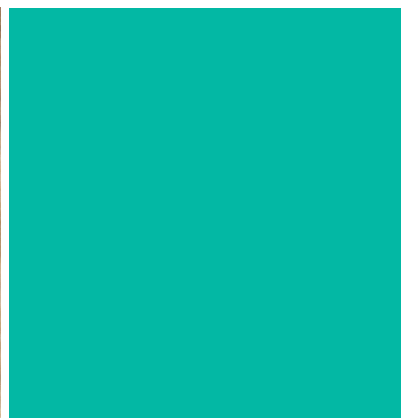
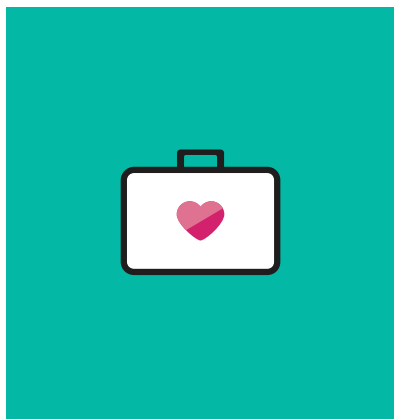


Sex, Abuse and Childhood

A study about knowledge, attitudes and practices relating to child sexual abuse, including in travel and tourism, in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam



Overview

This report presents an overview of the findings of four separate studies conducted in vulnerable communities in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam on knowledge, attitudes and practices related to child sexual abuse, including in travel and tourism. The studies were undertaken to contribute to the design and conceptual platform of Project Childhood Prevention Pillar. The research provides a general understanding of the awareness, understanding and behaviours in communities around the issue of child sexual abuse.

The introductory chapter provides background information on Project Childhood Prevention Pillar, the sexual abuse of children in travel and tourism, and known trends in the sexual exploitation of children in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) drawing on existing literature. It also outlines the rationale, objectives, methodology, ethical considerations, and limitations of the report. A snapshot is provided of each of the eight selected research sites.

The second chapter describes how children and adults understand concepts relating to childhood, child rights, sexuality, abuse, and related subjects. It also discusses children's knowledge of sex, as well as the sex education and communications children receive and access informing them about sexual abuse.

The third chapter of the report addresses how adults' and children's perceptions and understandings of child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, translated into actual practices and behaviour, how this behaviour was related to forces in the environment of the children, and how individuals and society viewed and responded to these practices and incidents of abuse.

Chapter four reviews additional risks to children of sexual abuse, including by tourists and travellers, pertaining to their environmental, political and broader situation. It also examines what internal and external circumstances and conditions increase or reduce their vulnerability to such abuse. Obstacles hindering proper interventions as well as opportunities to reach children with information and support are also presented.

The fifth and final chapter sets out the overall conclusions of the research for the main components of the study, namely the knowledge, the attitudes and practices, and the vulnerabilities and options for interventions by the program. Strategic recommendations for effective interventions are also included. A bibliography and two appendices complete the report.



Background

Project Childhood was an AUD 7.5 million Australian Government initiative to combat the sexual abuse of children in tourism in the GMS, specifically in the countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. The three and a half year program (2011-2014) brought together the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and World Vision to address the serious issue of sexual abuse of children in tourism. It took a dual prevention and protection approach.

In the Protection Pillar, UNODC worked with law enforcement agencies to protect children through strengthening law enforcement responses. In the Prevention Pillar, World Vision worked with governments, the private sector, and communities to prevent children from becoming victims of sexual abuse in tourism.

Research objectives

The principal strategy of Project Childhood Prevention Pillar in preventing the sexual abuse of children in the travel and tourism sector was to foster positive behaviour change and to create an enabling environment that increased the resilience of girls and boys to sexual predators and ensured that parents and families, duty bearers and community members could protect them. This was undertaken through communication interventions relevant to the cultural and social contexts of the target communities. In order to communicate messages effectively through relevant tools and interventions, the program required a strong conceptual platform including an overall understanding of the main views, attitudes and behaviours that made girls and boys vulnerable to sexual abuse. It also required a clear understanding of how vulnerable children, families and communities at large accessed and were influenced by the media in its various forms. Without this information, opportunities to deliver effective messages through relevant channels would be based on assumptions, creating the risk that messages may be lost or target groups may not be reached. This understanding was also integral to designing effective tools for intervention that were relevant to local communities and easily integrated, culturally and systemically, in a sustainable manner.

Methodology

This research aimed to inform Project Childhood Prevention Pillar on the knowledge, attitudes and practices of community members (including girls and boys, relatives of children and duty bearers) in regards to child sexual abuse, including by travellers and tourists. The following specific research questions guided the research. Including in the context of travel and tourism:

1. What are the knowledge, attitudes and practices in the community in relation to child abuse and child protection?
2. What are the key views, attitudes, behaviours and practices that enable risk and vulnerability to child sexual abuse?





3. **What are the key obstacles and opportunities to preventing child sexual abuse?**
4. **What are the existing resources, mechanisms and key channels of communicating, informing and educating children, families and communities on the sexual abuse of children?**

The Lao PDR research, which took place later than the other national research, also explored the following additional question:

5. **What part do financial motivations take in child exploitation and what obstacles and opportunities are there for Prevention Pillar to respond to this?**

The study utilised qualitative research methods, namely interviews, focus group discussions, observations and case reviews. The core research team developed the methodology during a five-day preparatory workshop. Field research took place over the course of two weeks including travelling time, with one week allocated to each main field site in each country.

Children were selected as the main source of information and efforts were made to contact children in diverse circumstances. Wherever possible, parents and duty bearers of the contacted children were interviewed to allow for triangulation. Other stakeholders like heads of police and government administrators at the local level were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires or topic lists. Case studies were also collected, mainly from NGO staff, and were used to identify different scenarios for child sexual abuse. Ultimately, children made up a considerable proportion of respondents in the study. This appears to be a result of the researchers' methodological approach, whereby most children participated in the research by means of focus group interviews, whereas most adults were interviewed individually. This research was undertaken between 2011 and 2012.

The researchers took the standard precautions to protect the safety and confidentiality of respondents, including obtaining permission to meet and interview children. They also applied specific measures to avoid harming children who, in any way, could be detrimentally affected by the study. Limitations of the research included time constraints, which limited the research methodology that could be used and also prevented some issues from being explored in greater detail. Time constraints may also have led to opportunistic sampling, especially as working and street children were much more difficult to interview than school children. While the limited scope of the research prevents generalisations beyond each study site, the study has generated a wealth of information and identified a number of striking trends.

Key Findings

Understanding child sexual abuse

Most respondents had a basic, limited understanding of child abuse and child rights. Both adults and children understood child sexual abuse narrowly as the penetrative rape of girls. The majority of children and adults that were interviewed 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 of, children. Judgements of sexual abuse often depended on certain circumstances, including the age of the sexual partner, the person's relationship to the child, and whether or not the girl in question was a virgin. Vocational students, working and street children, and private school students appeared to have a deeper understanding of the issue than public school students. Girls were generally seen to be more vulnerable to abuse than boys. Indeed, sexual abuse was not widely perceived as something that could happen to boys, which has implications for the identification of and response to sexual abuse of boys.

In short, many adults and children appeared to lack a sufficient understanding of child sexual abuse and practical ways to identify, prevent or respond to it. Parents demonstrated the lowest levels of understanding on the issue of child sexual abuse, while few children identified anal sex, oral sex, participation in/exposure to pornography or masturbation as abusive sexual acts. The general understanding appeared to be that sexual abuse was something that originated from outside the family and community, especially where sexual abuse of boys was concerned. Yet, at the same time, grooming techniques, used by both by foreign and local sex offenders, were rarely mentioned as a *modus operandi* or form of abuse.

Researchers identified five main sources of education about sex and sex-related issues for children: media/digital technology, friends and peers, schools, public information campaigns, and personal experience/observation. Despite children identifying parents as being the most important influence in their lives, parents were not found to be a major source of information, and many children expressed fear of confiding with their parents about intimate issues, including sex. Furthermore, school children received information about anatomy and reproductive health at schools and from NGOs, but rarely received more detailed information focussing specifically on child sexual abuse prevention strategies.

A striking pattern found throughout the research was parents' and teachers' resistance to providing sex education to children for fear that this would encourage sexual experimentation and inappropriate behaviour. In spite of this, many children in the study locations in Thailand and Vietnam were already engaging in sexual relationships. Children acquired a great deal of information about sex, accurate or otherwise, from informal channels such as peers, television, media and the internet.

Attitudes and practices

A number of attitudes, beliefs and practices were found in each of the research locations that could contribute to children's vulnerability to sexual abuse. These included taboos against discussing sexual issues openly, which prevented the dissemination of information and education about sexual abuse and how





to prevent it, gender inequality and hierarchical parent-child relationships contributing to a lack of empowering educational opportunities and lack of recognition for rights of children, especially female children; and a strong emphasis on female virginity and family honour and community reputation, which led to the widespread propensity to blame girls for 'rape' or any kind of sexual impropriety and hamper appropriate responses to child sexual abuse by creating a culture of silence and denial.

The research confirmed the strong cultural importance placed on girls across the region to remain virgins before marriage, although in practice, many children reported having romantic or sexual relationships. Girls were often blamed, stigmatised and marginalised for pre-marital sexual behaviour, even when they were victims of abuse. Additionally, the emphasis on preservation of girls' honour meant it was important to pretend that any sexual activity that did occur was unintentional or occurred without consent, the latter of which may contribute to the risk of unsafe sexual practices and further abuse.

Poverty, the need to finance educations, and health issues were some of the major reasons that children engaged in commercial sex. Furthermore, in all research locations, children were expected to obey and respect their parents. Kinship obligations and the need to support their families were frequently cited as the reason girls entered the commercial sex sector.

Peer influence was also found to be a contributing factor, especially where children encouraged their friends to engage in commercial sexual exchanges. It was also found that for some young people, selling sex for money was also a way of keeping up with consumer culture. This could take the form of conventional commoditisation of sex, or it could take the form of more subtle "material exchanges" involving gifts of consumer goods. Cases of grooming, often involving financial support and material gifts, were also documented across the research locations.

Homosexuality was stigmatised and considered socially unacceptable in all study sites, with the exception of Lao PDR and Pattaya, Thailand, and sexual exploitation of boys was not considered to be a real threat or issue. This lack of awareness and recognition presents a major risk to boys who are in danger of, or suffering from, abuse.

In all locations, the influence of media and digital technology on the attitudes and sexual behaviour of children was evident. Supervision of children's use of digital technology was practically non-existent. Parents' and duty bearers' main concern was that children might become addicted to video games or exposed to pornographic material. Few parents or children indicated awareness about the use of grooming techniques on the internet by sex offenders and the risks that were posed by this practice. The concept of a "helpline" as a channel for children to access confidential information and to get advice to deal with their problems was mostly unknown.

Responses to abuse varied across the different research locations. Where great significance was placed on reputation, children often did not report abuse to adults as a result of guilt and shame, parents preferred not to report abuse to authorities, and authorities tended to deny the existence of child abuse within their

communities. Reported hindrances to appropriate responses on the part of duty bearers included lack of resources, lack of coordination between departments and units, lack of knowledge of laws and procedures, lack of cooperation from families, difficult logistical barriers, and the tendency to treat child abuse as a family or civil matter.

Obstacles and opportunities for interventions

A number of factors were identified as contributing to children's vulnerability to sexual abuse, including financial difficulties, migration, the living environment, parental absence, physically or emotionally abusive household situations, as well as substance-related addictions in the family. Although some street children had access to day care shelter and food, the shelters could also be places for children to be recruited into exploitative practices by other street children or adults.

Travel and tourism comprised another risk factor contributing to children's vulnerability. Especially 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. Yet, it was found that children and adults in the study did not in general perceive tourists and travellers as threats.

Although child protection issues appeared to be increasing in prominence on national political agendas, in many cases, the majority of funding sources for child protection and prevention efforts derived from foreign sponsors and local civil society organisations rather than the national government. Thus, while researchers found child protection systems in place across all the research locations, respondents expressed that the degree of effectiveness of the structures was hindered by a variety of issues, including: the inadequate training of NGO and social workers; denial of the existence of child abuse and child sexual exploitation by authorities; limited availability of services in more remote locations; the tendency towards extra-judicial settlements and treating child sexual abuse as a civil matter; alleged police and local level corruption; lack of police resources, coordination between departments and units, and knowledge of laws and procedures; logistical challenges to responding to abuse cases (e.g. distance, transportation, human resources); failure to take child sexual abuse seriously and; local customs and beliefs.

Nevertheless, the research revealed many promising opportunities for intervention. Although many teachers and parents were opposed to talking in detail about sexual issues, schools were identified as important vehicles to relay information on sexual abuse. Existing NGOs and community-based organisations could also be harnessed for conveying IEC messages about child protection to wider audiences. Campaigns directly targetting parents could prove highly successful in improving communication between parents and children, decreasing taboos about discussing sexual issues, and informing parents about the risks posed by media and digital technologies. Hotlines and helplines appeared to be under-utilised and could become powerful tools of communication and awareness raising. Similarly, children's widespread access to the internet could also be employed as a way of reaching them with effective messages and strategies of preventing child sexual abuse.





Recommendations

- 1.** Prevention interventions should take an all-inclusive approach; providing children and their parents and communities with the information, skills and strategies to protect children from all kinds of sexual abuse – whether committed by a stranger, foreigner, local person, friend or family member.
- 2.** Prevention interventions should not only focus on child sexual abuse by travellers/tourists in tourist hubs, but also by locals and foreigners in remote and indigenous areas where the community cannot be easily accessed by competent authorities and where child sex offenders are reportedly increasingly targetting children.
- 3.** Risks and vulnerabilities of children to sexual abuse cannot be summarised to one specific situation, such as poverty, the presence of tourism etc. Numerous factors, including the living environment and economic context, strongly influence behaviour. This means attitudes and practices must be observed from a holistic and dynamic perspective. Regular situational analysis will be required to identify behaviour change. Preventative approaches and tools must be reviewed and reconsidered on a regular basis in relation to these dynamics rather than ‘top-down’ perceptions and impressions made.
- 4.** More attention should be paid to the sexual abuse of boys which is less known and has been less researched, especially as boys are more vulnerable due to increased stigma surrounding homosexuality. More research also needs to be conducted on changing child sex offender tactics, such as use of intermediaries, and access to children through pseudo-care work.
- 5.** Children should be targeted in prevention interventions and provided education to help them recognise signs of abuse (including grooming) and encourage them to disclose information to a trusted adult if they are being abused.
- 6.** Prevention interventions should reach out to both school-going and disadvantaged children (street and working children, and children with disabilities) who may not be receiving formal education or have access to child rights messages and prevention services.
- 7.** Media and technology play an increasingly important role in children’s lives, both as a source of entertainment and information. Any prevention information and messaging should be conveyed to children via their favourite communications platforms. More traditional information techniques such as leaflets, pamphlets and posters may be more appropriate for street and working children, who have less access to internet and phones. Existing child helplines should be promoted, especially in remote areas.

- 8.** Parents should be targetted in preventative interventions and provided with the information and skills to protect and communicate effectively with their girls and boys. Tools for caregivers should include understanding and recognising signs of sexual abuse.
- 9.** Parents and duty bearers are not using new technologies as frequently and with as much ease as children, making them sometimes unaware of children's interests and practices. Parents and duty bearers must be updated on children's tools and communication channels, particularly as they can dramatically change children's behaviour or endanger their lives.
- 10.** Campaigns are needed among visiting travellers and tourists to reduce activity that keeps children on the streets and especially vulnerable to sexual abuse, such as giving to begging children or buying from child vendors.
- 11.** Interventions at community level should work in cooperation with, and in support of, existing local child protection mechanisms. These mechanisms are already integrated within communities and cooperation would also offer a form of local capacity building and contribute to the sustainability of the program.
- 12.** Besides providing information and education, interventions should also include advocacy with relevant high-level jurisdictional entities to amend and enforce criminal justice responses to child sex offending, rather than allow civil settlements such as financial compensation or marriage proposals, as well as to ensure better allocation of resources and training to local authorities entrusted with responding to cases of child sexual abuse.



Sex, Abuse and Childhood presents an overview of the findings of four separate studies conducted in vulnerable communities in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam on knowledge, attitudes and practices related to child sexual abuse, including in travel and tourism. The research provides a general understanding of the awareness, understanding and behaviours in communities around the issue of child sexual abuse.

This research is a contribution to the evidence base to better understand the vulnerabilities of children to sexual abuse and inform the strengthening of responses that aim to keep children safe from harm.

ISBN: 978-0-9874441-6-5

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Child Safe Tourism

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www.childsafetourism.org

