manipulating a child to generate such content, ordering live-streaming of child sexual abuse, or dissemination of CSAM generated from artificial intelligence.

In many cases, there is a continuum of abuse and exploitation in online and offline worlds. Images online may reflect offline forms of violence, while online sexual exploitation may result in offline forms of sexual exploitation. Child sexual exploitation is also associated with harmful social norms and practices, such as child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C).

Root causes

Poverty, inequality and socio-economic shocks related to climate change, resource extraction, natural disasters, conflict and complex humanitarian emergencies render many children vulnerable to sexual exploitation at the hands of persons with power and resources, including smugglers, recruiters, traffickers or even humanitarian workers.

As a result of power imbalances related to intersecting identity factors, gender norms and socio-economic

realities, many children lack the information, self-efficacy and power to seek support, migrate to safety and secure alternative livelihoods. Many children are vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of unmet needs like care, protection and belonging in families, peer groups, schools and communities. Discrimination and social exclusion resulting from intersecting identity factors such as disabilities, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, caste and refugee status lead some children to turn to dangerous online and offline spaces.

Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, institutionalisation or harmful practices are vulnerable to revictimisation. Inadequate child protection systems, weak institutions and legal policy frameworks fail to live up to human rights standards and deny them access to timely, comprehensive and quality education, health (including mental health and sexual and reproductive health), social welfare and justice services.

Rapidly evolving digital technologies such as end-to-end encryption (E2EE), artificial intelligence, interactive anonymous gaming environments and evolving modes of connectivity between devices further complicates efforts to combat the sexual exploitation of children, demanding safety-by-design features, stronger and harmonised legal and child protection frameworks, private sector regulations and accountability mechanisms.

Tackling the Challenge

Terre des Hommes Netherlands has developed the Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme, which envisions a world where “children, in all their diversity, are safe from all forms of sexual exploitation, enjoy their rights, and have influence”. Using a comprehensive co-creation process that included input from children, this Programme is designed to prevent and respond to online and offline sexual exploitation through ecological, holistic and whole-of-society approaches that address risk and protective factors at multiple levels and in multiple protective environments, tailored for children most likely to be left behind with gender, intersectionality and evolving capacities in mind.

The SEC Thematic Programme focuses on five pillars of change:

1 Empowering Children: Recognising children as agents and experts in their lives, the Programme engages them in co-creating, advising, and joint learning throughout the project lifecycle. It aims to create inclusive spaces for children, in all their diversity, to participate meaningfully and influence decisions affecting them, while promoting their leadership and advocacy skills.

2 Strengthening socio-economic resilience: The Programme focuses on equitable access to education, alternative livelihoods, safe migration and strengthened social protection systems to enhance the resilience of children, families and communities in the face of economic shocks. By addressing the economic drivers of sexual exploitation, the Programme aims to reduce children’s vulnerability to sexual and labour exploitation.

3 Ensuring Care, Protection, and Belonging: The Programme supports and partners with local champions, harnesses the strengths of local communities and empowers families, peers, teachers and communities to transform harmful social norms, promote inclusive, positive and protective relationships, as well as identify and respond to risks and report child sexual exploitation. This includes interventions to prevent perpetration and harmful sexual behaviour.

4 Strengthening Response and Recovery: Collaborating with partners, the Programme strengthens child protection and justice systems to offer timely, comprehensive, coordinated, and quality services for at-risk children and survivors that are child-centred, gender-responsive and trauma-informed, reduce barriers for marginalised children and promote fair, accessible and survivor-centred justice mechanisms. In doing so, the Programme reduces the risks of re-traumatisation, while recognising and promoting their agency and resilience in overcoming adversity.

5 Advocating for Strong Human Rights Frameworks: The Programme focuses on strengthening laws, policies, and budgets that protect children from sexual exploitation, advocating for the rights of children and marginalised groups, and holding duty bearers accountable for implementing child-safe and gender-responsive legal frameworks. It also promotes whole-of-society principles through equitable and collaborative partnerships with diverse stakeholders, including the private sector, to strengthen SEC prevention and response, while strengthening the capacity of grassroots organisations, including survivor-, youth- and women-led organisations, to advance systemic change.

RECLAIM children’s rights to protection from sexual exploitation

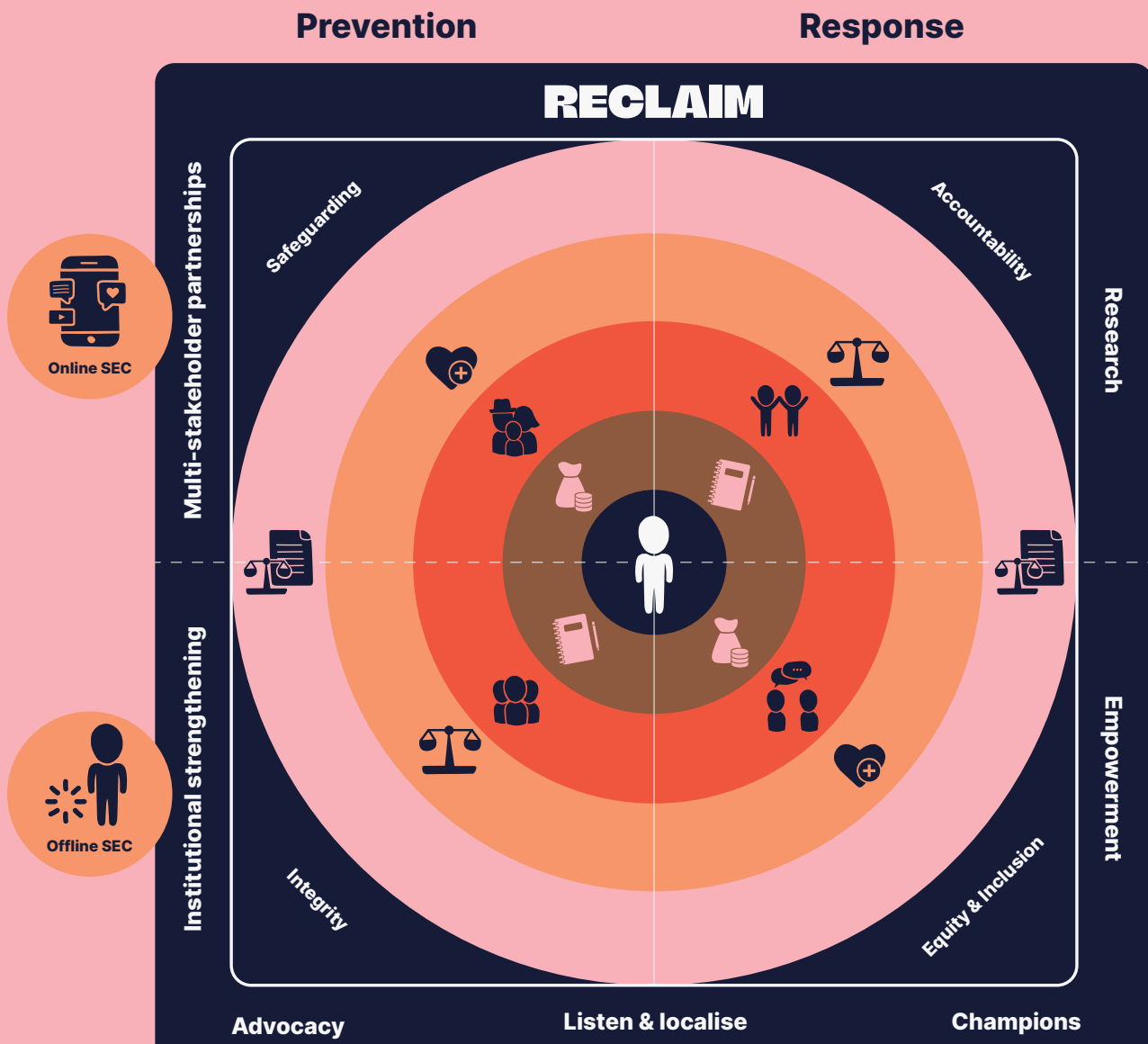
Children are empowered to make safe choices and can influence the decisions that affect them

Children and families can cope with economic shocks

Children are cared for, protected and socially included in families and communities

Survivors of SEC are supported and recover with dignity, justice and compassion

Human rights frameworks create safe environments for children in all their diversity



To achieve change in these five pillars, the **RECLAIM Model** employs seven strategies, namely participatory child-centred research; education and empowerment; children, youth and community champions; localisation approaches; child-led advocacy; institutional strengthening and multi-stakeholder engagement. This comprehensive model emphasises children's rights to participation and protection, targeting both offline and online exploitation for diverse children at risk and survivors to create sustainable, community-driven solutions that catalyse systemic change.

The SEC Thematic Programme adopts a holistic approach to combat sexual exploitation, amplifying children's voices, building strategic partnerships, and implementing sustainable, evidence-led interventions to catalyse systemic change,

thereby creating a future free from sexual exploitation, where children feel safe, included and heard.

This Programme is designed to prevent and respond to online and offline sexual exploitation through ecological, holistic and transformative approaches that address risk and protective factors at multiple levels and in multiple protective environments, tailored for children most likely to be left behind with gender, intersectionality and evolving capacities in mind.



Programme Principles

Terre des Hommes Netherlands protects children by preventing and responding to online and offline forms of Sexual Exploitation of Children, and by empowering children to make their voices count. Grounded in ethical, **survivor-centred** principles, we recognise and applaud the agency, resilience and courage of children. We prioritise their perspectives, expertise and leadership while promoting their wellbeing and recovery. We have a duty to ensure that children in our programmes, many of whom have experienced exploitation and abuse, are not retraumatised and revictimised, or are exposed to intersecting discrimination. For this reason we prioritise the **do no harm principle** in our trauma-informed interventions and comprehensive child safeguarding practices.

Through child-centred, gender-responsive and intersectional approaches we co-create solutions with and for children, and remove barriers that hinder the meaningful participation of marginalised children. To this end, we prioritise inclusion, equity and the Sustainable Development Goals' **leave no one behind** pledge.

We accelerate **transformative approaches** to address the root causes of child sexual exploitation, prevent perpetration and build protective online and offline environments for children most at risk. In our efforts to strengthen the role of local champions, grassroots organisations and community-based

child protection structures in combating child sexual exploitation, we commit to **asset-based principles** - listening and learning before acting, asking before doing, and identifying strengths before deficits. With this in mind we support and facilitate joint learning processes, co-creation and locally-driven approaches.

We recognise that our voices are louder when together and that our contributions are more impactful when complementary, and for this reason we promote equitable **partnerships**, coordinated action and collective advocacy. We generate **evidence** through child-centred research and documented learning to expand knowledge on effective and sustainable solutions that are proven to work, and scale successful approaches through our networks.

We do not do this alone - we adopt a whole-of-society approach by leveraging and complementing the work of diverse stakeholders and foregrounding the voices of children to promote systemic change, based on an analysis of our optimal contribution to lasting changes in the lives of children at risk and survivors of exploitation.