THE GENDER AND SOGIESC DIMENSIONS OF (ONLINE) SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Terre des
Hommes
Netherlands

DEFINITIONS

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN (SEC)

is when a child is forced or coerced into sexual activities, in exchange for some form of commercial value, such as money, gifts, food or water, or non-commercial benefits, such as favouritism, affection or protection. There is a clear power differential between the offender(s) and the child who is sexually exploited[1].

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (OCSE)

is a term that describes all sexually exploitative acts against a child that at some stage were facilitated through a connection to the internet, an online environment and/or technological devices[2]. This includes:

- **Sexual extortion**, when an individual is blackmailed and threatened that their intimate content (sent consensually or under coercion) will be non-consensually shared, if they do not meet certain demands, such as providing more content, meeting in person to engage in sexual activities or sending money[3].
- **Online grooming**, where an offender builds a relationship with a child online, gaining their trust, often pretending to be a child, luring them into secrecy and eventual sexual exploitation and abuse[4].
- **Live streaming**, when a child is forced or coerced into sexual acts, either alone or with others, while this abuse is broadcasted live online for others to watch remotely. Remote viewers often have requested, paid for and dictated how the sexual abuse is performed[5].
- **Child sexual abuse materials (CSAM)**, which denotes sexual images or videos of children that they have been forced or coerced to produce, or that depict child sexual abuse. Today, CSAM is viewed, produced, disseminated, bought and sold almost entirely online. AI advancements have enabled the creation of hyper-realistic depictions of children ('deep fakes'), which places CSAM at risk of exponential increase[6].

(ONLINE) SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN ((O)SEC)

will be used when collectively referring to SEC and OCSE at the same time.

1   Hall et al. 2022; Luxembourg Guidelines 2016
2   Luxembourg Guidelines 2016
3   ECPAT International 2021a
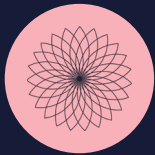4   Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) 2016
5   ECPAT International 2016
6   Luxembourg Guidelines 2016

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.

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)[7].
- **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 birth[8].
- **Gender expression** is the public presentation of one's gender identity through their appearance (dress, hairstyles, cosmetics and accessories), mannerisms, behaviours, names and preferred pronouns[9].
- **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 puberty[10].

LGBTQIA+

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

7   Green et al. 2019; Maclaran 2017
8   Diamond 2020
9   ibid; Paradiso et al. 2023
10   American Psychological Association 2012; Green et al. 2019

TdH NL Position

At TdH NL, we recognise that:

- (O)SEC is a form of child exploitation, as children involved are taken advantage of, forced, coerced and/or deceived into sexual acts against their will, that threaten their physical, psychological, emotional and/or social wellbeing, while the offender(s) gain some benefit[11].

- (O)SEC is a significant child rights and protection issue that requires urgent attention, as it violates children's rights to health, wellbeing, safety and freedom from all forms of violence and harm[12].

- Given the anonymity, increased impunity and easy, rapid spread of content on the internet, and lack of online safety regulation, the risk of sexual violence and exploitation against children is often exacerbated in online spaces[13].

- (O)SEC is a form of gender-based violence, as harmful gender norms and underlying gender and SOGIESC inequalities distinctly shape the risk and manifestation of (O)SEC, and perpetuate the problem[14].

- Adult men are the main perpetrators of (O)SEC, with girls as their primary targets, as facilitated by patriarchal gender norms and misogyny, that reinforce male dominance over others, especially women, girls and children[15].

- Harmful sexual behaviours (HSBs), being inappropriate, exploitative, abusive or violent sexual acts displayed by a child towards another child, similarly reflect these (O)SEC gender patterns with adolescent boys as the main group exhibiting such behaviours, most commonly towards girls[16].

- Not all men will perpetrate (O)SEC, and not all boys will display HSBs. The enactment of such crimes or behaviours, respectively, are shaped by highly situational individual, familial and societal risk factors, as well as various protective factors that can mitigate such risks. Those risks are facilitated by patriarchal gender norms and misogyny. These factors must be centred to holistically, adequately respond to (O)SEC offenders and offences.

- Children with divergent, non-dominant SOGIESC identities are at increased risk of (O)SEC, due to heteronormative gender norms that marginalise and persecute individuals for such having non-conforming identities, making them easier targets to offenders[17].

- Boys are victims of (O)SEC too, facing an increased risk of financial sexual extortion online in particular[18].

- The number of children across all gender and SOGIESC identities who have experienced (O)SEC is predicted to be significantly higher than current statistics suggest, due to issues of underreporting, distinctly shaped by gender norms and a child's SOGIESC identity[19].

- A child's gender and SOGIESC may also impact their access to (O)SEC support services, with certain barriers reinforced by gender norms and inequalities, which can increase the risk of re-victimisation and re-traumatisation[20].

- Gender and SOGIESC are key intersectional risk factors for (O)SEC that must be prioritised across all (O)SEC research, policy, advocacy and programme interventions, in order to adequately respond to the problem[21].

- There is a need for gender-transformative approaches to (O)SEC that work to address deeply entrenched gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms that perpetuate the problem[22].

- Responding to the gender and SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC requires a whole-of-society approach, entailing action, and collaboration where relevant, on behalf of multiple stakeholders across society, including governmental, education, health, legal, justice system, child rights, and where appropriate, private sector actors[23].

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11 TdH NL 2023, Listen Up! Strategy; TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief
12 UNCRC 1989
13 Project deSHAME 2019
14 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief; TdH NL Theory of Change 2022
15 Armitage et al. 2018; Bautista et al. 2019; Christensen 2023; Diaz-Bethencourt et al. 2024; Moreno et al. 2013; UNICEF 2020
16 TdH NL 2025, Harmful sexual behaviours (HSBs) focus brief
17 Lodha 2019; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020; Martinez 2013; WeProtect 2022
18 Alonso-Ruido et al. 2024; Estevez et al. 2024; IWF 2024; UNICEF 2021
19 UNICEF 2017; UNICEF 2021
20 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief
21 ibid
22 TdH NL 2024, Gender Policy
23 TdH NL Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief 2024

In response, we at TdH NL:

- Work through our Sexual Exploitation of Children (SEC) Thematic Programme to address the root causes of (O)SEC, including harmful gender norms and inequalities that perpetuate the problem[24].
- Centre gender-transformative and intersectionality approaches across all (O)SEC interventions, proactively responding to gender and SOGIESC as key intersectional risk factors for (O)SEC, and working to transform gender and SOGIESC inequalities and harmful gender norms[25].
- Create safe and inclusive spaces where children of all gender, SOGIESC and intersectional identities are empowered to meaningfully participate in and influence (O)SEC policy and programme decision-making[26].
- Collaborate with partners to strengthen child protection, and youth justice, health and education sectors, to offer services that are responsive to the gender and SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC, and

reduce barriers to children with marginalised gender and SOGIESC identities[27].
- Support community champions to promote respectful relationships and gender and SOGIESC equality and inclusion, to help tackle harmful gender norms and inequalities that are root causes behind (O)SEC[28].
- Support parents and caregivers to identify and respond to signs of (O)SEC occurring in a child's life, including the diverse gender and SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC[29].
- Strengthen laws, policies and budgets to protect all children from (O)SEC, with a focus on advocating for the rights of girls and children with divergent, non-dominant SOGIESC identities as most vulnerable[30].
- 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 the root causes that shape (O)SEC[31].

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 inequalities[32]. 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 interventions[33].

To achieve our mission to protect all children from child exploitation[34], and our vision of a world free from all forms of child exploitation, 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 gender and SOGIESC identities and experiences[35].

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

24 TdH NL Annual Report 2023; TdH NL Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief 2024; TdH NL 2024, Gender Policy
25 TdH NL Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief 2024
26 ibid
27 ibid
28 ibid
29 ibid
30 ibid
31 ibid; TdH NL Theory of Change 2022
32 TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023
33 Conte et al. 2020; Josenhans et al. 2020
34 TdH NL Listen Up! Strategy 2023
35 Conte et al. 2020

PREVALENCE OF (O)SEC

1.7 million children were **sexually exploited** worldwide in 2021.

35% of people trafficked globally for **commercial sexual exploitation** in 2020 were children.

1 in 5 girls
1 in 30 boys are forced into **child marriage**, often leading to SEC and abuse.

300% surge in **online grooming** and **sextortion** of children in 2023.

300+ million children affected by **OCSE** in 2023–2024 (and rising).

35.9 million **CSAM** files were reported to NCMEC (US) in 2023.

More information on (O)SEC

Global prevalence of (O)SEC

In 2021, 1.7 million children were sexually exploited worldwide[36]. In 2020, 35% of the 14,121 people trafficked globally for commercial sexual exploitation were children[37]. 1 in 5 girls, and 1 in 30 boys, were forced to marry (mainly male) adults, where they are commonly sexually exploited and abused in exchange for money to support their families[38]. In times of conflict, child marriage rates are said to further increase by approximately 20%[39]. In humanitarian emergencies, commercial SEC in general dramatically increases, as families seek to alleviate financial burdens that have resulted from such devastating circumstances[40]. As international travel and tourism has steadily increased in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, so too has SEC in this context, with offenders using the infrastructure of the industry, including hotels, hostels and transportation, along with online technologies, to commit SEC crimes[41].

The rise of social media and other online environments, such as virtual reality and gaming platforms, generative artificial intelligence, encrypted chat rooms and communication services, has escalated SEC. This is explained by the fact that offenders have new, easier avenues to contact, connect with and sexually exploit children, either solely through online spaces or to facilitate in-person SEC, with increased anonymity and impunity that the internet provides[42]. Between 2023 and 2024, over 300 million children were affected by OCSE, with numbers projected to increase[43]. In 2023, over 35.9 million CSAM files were reported in the US to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children's (NCMEC) CyberTipline, along with a 300% increase in online grooming and sexual extortion of children[44].

Gender dimensions behind (O)SEC perpetration

Studies worldwide show the main perpetrators of both in person SEC and OCSE are adult men. In relation to in person SEC, a global study with 22,825 child sexual abuse and exploitation survivors found 97% of participants were harmed by male offenders[45]. Systematic reviews across Australia, Sweden, England, Whales, Spain, and South Asia further confirm that the vast majority of SEC perpetrators, (around 90% or higher) are adult men[46]. Research also demonstrates that the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, including high rates of girls for child marriage, almost always entails male orchestrators and offenders[47]. In humanitarian emergencies, there is a major increase in instances of SEC, with male soldiers, aid workers and

36 ILO 2022
37 UNODC 2022
38 UNICEF 2023
39 Dalal 2022
40 CARE 2018; Verant 2021
41 ECPAT International 2021b
42 Project deSHAME 2019
43 Childlight 2024
44 NCMEC 2023
45 ibid
46 Cashmore and Parkinson 2017; Frederick 2010; Göran Svedin et al. 2010; Abad et al 2009; Barter et al. 2017
47 UNODC 2022; Voronova et al. 2016

general men in the community found to be the main perpetrators[48].

In relation to OCSE, research also consistently finds adult men to be the main offenders[49]. For instance, an anonymous survey with 459 CSAM viewers in the UK, New Zealand, Australia, the US and Canada found being an adult male a key risk factor for viewing and sharing CSAM[50]. Further, a study of US crime arrests for OCSE found 99% of offenders to be adult men[51]. In a survey with 1200 children in the US aged 9-17, 47% of participants reported they had been contacted online by an adult male attempting to groom or sexually extort them[52].

This trend of male perpetrators most frequently behind both in person SEC and OCSE is similarly reflected across HSBs patterns, including those facilitated through the internet and technological devices, known as technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours (TA-HSBs)[53]. Research consistently finds adolescent boys as the main children displaying both HSBs and TA-HSBs[54]. For instance, a large-scale Australian inquiry with 1,129 survivors of HSBs showed 86.3% of children displaying HSBs were male. A nationally representative survey is the US with 13,052 children and their caregivers likewise found adolescent males were the main group found displaying HSBs[55]. In relation to TA-HSBs, a project with 61 young people aged 11-19 in Glasgow found that adolescent males made up 75% of TA-HSB cases[56]. Similarly, a UK study that assessed data from a service for children displaying TA-HSBs, involving 231 cases, found that 83.2% of service users were adolescent males[57].

It is important to note that not all men will perpetrate (O)SEC, and not all boys will display (TA-)HSBs. Yet, the increased prevalence of male perpetration behind (O)SEC and boys displaying (TA-)HSBs cannot be overlooked. These patterns are ultimately reflective of and facilitated by a broader, deeply entrenched culture of harmful, patriarchal gender norms and misogyny, that condone, encourage and even reward male dominance, violence and control over others, especially women, girls and children.

There is a misconception that (O)SEC perpetrators who target boys are homosexual or bisexual men, or transgender. Yet, studies find the majority of male offenders identify as heterosexual[58]. These male offenders often weaponise heteronormative gender norms and homophobia to silence boy victims, threatening to expose their homosexuality to their communities where same-sex relations are stigmatised and/or punished if they report their (O)SEC experiences[59].

Female (O)SEC offenders are significantly less common, largely due to social sanctions around female violence shaped by gender norms that expect females to be gentle, nurturing care-givers[60]. When female offenders do exist, they often target boys, reflecting heterosexuality as the dominant sexual orientation[61]. In such cases, society often downplays the issue, viewing boys as "*lucky*" to have sexual encounters with women, even if non-consensual, due to gender norms that assume male dominance in sexual situations, making it difficult for boys to be viewed as victims[62].

There are evidently key individual, interpersonal, institutional and macro societal level risk factors that can combine and make men, boys, or any individual, more likely to enact such behaviours and crimes[63]. Such risk factors may include mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression or low self-esteem, experiences of abuse, neglect or trauma, exposure to violent, misogynistic media (including mainstream pornography), negative peer groups that encourage or celebrate violence, coming from unstable or violent households or institutional settings, or lacking sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and consent education[64]. It is important to consider the presence of such risk factors, including

48   Verant 2021; Dalal 2022
49   Bautista et al. 2019; Christensen 2023; Moreno et al. 2013; Armitage et al. 2018
50   Cashmore et al. 2024
51   Finkelhor et al. 2011
52   Thorn 2022
53   TdH NL 2025, Harmful sexual behaviours (HSBs) focus brief
54   Green et al. 2024
55   Finkelhor and Gewirtz-Meydan 2019
56   Allardyce et al. 2022
57   Hallet et al. 2019
58   Josenhans et al. 2020; Montgomery-Devlin 2008
59   Josenhans et al. 2020
60   Ashby et al. 2014; Josenhans et al. 2020; UNICEF 2020
61   Ashby et al. 2014
62   Josenhans et al. 2020
63   UNICEF 2020; Josenhans et al. 2020; Benelmouffok et al. 2020
64   ibid; Crabbe and Flood 2021; Allardyce et al. 2022; Branigan et al. 2016

how they interact with harmful gender norms, when responding to (O)SEC offenders and offences, to better understand and holistically address the issue.

There are likewise protective factors that can enable resilience and mitigate risk factors to prevent individuals from perpetrating (O)SEC, which are also important to consider when responding to this issue. Some key examples include[65]:

- Increased education, knowledge and awareness around SRH, including teachings on consent, respectful relationships and the consequences of gender-based violence, including (O)SEC.
- Therapeutic and/or psychoeducative support services to address mental health and/or behavioural issues, including violence.
- Critical thinking education and skills about the violent, sexist and misogynistic media, specifically mainstream pornography.
- Strong, supportive parental, carer and/or peer relationships, where the individual feels supported, valued, cared for and safe to seek help about their sexual interests, behaviours or experiences.
- Coming from safe, supportive home environments, where individuals have positive role models and guidance around appropriate, inappropriate and harmful sexual behaviours and relations with others.

Gender and SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC
While (O)SEC affects all children worldwide, the risk and nature of (O)SEC experiences vary amongst children, as shaped by gender norms, gender and SOGIESC inequalities and a child's gender and SOGIESC identity. Key aspects of these gender and SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC are detailed below.
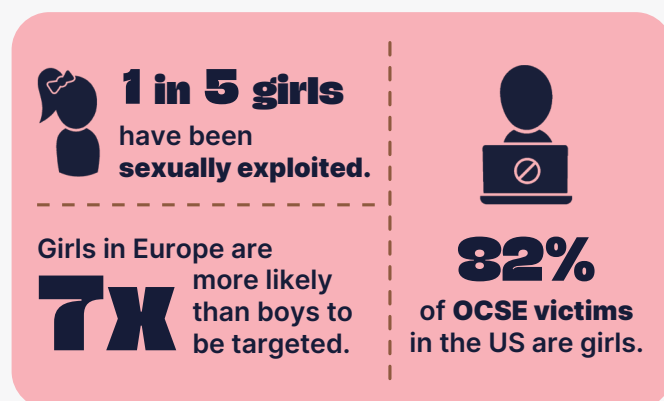
1 HEIGHTENED VULNERABILITY OF GIRLS TO (O)SEC

Global data indicates 1 in 5 girls have been sexually exploited[66], with girls in Europe being 7 times more likely to be targeted than boys[67]. Girls are also primary targets of OCSE globally[68]. A study on US crime arrests for OCSE found 82% of targets were girls[69]. This increased vulnerability of girls to (O)SEC, coupled with the overrepresentation of male perpetrators, is driven by harmful gender norms that condone and reinforce male dominance over women and girls, and position women and girls as submissive, sexual objects of men and boys.

Girls who experience (O)SEC can also face specific, heightened consequences, shaped by reproductive features they commonly possess, and gender norms. These can include[70]:
- Unwanted and unsafe pregnancies
- Forced or unsafe abortions to terminate pregnancies
- Shame, stigma, social exclusion and persecution for losing their virginity and/or becoming pregnant prior to marriage
- Being forced into child marriage to overcome breaking social codes of losing their virginity or becoming pregnant prior to marriage.

65   Berg et al. 2017; Crabbe and Flood 2021; Hamilton et al. 2017; Project deSHAME 2019
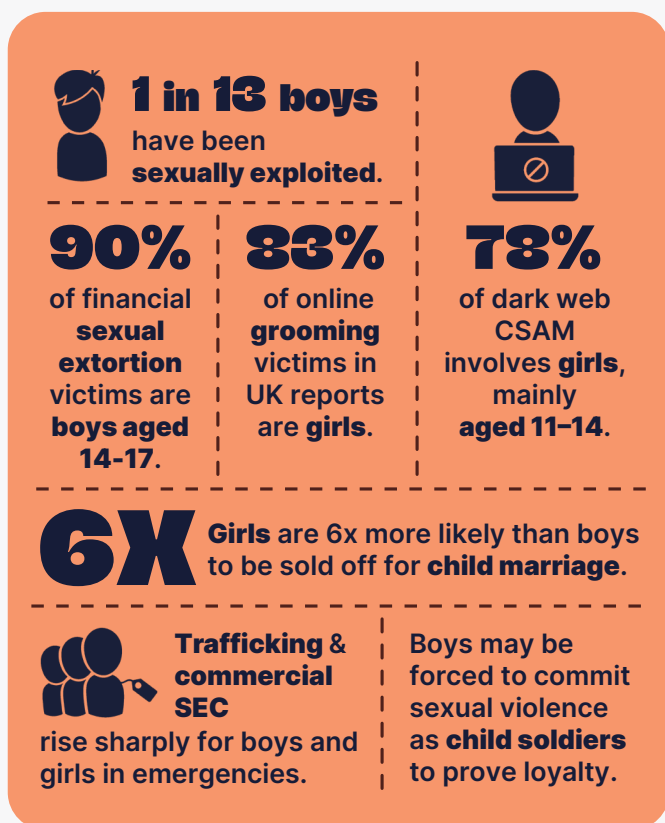66   UNICEF 2021
67   UNGA 2021; Deerfield et al. 2020
68   Aguado and Martinez-Arias 2022; Bautista et al. 2019; Cook et al. 2021; Díaz-Aguado et al. 2021
69   Finkelhor et al. 2011
70   Barnett et al. 2020; Bullen et al. 2020; Ferris 2007; WHO 2014

1 in 13 boys have been **sexually exploited.**

90% of financial **sexual extortion** victims are **boys aged 14-17.**

83% of online **grooming** victims in UK reports are **girls.**

78% of dark web CSAM involves **girls,** mainly **aged 11–14.**

6X **Girls** are 6x more likely than boys to be sold off for **child marriage.**

Trafficking & commercial SEC rise sharply for boys and girls in emergencies.

Boys may be forced to commit sexual violence as **child soldiers** to prove loyalty.

2 DIVERSE MANIFESTATIONS AND IMPACTS OF (O)SEC EXPERIENCED BY GENDER

While girls are the main victims of (O)SEC, boys are victims too, with globally 1 in 13 boys having been sexually exploited[71.] Yet, the manifestations of (O)SEC and its impacts often differ between girls and boys, as a child's gender identity, along with entrenched gender norms, evidently shape their vulnerability to and experiences of (O)SEC.

Research shows that girls are more likely to be forced into commercial SEC, and to be trafficked for SEC purposes than boys[72]. Often girls that are sold off or trafficked for child labour purposes end up being sexually exploited and abused, or are abducted into the commercial SEC sector[73]. Girls are also six times more likely to be sold off for child marriage than boys, where they are forced into relationships with older men, and commonly sexually exploited and abused[74]. In humanitarian emergencies, the risk of girls being forced into commercial SEC, being trafficked for SEC purposes or forced into child marriage exponentially increases[75]. This is because families are often in desperate circumstances, without money, food, water, shelter and safety[76]. They therefore resort to exchanging girls to acquire money or basic needs, as influenced by gender norms that commodify women and girls and sexual objects[77].

In relation to OCSE in particular, girls are more commonly victims of CSAM, online grooming, unsolicited sexual requests and sexual extortion for CSAM or in person sexual acts[78]. In a study that analysed 2899 anonymous survey responses on the dark web, 78% of participants look for and share CSAM depicting girls, mainly aged 11-14 years old[79]. Of the 21,890 reports of online grooming of children made to the UK police since 2017, where the gender of the victim was known, 83% of victims were girls[80]. A survey with 1631 survivors of sexual extortion as children, aged 18-25 at the time of the study, found that the vast majority of female participants were sexually extorted in exchange sending more CSAM or to engage in sexual activities in person[81].

Boys often experience SEC in exchange for alcohol or drugs, and boys involved in selling illegal products are often sexually exploited and abused by customers[82]. In humanitarian emergencies, commercial SEC and being trafficked for SEC amongst boys also significantly increases, due to increased poverty, displacement and destruction of child protection structures[83]. It is also common that boys recruited as child soldiers in conflict settings are forced to sexually abuse girls in rival communities, to prove their loyalty to the armed group[84]. Such scenarios invoke harmful patriarchal gender norms

71   UNICEF 2021
72   UNICEF 2021; UNICEF 2014; Warria 2017
73   UNODC 2022; ILO 2022
74   UNICEF 2021; UNICEF 2014; Warria 2017; UNICEF 2023; TdH NL 2024, Child, early, and forced marriage and child exploitation
75   CARE 2018; Plan International 2013
76   ibid
77   CARE 2018; Plan International 2013
78   Bueno-Guerra et al. 2024; Diaz-Bethencourt et al. 2024; INHOPE 2021; Thorn 2022
79   Protect Children 2024
80   NSPCC 2023
81   Finkelhor et al. 2016
82   Ayuku et al. 2015; Edwards et al. 2006; Kudrati et al. 2008; Reid and Piquero 2014
83   Akhtar 2019; Josenhans et al. 2020
84   Akhtar 2019; Alfredson 2001

that reward male sexual force over women and girls, to signify allegiance and foster acceptance within a male-dominated group.

In relation to OCSE, research finds boys are more vulnerable to sexual extortion, particularly financial sexual extortion, due to the higher likelihood to engage risky online behaviours, such as connecting with strangers and sharing sexual content[85]. A study that analysed reports to NCMEC and found 90% of financial sexual extortion cases submitted involved boy victims aged between 14 and 17 years old, where they were lured into sending sexual, intimate content of themselves, and threatened that these would be publically shared if they did not send money[86]. This increased risk of financial sexual extortion amongst boys in particular could be explained by offenders assuming boys have more pocket money, as influenced by gender norms that associate income, wealth and financial independence with men and boys[87].

All (O)SEC survivors can suffer severe impacts, including physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, trauma, suicidal ideations and attempts, substance abuse, self-harm[88]. Yet, research suggests girl survivors often experience heightened self-blame, shame, denial, self-harm, suicidal ideations and attempts[89]. While boy survivors are often more prone to alcoholism, substance abuse or turn to enacting violence and abuse towards others as coping mechanisms[90].

3 HEIGHTENED VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN WITH NON-CONFORMING SOGIESC IDENTITIES TO (O)SEC

Most (O)SEC research focuses on boys and girls, failing to consider children with diverse, non-dominant SOGIESC identities, including LGBTQIA+ children. Yet, available data suggests LGBTQIA+ children are at higher risk. A global study found LGBTQIA+ children are 4 times more likely to experience in person SEC[91]. A global survey reported OCSE rates of 65% of LGB and 59% of transgender or non-binary child participants, compared to 46% of non-LGBTQIA+ respondents[92]. Multiple studies also find higher risk of trafficking amongst LGBTQIA+ children, especially for sexual exploitation[93]. This is attributed to the hidden nature and heightened stigma surrounding LGBTQIA+ relationships and sexuality, driven by heteronormative gender norms. These factors increase the demand for LGBTQIA+ individuals in underground, secretive spaces to engage sexual activities, including SEC of LGBTQIA+ children, as offenders likely seek to avoid public exposure of their sexuality[94].

LGBTQIA+ children face higher (O)SEC risk due to increased exclusion and displacement they already face for having non-conforming SOGIESC identities, isolating them from social safety networks and making them easier targets to offenders[95]. There is also increased homelessness rates amongst LGBTQIA+ children, as they are more likely to run away from home, or be shunned by their family or community, which makes them more accessible to traffickers or commercial SEC offenders[96].

LGBTQIA+ children are **7X** more likely to experience **in-person SEC**.

LGBTQIA+ youth face higher risks of **homelessness** due to stigma and exclusion, increasing their risk of being **trafficked**, especially for SEC.

65% of **LGB**
59% of **transgender/non-binary**
children report OCSE, vs **46%** of non-LGBTQIA+.

85   Alonso-Ruido et al. 2024; IWF 2024; Thorn 2024
86   Thorn 2024
87   Chen et al. 2023; Furnham 2001; Lewis and Scott 2000
88   Diaz Bethencourt et al. 2024; Ferguson et al. 2018; UNICEF 2020
89   Alix et al. 2020
90   Branigan et al. 2016; Peter-Hagene et al. 2015; UNICEF 2020
91   Lodha 2019
92   WeProtect 2022
93   Choi 2015; Greenbaum 2020; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020; Martinez 2013
94   Martinez 2013
95   Lodha 2019; UNICEF 2020
96   Barren et al. 2017; Greenbaum 2020; Hogan and Roe-Sepowitz 2020

Offenders also commonly prey upon LGBTQIA+ children's increased desire for connection, due to the exclusion they frequently face[97]. Research shows they are more likely to connect with unfamiliar adults online, seeking friendships they often do not have access to offline, which can increase their vulnerability to OCSE[98].

4 ISSUE OF UNDERREPORTING

(O)SEC is underreported among children of all gender and SOGIESC identities, indicating numbers to be significantly higher across the board. Yet, reasons behind such underreporting vary amongst children with diverse gender and SOGIESC identities, as influenced by gender norms.

Girls fear reporting (O)SEC as it may cause trouble, which violates gender norms expecting them to be quiet, submissive and cooperative[99]. They may also avoid reporting, given shame, stigma and fear of being labelled as '*unmarriable*' or '*promiscuous*' for losing their virginity before marriage[100]. Girls may also even perceive the (O)SEC they experience as normal or expected, due to the dominance of gender norms that condone male violence against women and girls, deterring them from reporting.

Boys underreport (O)SEC due to shame, stigma, and fear of being seen as "unmasculine," as victimhood contradicts gender norms around masculinity and manhood, expecting them to be strong, dominant individuals[101]. They also fear being labelled "homosexual" when abused by male perpetrators, controlled by heteronormative gender norms and systemic homophobia[102].

LGBTQIA+ children often do not report (O)SEC due to fear of exacerbating the stigma, discrimination and/or violence they already face for having non-conforming SOGIESC identities[103], as controlled by heteronormative norms that marginalise individuals with divergent, non-binary SOGIESC identities[103]. This reluctance to report is often exacerbated, as such children have frequently not even disclosed their divergent SOGIESC identity to any family members or peers, given entrenched community taboos[104]. They also may still be in the process of understanding and learning how to express their identity, so it might not be possible for them to disclose their SOGIESC if they are still coming to terms with it. Or they might live in a country where being LGBTQIA+ is illegal, criminalised and/or punishable by law or authorities[105].

Gender and SOGIESC barriers across (O)SEC responses

There are evidently insufficient support services responding to (O)SEC for children across all diverse gender and SOGIESC identities[106]. Yet, there are certain barriers for children to access quality, timely and comprehensive (O)SEC support services, as shaped by gender and SOGIESC differences and inequalities. For example, some research highlights that due to myths that boys are never victims of (O)SEC, support services may commonly focus on girls as sole victims, precluding boy victims from receiving crucial support[107]. Service providers may likewise hold stigma towards boys as vulnerable or victims of (O)SEC, as driven by patriarchal gender norms that solely portray boys as strong, dominant individuals. This may cause them to overlook or avoid providing support to boy victims. However, support services for (O)SEC girl victims should not be overstated. Such services are still insufficient to reach and address the colossal volume of girl (O)SEC victims across the globe[108].

Many support services and contacts are also situated within school contexts[109]. Globally, girls are more likely to be forced to leave school, as their education is not valued to the same degree as boys, due to gender norms that confine them to roles as mothers, wives and caregivers

97 Thorn 2022
98 eSafety Commissioner 2024; Thorn 2022; TdH NL, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief
99 UNICEF 2017
100 UNICEF 2020
101 UNGA 2021; UNICEF 2021
102 ibid
103 Martinez 2013
104 ibid
105 ECPAT International 2024
106 UNODC 2022; UNICEF 2021
107 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief;
108 UNODC 2018; UNICEF 2021
109 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief

in the private sphere[110]. This can in turn exclude girls from accessing essential (O)SEC support services available through education institutions.

Many (O)SEC services do not proactively work to address increased vulnerabilities of or make space for children with divergent, non-dominant SOGIESC identities, which can lead such children to fall through the cracks[111]. There may likewise be inbuilt stigma within service providers, especially within cultures where being LGBTQIA+ is extremely taboo or prohibited, leading staff and services to exclude children with diverse SOGIESC identities from receiving (O)SEC support.

Barriers to receiving essential support services in response to (O)SEC increases the risk of re-victimisation and re-traumatisation amongst victims, of all gender and SOGIESC identities[112]. This is because the (O)SEC experienced by victims can be left unaddressed, thereby continue or intensity, along with its adverse physical or mental wellbeing effects.

Conclusion

(O)SEC, as a key form of child exploitation, 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 (O)SEC they face. Yet, more research is evidently needed to better understand and respond to broader SOGIESC dimensions of (O)SEC, that covers all elements of this acronym. Moreover, to effectively protect and support all children, responses to (O)SEC must prioritise the diverse gender and SOGIESC dimensions of such child exploitation. This requires tackling the root causes of gender and SOGIESC inequality and marginalisation that influence the risk and manifestation of (O)SEC. 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 (O)SEC experiences of children, ensuring their rights to safety, dignity, and empowerment in all contexts.

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

WHAT INCREASES RISK?

- Gender **inequality**
- SOGIESC-based **discrimination**
- **Marginalisation** of diverse, non-conforming and intersectional gender and SOGIESC identities

WHAT IS MISSING?

More research needed to:
- Understand how **(O)SEC affects all diverse SOGIESC identities**
- **Tailor responses** to diverse gender and SOGIESC identities and needs

WHAT MUST BE DONE?

To protect **all** children:
- Address **root causes** of gender & SOGIESC inequality.
- Prioritise **inclusive and gender-transformative approaches** in research, policy, advocacy and programming

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110 Burrone and Giannelli 2019
111 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief; Dominey-Howes et al. 2017; Goldsmith et al. 2022
112 TdH NL 2024, Sexual Exploitation of Children Thematic Programme Brief

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