

TERRE DES HOMMES NETHERLANDS FOCUS BRIEF

**THE GENDER
AND SOCIOECONOMIC
DIMENSIONS OF
CHILD LABOUR**



**Terre des
Hommes
Netherlands**

DEFINITIONS



CHILD LABOUR (CL)

describes when a child is forced or coerced into work that is physically, socially and/or morally harmful, exploitative and/or degrading¹. Not all work performed by children can be considered exploitative or harmful, as the age and appropriate hours of work for a child is culturally contingent across diverse contexts². Such labour evidently becomes a cause for concern when it is forced upon a child, affecting their health, development, education, physical and/or mental wellbeing, ability to play, human dignity and potential³. This includes a focus on '*the worst forms*' of child labour, as listed in Article 3 of the Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour⁴:

- a. All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, as well as forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- b. The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- c. The use, procurement or offering of a child for illicit activities, for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; and
- d. Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children.



GENDER

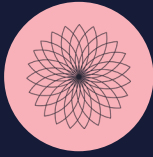
is an individual's identity, and the expression of that identity, as a boy/man, girl/woman or something beyond these binary categories, such as transgender, non-binary, queer and gender-fluid identities and expressions.

¹ ILO 2022

² Ibid

³ Hoque 2021; ILO2022

⁴ ILO 1999



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)⁵.
- **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 birth⁶.
- **Gender expression** is the public presentation of one's gender identity through their appearance (dress, hairstyles, cosmetics and accessories), mannerisms, behaviours, names and preferred pronouns⁷.
- **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 puberty⁸.



LGBTQIA+

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

⁵ Green et al. 2019; Maclaran 2017

⁶ Diamond 2020

⁷ Ibid; Paradiso 2023

⁸ American Psychological Association 2007; Green et al. 2019

TdH NL Position

At TdH NL, we recognise that:

- CL is a form of child exploitation, as children involved are taken advantage of, coerced and/or deceived into work that threatens their physical, psychological, emotional and/or social wellbeing, while the offender(s) or a third party gain some benefit⁹.
- CL 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 harm¹⁰.
- CL is a form of gender-based violence, as harmful gender norms and underlying gender and SOGIESC inequalities distinctly shape the risk and manifestation of CL, and perpetuate the problem¹¹.
- The gender dimensions of CL are reflective of systemic gender inequalities and power dynamics across adult labour divisions, including the association of undervalued domestic and care work with women and girls, and expectations of men and boys to be breadwinners¹².
- Children with marginalised SOGIESC identities face a higher risk of CL, due systemic power imbalances, including patriarchy and heteronormativity, which exclude and disenfranchise such children, making them easier targets to such exploitation¹³.
- There is an overlap between CL, child sexual exploitation and child trafficking (especially for sexual exploitation), which when considered indicates a higher risk for girls and children with marginal SOGIESC identities to CL for such purposes¹⁴.
- Gender and SOGIESC are key intersectional risk factors for CL that must be prioritised across all CL research, policy, advocacy and programme interventions, in order to adequately respond to the problem¹⁵.
- There is a need for gender-transformative approaches to CL that work to address deeply entrenched gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms that perpetuate the problem¹⁶.

In response, we at TdH NL:

- Work through our Child Labour Thematic Programme to address the root causes of CL, including harmful gender norms and inequalities that perpetuate the problem¹⁷.
- Centre gender-transformative and intersectionality approaches across all CL interventions, proactively responding to gender and SOGIESC as key intersectional risk factors for CL, and working to transform gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms¹⁸.
- Ensure all programmes, policies, organisational management, monitoring and evaluation processes in relation to CL are gender mainstreamed, meaning they are designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated in ways that are sensitive and responsive to diverse CL risks and experiences of children, based on their gender and SOGIESC¹⁹.
- Create safe and inclusive spaces where children of all gender and SOGIESC identities are empowered to meaningfully participate in and influence CL policy and programme decision-making²⁰.
- Pay special attention to children from marginalised groups when responding to CL who may be more vulnerable, including girls (especially those not attending school) and children with marginalised, minority SOGIESC identities²¹.
- Advocate for equitable access to quality education and development opportunities for children of all SOGIESC identities, to provide positive alternatives to and help protect children from CL²².
- Strengthen laws, policies and budgets to protect all children from CL, in ways that are responsive to the unique vulnerabilities and needs of children involved based on gender and SOGIESC²³.
- Influence and hold governments and other duty bearers accountable to implement gender-responsive and gender transformative legal frameworks that prioritise gender and SOGIESC rights, to help address root causes that shape CL²⁴.

9 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document

10 UNCRC 1989

11 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief; TdH NL 2023, Listen Up! Strategy; TdH NL 2022, Theory of Change

12 Abdullah et al. 2022; Kayaoglu 2021

13 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document; TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023

14 Greenbaum 2020; Martinez 2013; TdH NL Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief 2024; UNICEF 2021; UNODC 2022

15 TdH NL Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief 2024

16 TdH NL 2024, Gender Policy

17 TdH NL Annual Report 2023

18 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief; TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document

19 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document; TdH NL 2022, Core Principles

20 TdH NL Annual Report 2023; TdH NL Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief 2024

21 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document

22 TdH NL Child Labour Thematic Programme Brief 2024

23 ibid

24 TdH NL 2024, Child Labour Programme Design Document

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 inequalities²⁵. 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 interventions²⁶.

To achieve our mission to protect all children from child exploitation, and our vision of a world free from all forms of child exploitation²⁷, 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 experiences²⁸.

This brief focuses on CL, 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.

More information on CL

Global prevalence and gender patterns of CL

Global estimates in 2020 found that 160 million children are involved in CL worldwide²⁹, and global databases spanning 2015-2023 demonstrate that slightly more than 1 in 5 children in lower income countries are engaged in CL³⁰.

CL has been demonstrated as more prevalent amongst boys than girls, with 97 million boys involved globally, and 63 million girls³¹. However, such figures have been called into question, as they do not include unpaid domestic and care work³². This omission stems from patriarchal, capitalist gender norms that devalue these forms of labour typically associated with women and girls as 'unproductive' and not 'real work', because they do not generate income³³.

Globally, girls perform 160 million more hours of unpaid domestic household and care work daily³⁴. Girls aged 5-9 spend 30% more time on chores than boys this age, increasing to 50% by ages 10-14³⁵. Gender norms that associate unpaid domestic and care work with women and girls reinforce this exploitation and socialise girls to believe these roles are the only ones suitable to them, limiting their future career aspirations and opportunities³⁶.

Expanding the definition of CL to include unpaid domestic and care work, this gender gap reduces by almost half³⁷. Data across Sub-Saharan Africa, The Middle East and North Africa, West and Central Africa, Eastern and Southern Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean shows girls and boys equal involvement in CL when unpaid domestic and care work is considered³⁸.


25 TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023
26 Conte et al. 2020; Josenhans et al. 2020
27 TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023
28 Conte et al. 2020
29 ILO 2020
30 UNICEF 2024
31 ILO 2020; Kayaoglu 2021
32 Ibid
33 Abdullah et al. 2022; Kayaoglu 2021
34 UNICEF 2016
35 Ibid
36 UNICEF 2022
37 ILO 2022
38 UNICEF 2024

Gender dimensions of CL

While there is a more equal involvement of girls and boys across CL than previously perceived, there are key disparities in their experiences of this form of child exploitation, distinctly shaped by gender norms, as detailed below. However, the differences discussed


here should not be seen as representing every girl's or boy's experience of CL. Rather, the following gender dimensions explored highlight key patterns and manifestations of CL among boys and girls respectively, as identified from available literature.

Figure 1: Differences in boys and girls experiences of CL



BOYS
are more likely to:

- Be sent away from home to work and earn money for their families;
- Be tasked with physically strenuous, dangerous labour, such as construction, mining, forest burning and spraying pesticides;
- To work in industry, physically manufacturing and cultivating goods;
- Face increased physical injuries from CL;
- Stay in school despite CL.



GIRLS
are more likely to:

- Be forced into unpaid labour behind closed doors;
- Be tasked with domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning and care-giving;
- Work in the service sector, trading and selling goods;
- Face increased mental health challenges from the experience of CL;
- Experience sexual exploitation and violence while facing CL;
- Be forced to leave school because of CL.

1

UNPAID VERSUS INCOME-GENERATING ROLES

Girls are more likely to be forced into unpaid domestic work, spending 40% more time than boys cooking, cleaning and caring for other siblings and/or sick, elderly or younger family members³⁹. While boys are more likely to be forced into income-generating roles, earning money for their families, making up approximately 61% of children involved in paid child labour⁴⁰. This division is facilitated by gender norms that associate women and girls solely with household and care-giving duties, and 'productive', wage-earning positions with men and boys, burdening them to become breadwinners for their families, often at very young ages⁴¹.

2

PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE SPHERE WORK

Boys are often forcibly sent away from home for CL in situations of economic hardship to financially support their families⁴². This is facilitated by gender norms that expect boys to be independent and to occupy income-generating roles in the public sphere⁴³. As discussed above, girls are mainly tied to roles in the private sphere and only sent away from home for CL as a last resort⁴⁴. This is reflective of gender norms that confine women and girls to roles as mothers, wives, caregivers and homemakers, restricting their visibility and access to roles within public domains⁴⁵. Yet, when girls are forced to work outside of the home, they are often still expected to fulfill unpaid domestic and care duties, subjecting them to a double labour burden⁴⁶.

3

INDUSTRY VERSUS SERVICES

Boys are more commonly forced to work across industry and production sectors, such as agriculture and construction, often involving physically strenuous, hazardous tasks, such as operating heavy machinery,

scavenging, lifting heavy items, cattle herding, forest burning and spraying pesticides⁴⁷. For example, 67.8 million boys are involved in agricultural CL, compared to 44.3 million girls⁴⁸. This is linked to gender norms that assume boys to be physically strong and capable of arduous tasks. There are evidently instances of girls involved in industry-based CL, for example as aforementioned in relation to agricultural CL, and sometimes in the mining industry, such as in Madagascar and India⁴⁹. Yet, when girls are forced to work outside of the home, they are more likely to be pushed into service sector roles, trading and selling goods, as opposed to more strenuous industry roles⁵⁰. This is reflective of gender norms that presume women and girls are incapable of physically strenuous tasks, and are better suited to customer facing roles because of their innately accommodating, polite natures⁵¹.

4

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

As boys are more commonly forced into physically strenuous work, they may face increased risk of short- or long-term physical injuries⁵². While CL affects all children's time for play, friendships and their mental health, research shows girls take a slightly higher toll in this area, due to the double burden of labour they often face, including many adult duties like caring for younger siblings and/or older, sick relatives, depriving them of time for themselves⁵³. Girls are also more likely to experience sexual exploitation, abuse and violence when forced to work outside the home⁵⁴.

39 Abdullah et al. 2022; UNICEF 2016

40 Ibid; Kayaoglu 2021; ILO 2020

41 Abdullah et al. 2022; Kayaoglu 2021

42 Ahmady 2024; ILO 2020

43 Ibid

44 ILO 2020

45 Ahmady 2024; ILO 2020; Berenger and Verdier-Chouchane 2015

46 Berenger and Verdier-Chouchane 2015

47 Ahmady 2024; ILO 2020

48 FAO 2020

49 Ibid; Kempers 2024; TdH NL 2025

50 de Lange 2009; ILO 2020

51 Paradiso et al. 2023; Smith et al. 2021

52 ILO 2020

53 UNICEF 2016

54 ILO 2020

5 EDUCATION

While all children's education is affected by CL, boys involved tend to continue schooling⁵⁵. On the other hand, girls involved in CL are usually forced to leave school and terminate their education⁵⁶. For instance, 119 million girls worldwide are not in school, for various reasons, with one key reason being because they are required to assist with household chores and care-giving duties at home⁵⁷. This is a manifestation of patriarchal gender norms that prioritise boys' education, as they are expected to eventually fulfill diverse, wage-earning occupations in the public sphere, and devalue girls' education, as they are confined to roles as mothers, wives and homemakers⁵⁸. This in turn limits girls' future job opportunities, entrapping them in domestic, private sphere roles for the rest of their lives⁵⁹.

SOGIESC dimensions of CL

Research on CL has mainly focused on differences for boys and girls, without considering broader SOGIESC dimensions. This has largely invisibilised CL experiences of children with divergent, non-dominant SOGIESC identities, such as LGBTQIA+ children. Therefore, more research is needed to explore CL amongst children with diverse, marginal SOGIESC identities, to better understand and respond to their experiences of CL.

It is important to note however, that many children become involved in CL at very young ages, typically between 5 and 11 years old⁶⁰. At this developmental stage, a child's unique SOGIESC identity may not be fully formed, or something they are fully aware of yet, or they may not yet have the vocabulary to fully express their

identity⁶¹. This indicates that having a non-conforming SOGIESC identity may not apply as a relevant risk factor or root cause for CL among very young children. Yet, it still could be a risk factor for very young children that may not be able to fully understand or articulate their diverse SOGIESC yet, but do feel different in some way, hence may be more vulnerable to such exploitation. More research is evidently needed to explore the intersection of age and the SOGIESC dimensions of CL.

Despite limited research, it can be deduced that children with diverse, non-dominant SOGIESC identities⁶² are at increased risk of CL for a few reasons. Such children are frequently persecuted and excluded by their families and/or communities for having non-conforming SOGIESC identities. This can cause such children to commonly be forced out of or to run away from home, increasing the rates of homelessness amongst LGBTQIA+ children compared to non-LGBTQIA+ children⁶³. In turn, such children may be more easily forced into CL, as they are in financially desperate, precarious circumstances, without the support of any adults, in need of money to afford food, shelter and other basic needs⁶⁴. Being ostracised by family, peer and community networks, along with increased homelessness rates, also makes such children more vulnerable to being trafficked for various purposes, including CL⁶⁵.

Looking at sexual exploitation and child trafficking, evidence suggests children with diverse, non-dominant SOGIESC identities are at increased risk of CL for such purposes⁶⁶. For instance, a global study found LGBTQIA+ children are 4 times more likely to be forced into commercial sexual exploitation⁶⁷. Multiple studies

⁵⁵ Abdullah et al. 2022; Burrone and Giannelli 2019

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ UNICEF 2024

⁵⁸ Ibid; Kayaoglu 2021

⁵⁹ Burrone and Giannelli 2019

⁶⁰ ILO 2017

⁶¹ Cislighi and Heise 2019

⁶² Lodha 2019; UNICEF 2020

⁶³ Greenbaum et al. 2023; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020

⁶⁴ Lodha 2019

⁶⁵ Greenbaum et al. 2023; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020; Polaris 2015

⁶⁶ TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief

⁶⁷ Lodha 2019

also find that LGBTQIA+ children are at higher risk of being trafficked than their cisgender, heterosexual peers, especially for commercial sexual exploitation⁶⁸.

Children with marginal SOGIESC identities face heightened risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking due to increased social exclusion and displacement they experience, as shaped by heteronormative gender norms⁶⁹. This weakens their support systems, making them more vulnerable to offenders⁷⁰. As noted above, many are forced to leave home or run away, often ending up in financially precarious situations without adult support, which increases their vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation or trafficking. LGBTQIA+ children are also more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and trafficking⁷¹, as they are more likely to connect with strangers online, to forge friendships they may not have access to offline⁷². The stigma and secrecy surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities also increases children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking, as demand rises in hidden, underground spaces where offenders seek to conceal their own sexuality⁷³.

Conclusion

CL, as a key form of child exploitation, is a highly gendered issue, 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 CL they face. Yet, more research is evidently needed to better understand and respond to broader SOGIESC dimensions of CL, that covers all elements of this acronym. Moreover, to effectively protect and support all children, responses to CL must address gender and SOGIESC inequalities and marginalisation that shape such child exploitation, along with tackling other key root causes and their gender and SOGIESC dimensions, such as poverty, climate, social or political vulnerabilities and various harmful socio-cultural norms. By centering these gender and SOGIESC dimensions across research, policy, and programming, we can build more inclusive and effective interventions that respond to the unique CL experiences of children, ensuring their rights to safety, dignity, and empowerment in all contexts.

CL is a form of child exploitation, deeply shaped by harmful gender norms and structural inequalities related to gender and SOGIESC.



⁶⁸ Choi 2015; Greenbaum 2020; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020; Martinez 2013

⁶⁹ TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief

⁷⁰ Ibid; Lodha 2019; UNICEF 2020

⁷¹ Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020; Greenbaum et al. 2023; Martinez 2013; Lodha 2019; UNICEF 2020

⁷² eSafety Commissioner 2024; Thorn 2022

⁷³ Martinez 2013

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