


# Sex, Abuse and Childhood




The research in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam aimed to understand the general awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse in communities and the protective mechanisms utilised in reducing harm to children. It is through understanding this broader situation in communities that specific interventions to prevent child sexual abuse in travel and tourism can be effectively delivered over the long term in a sustainable way.


## Knowledge

- Adults and children in the study had only a basic, limited understanding of child abuse and child rights, with child sexual abuse typically understood as the penetrative rape of girls.
- Few children identified anal sex, oral sex, participation in/exposure to pornography or masturbation as abusive sexual acts.
-  Cases of grooming were documented across the research locations, yet grooming techniques used by both local and foreign offenders to gain access to children were not well understood by adults or children.
- Most children and adults confused the legal age of consent with the legal age of marriage and perceived this mainly as a form of control over, rather than a protective mechanism for, children.
- School children received information about anatomy and reproductive health at schools and from NGOs but rarely received more detailed information focusing specifically on child sexual abuse prevention strategies.
- Researchers identified five main sources of education about sex and sex-related issues for children: media and the internet, friends and peers, schools, public information campaigns, and personal experience/observation.
- Parents were not found to be a major source of information about sex for children and demonstrated the lowest levels of understanding on the issue of child sexual abuse.
- Despite the strong influence of the internet, digital and media technologies on the attitudes and sexual behaviour of children, parents and duty bearers were generally not aware of its effects, nor did they provide adequate supervision or information about the risks posed (e.g. online grooming).
- In general, many adults and children appeared to lack a thorough understanding of child sexual abuse and practical ways to identify, prevent or respond to it.

## Attitudes and Practices

- Girls were generally seen to be more vulnerable to abuse than boys and a strong cultural importance was placed on girls' virginity across the region.
- Girls were often blamed, stigmatised and marginalised for pre-marital sexual behaviour, even when they were victims of abuse.
- Homosexuality (particularly in relation to boys) was stigmatised and considered socially unacceptable in the majority of study sites, and sexual abuse of boys was not generally considered to be a real issue that was recognised.
- Sexual abuse was seen as something that originated from outside the family and community, especially sexual abuse of boys.
- Children and adults often did not report abuse as a result of shame and fear of loss of reputation or stigmatisation.
- Parents and teachers were found to be resistant to providing sex education to children for fear that this would encourage sexual experimentation and inappropriate behaviour.
-  Poverty, the need to finance education, family obligations, peer influence, and health issues were some of the major reasons that children engaged in commercial sex.
- For some young people (under 18 years), selling sex for money was also a way of keeping up with consumer culture; something which could take the form of more subtle 'material exchanges' involving gifts of consumer goods.

## Obstacles and Opportunities for Intervention

- Factors identified as contributing to children's vulnerability to sexual abuse included: situation of care in the family and home; the presence of the travel and tourism industry; local environment; migration; and the internet, media and digital technology.
-  Where children worked in occupations such as street vending, as tour guides, or in the service industry, proximity to travellers could make them highly vulnerable to grooming and sexual exploitation.
- Children living in remote and isolated locations were also vulnerable, especially as sex offenders appeared to be increasingly moving from cities towards targeting remote areas.
- Child protection issues appeared to be increasing in prominence on national political agendas, and child protection systems, even if rudimentary, were in place across all the research locations.
- The degree of effectiveness of child protection structures was hindered by issues such as inadequate training of social workers (both governmental and non-governmental), denial of the existence of child abuse and child sexual exploitation, limited availability of services in more remote locations, the tendency towards extra-judicial settlements and treating child sexual abuse as a civil/domestic matter, lack of resources and coordination, and logistical challenges.
- The research revealed that prevention information and communication interventions should focus on understanding the fundamentals of child sexual abuse in order to enhance early identification and risk reduction strategies.
- Given their central role in protecting children, preventative interventions should include parents and caregivers, as well as community representatives. Interventions should provide them with the information and skills to protect and communicate effectively with children, and tools for understanding and recognising signs of sexual abuse, including where enabled through digital technology.
- Public campaigns should also target visiting travellers and tourists to reduce activity that makes children vulnerable to sexual abuse, such as giving to begging children or buying from child vendors. Deterrence campaigns targeting potential travelling child sex offenders should also be considered.
- Interventions at community level should work in cooperation with, and in support of, existing local child protection mechanisms.
- Interventions should also include advocacy with relevant high-level jurisdictional entities to amend and enforce criminal justice responses to child sex offending.



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