CHAPTER III
CHILDREN; EASY TO TARGET
CHAPTER 3
CHILDREN;¹³⁹ EASY TO TARGET

Globally, one in every three victims detected is a child. Patterns about the age profile of the victims, however, appear to change drastically across different regions. Countries in West Africa, South Asia and Central America and the Caribbean typically present a much higher share of children among total victims detected. More broadly, differences in the age composition of detected victims appear to be related to the income level of the country of detection. The detection of children account for a significantly higher proportion in low income countries when compared to high income countries. As such, wealthier countries tend to detect more adults than children among the trafficking victims. These differences could be the result of varying criminal justice focuses in different parts of the world. At the same time, however, they may reflect different trafficking patterns according to countries’ socio-economic conditions.

This chapter provides an overview of the dynamics related to the trafficking of children. The first section discusses the main forms of child trafficking, namely trafficking for forced labour and trafficking for sexual exploitation. The second section focuses on risk factors connected with child trafficking.

Different forms of child trafficking in different parts of the world

The characteristics of child trafficking and its underlying drivers seem to differ according to geographical and social contexts. Trafficked children detected in low income countries are more likely to be exploited in forced labour; this is particularly the case for Sub-Saharan African countries. Conversely, children detected in high-income countries are more frequently trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Thus, it can be concluded that the nature of child trafficking in low-income countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, seems to be part of the broader phenomenon of child labour. In high-income countries, it is more related to child sexual exploitation.

¹³⁹ According to the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the 2000 UN Trafficking Protocol, a child is any person younger than 18 years of age. In the following text, the terms ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ refer to, accordingly, female and male children.

Children trafficked for forced labour

The phenomenon of child labour is conceptually different than child trafficking for forced labour or children in exploitative situations.¹⁴⁰ These two phenomena, however, appear to be inter-related and have similar determinants.

¹⁴⁰ According to the International Labour Organization Child Labour Conventions, “child labour” includes working children aged between 5 and 11, all children between 12 and 14 who are performing work not considered light and for more than 14 hours per week, and those between 15 and 17 performing hazardous work (International Labour Organization, Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends, 2012–2016. ILO, Geneva, 2017, p.2).
Countries where children account for a larger share of the trafficking victims detected are also countries where child labour is more prevalent.\textsuperscript{141} This trend is particularly relevant for West Africa.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the African continent records the largest prevalence of children (between 5 and 17 years of age) in labour.\textsuperscript{142} The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) estimates confirm this geographical pattern. Some countries in West Africa are estimated to have more than 40 per cent of the total population aged between 5 and 17 engaged in child labour.

The interlinkages between child trafficking and child labour are illustrated in field research conducted in West Africa, where child labour has been found to possibly deteriorate into children working in exploitative situations. One study in Burkina Faso documented how a significant share of children working in goldmining sites are not

\textsuperscript{141} There is a statistical correlation between prevalence of children in labour (ILO estimates) and share of children detected among total victims of trafficking (UNODC) – Pearson’s R +0.501, Sig 0.000 , N 80 countries.

paid (14 per cent) or only provided with food and lodging (16 per cent), suggesting that exploitative practices and trafficking are part of these working sites where child labour is employed. About half of those who were paid barely managed to cover food and lodging, while only one third of them managed to support their families.

In one case reported by Cote d’Ivoire, for example, authorities identified more than 30 children working on one cocoa plantation site. After assessing each individual case, authorities determined that about one third of these children were victims of trafficking.

Broad cultural acceptance of the participation of children in the labour market can serve as a fertile ground for traffickers seeking children to exploit in labour activities. It is easier to exploit children in areas where communities are accustomed to sending children to work than in communities where child labour is generally not an acceptable practice. In such settings, child trafficking victims may be hidden in plain sight.

In some socio-economic contexts, trafficking of children may occur on a community scale, often involving family members. Families in dire need may encourage their children to work and children may feel the pressure to economically contribute to the family, leaving them vulnerable to exploitative practices.

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144 Ibid.
145 Court case 374 – Cote d’Ivoire 2015.

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146 International Labour Organization, Child Labour in Cotton, a Briefing, ILO 2016; p 15.
International Labour Organization, Caracterización del trabajo infantil agrícola en municipios seleccionados de los estados de Sinaloa, Oaxaca y Veracruz; uno estudio de las experiencias de las niñas, niños y adolescentes con enfoque particular en la educación, en la origen étnico y la migración, ILO, 2014, p.37.
In Sub-Saharan Africa, cases have been documented of children trafficked to work on different types of plantations,\(^{147}\) in mines and quarries,\(^{148}\) on farms (i.e. les enfants bouvier),\(^{149}\) as well as being forced to sell different products in markets and on the streets\(^{150}\) or to engage in domestic work (i.e. vidoémon).\(^{151}\) In South Asia, it has been documented that children as young as 12 years of age are trafficked for forced labour in domestic work,\(^{152}\) brick kilns,\(^{153}\) small hotels,\(^{154}\) the garment industry,\(^{155}\) or agriculture.\(^{156}\) Child trafficking cases have also been reported on South American plantation.\(^{157}\)

There are no precise statistics on the age range of children trafficked for forced labour in general. Studies on children working in agriculture in South Asia indicate that one quarter of these children start to work between the ages of six and nine.\(^{158}\) In West Africa, children trafficked for domestic labour are mainly females, with younger girls often doing childcare and older girls responsible for cooking.\(^{159}\) Even in hazardous work settings, such as mines and quarries, some children may begin to learn the skills at the age of six or seven, while doing support functions for the adults they accompany to the mining site.\(^{160}\) Younger children are normally involved in lighter activities, such as sorting or washing of the material extracted. Older children are tasked with digging and going down into the holes.\(^{161}\) Deciding whether a boy is strong enough to become a digger depends on the child’s physical strength and so, the age can vary.\(^{162}\) Girls also work around these sites, usually carrying materials above ground.\(^{163}\)

### Trafficking for sexual exploitation of children

Child victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (mainly girls) are identified in every part of the world, but largely concentrated in Central America and the Caribbean and East Asia.

As with trafficking for forced labour, countries with lower GDP per capita typically detect more children than adults among detected victims of sexual exploitation compared to countries that record a higher GDP per capita. This is confirmed even among countries parts of

\(^{147}\) Court case 373 – Cote d’Ivoire 2014, Court case 374 – Cote d’Ivoire 2015, Global Research and Advocacy Group, Travail des Enfants dans les champs de coton et les mines d’or au Burkina Faso, Counterpart International, 2014; pp 24-29.


\(^{152}\) Global Research and Advocacy Group, Travail des Enfants dans les champs de coton et les mines d’or au Burkina Faso, Counterpart International, 2014, pp 24-29.


\(^{158}\) Court case 302 – Niger 2016.


the same subregion. The age profile of the victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation changes according to the national income.

Among children, girls aged between 14 and 17 years old appear to be particularly targeted. This age pattern seems to be part of broader patterns of sexual and gender-based violence that results in teenage girls also being particularly targeted as victims of other crimes, from bullying to sexual violence and murder. Girls’ risk of death as a result of violence increases from early to late adolescence and the first incident of sexual violence occurs most often between the ages of 15 and 19.

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164 Not all countries systematically record the precise age of the victims beside being adults or minors. When this is recorded, there is not a standardised age group; some countries consider teenagers are aged between 12 and 17 years old, some others consider teenagers starting from the age of 13 or 14.


**Figure 55** Shares of girls among total detected victims of trafficking and GDP per capita, in selected countries in South-East Asia

Source: UNODC elaboration on national data on trafficking in persons and International Comparison Program, World Bank I World Development Indicators database, World Bank Programme for GDP per capita.

**Figure 56** Shares of total detected female victims of trafficking in persons, by age group; Guatemala and El Salvador

Source: Guatemala/Informe de estado en materia de trata de personas - p95 - SVET; El Salvador/Informe sobre Aplicacion de Ley especial contra la Trata de Personas en El Salvador. P 127 CNCTP Consejo Nacional contra la Trata de Personas.

**Figure 57** Age distribution of recorded potential victims of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation, Peru (2016)

The profile of victims of child trafficking is often characterized by many intersecting vulnerabilities. The risks related to their young age are compounded by the socio-economic dimensions discussed earlier (see Chapter 2 – The impact of socio-economic factors on victims’ experiences and the risks of the COVID-19 Recession), as well as other factors particularly relevant to children, such as behavioural and developmental needs, lack of parental care and/or dysfunctional families. Some studies in Central America, for example, suggest that domestic violence and other forms of violence against women and children, as well as discrimination against ethnic minorities, potentially increase the risk of girls becoming victims of trafficking.167

A child victim’s vulnerabilities are often connected to the child’s family background. In extremely poor communities, socioeconomic context and cultural norms appear to play an important role in the trafficking of children. However, even in high income countries, children are vulnerable to traffickers too. This is particularly true among children experiencing dysfunctional parenting or with no parental care, as well as those living in poorer communities.

Families’ coping mechanisms may place children at risk of trafficking

Child trafficking in West Africa is often connected with the practice of parents sending children for employment outside of the household.168 Similar findings emerge from studies in Latin America169 and South Asia.170 These practices are not trafficking per se, and in general they may not be harmful to children, but they can represent a significant risk factor for children to be trafficked into forced labour.

FIG. 58 Percentage of child trafficking cases by pre-existing factors that traffickers have taken advantage of, as reported in the GLOTIP court cases*  
Some cases reported multiple conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conditions listed in the child trafficking court cases analysed</th>
<th>Share of cases on the 99 child trafficking cases reporting this information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family or child in economic need</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child with a dysfunctional family</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child deprived of parental care</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional attachment to the trafficker</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental, Behavioural or Neurological (MBN) disorder</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration status</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

*This information was reported in 99 child trafficking court cases of a total of 489 cases collected by UNODC for the purpose of this Report.

FIG. 59 Number of assisted victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, by age group, Thailand (2017)


Risks factors for and drivers of child trafficking

The profile of victims of child trafficking is often characterized by many intersecting vulnerabilities. The risks related to their young age are compounded by the socio-economic dimensions discussed earlier (see Chapter 2 – The impact of socio-economic factors on victims’ experiences and the risks of the COVID-19 Recession), as well as other factors particularly relevant to children, such as behavioural and developmental needs, lack of parental care and/or dysfunctional families. Some studies in Central America, for example, suggest that domestic violence

The practice of sending children to work in context of extreme poverty

According to one ILO study conducted on child labour in the cotton farming industry, the work children do is often critical to the survival of poor households spending the bulk of their income to feed the family. Many field studies in different parts of the world indicate a household’s poverty as the greatest factor in determining whether children of school age are sent to work and how these children’s income contribution is important for a household’s basic food security. Some of these studies also report how these children can easily be targeted by traffickers.

Child labour is not only prevalent in poor countries, but also among the poorest segments of richer societies. Suriname and Sri Lanka are upper-middle income countries that record child labour rates below the regional averages. In these countries, child labour is mainly concentrated among the poorest households. This pattern is confirmed in a wide range of countries characterized by different cultural contexts and income levels. However, child labour decreases as the national economy improves.

**FIG. 60** Shares of children in child labour in selected countries, by Gross National Income (GNI)

![Graph showing shares of children in child labour in selected countries, by GNI](image)

Source: UNODC elaboration on ILO-International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) estimates on child labour and World Bank data on Gross National Income.

**FIG. 61** Shares of children in child labour in selected countries, by household cash income quintiles (%)

![Graph showing shares of children in child labour in selected countries, by income quintiles](image)

Source: UNODC elaboration on ILO-International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) estimates on child labour and World Bank data on Gross National Income.

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a International Labour Organization, *Child Labour in Cotton, a Briefing*, ILO 2016 p 15


c International Labour Organization, *Child Labour in Cotton, a Briefing*, ILO 2016 p 15


Surveys on child labour conducted in India indicate about 60 per cent of the children working in agriculture in the state of Haryana were encouraged by the child’s family in order to cope with poverty. See Kumari M. (2013) *Child labour, a Sociological Study in Haryana, India, International Research Journal of Social Science, Vol. 2 (8), 15-18 August 2013*, p17.

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r; uno estudis de la experiencias de las ninas, niños y adolescentes con enfoque particular en la educaciôn, en lo origen étnico y la migración, ILO, 2014. p 37


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International Labour Organization, *Caracterización del trabajo infantil agrícola en municipio seleccionados de los estados de Sinaloa, Oaxaca y Veracruz; uno estudio de la experiencias de las ninas, niños y adolescentes con enfoque particular en la educaciôn, en lo origen étnico y la migración, ILO, 2014. p 37

The practice of sending children to work is generally reported as a coping mechanism for families to survive in conditions of extreme poverty. According to a seminal study on the drivers of child labour, “parents withdraw their children from the labour force as soon as they can afford to do so” and “a family will send the children to the labour market only if the family’s income from non-child labour sources drops very low.” This practice could easily deteriorate into child trafficking. A study on children trafficked for forced labour in brick kilns in South Asia, for example, refers to farm debts compelling families to send their children for work as one of the risk factors for child trafficking.

When looking at high-income countries, the share of detected children trafficked for forced labour is limited. While these countries do not record significant levels of child labour, the few cases of reported child trafficking for forced labour are characterized by a context of extreme economic need for these children and their families.

Early marriage is a practice that is rooted in some cultures and may sometimes be regarded as a family survival strategy. This practice constitutes trafficking when the girl is married off in return for some economic or other material benefit. In some communities, these practices are the results of bride-price arrangements between families.

Child trafficking for forced marriage is heavily dependent on the household’s income as it can be perceived as a way to generate income and assets, while reducing the costs associated with raising a daughter. In South Sudan, for example, it has been documented how this practice is more common in periods of drought and economic hardship. Similarly, in South Asia it has been documented how this practice is more pronounced after natural disasters like floods.

Another practice that has been found to affect the risk of child trafficking is the sending of boys, and in some limited cases, girls, to residential religious schools. In North and West Africa, some child trafficking for the purpose of forced begging have been linked to this practice. Cases of religious teachers (called marabouts or mallams) forcing students (referred to as talibe or almajiris) to beg have been reported by international organizations. There are several reasons behind this widespread and complex phenomenon. Many studies indicate the need of poor households to provide some form of education, pressure on some of the boys to send additional money to their parents or other material benefit.


177 The United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol explicitly includes the purpose of exploitation for slavery-like practices as a form of trafficking in persons. The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery defines the practice of “a woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family or any other person or group” as a slavery-like practice. This includes early and forced marriages as part of the trafficking phenomenon. See Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1957.


179 Ibid. page 14.


181 In Nigeria, the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act does not include a separate offence for child begging. The number of such cases, or rescued victims in relation to this form, are not captured in official trafficking in persons data.

families, and the demand among families for some education for their children.  

Although significantly more rarely reported than for children in forced labour or forced marriages, child trafficking for sexual exploitation may also be related to some form of tradition or cultural norms. Some families, under the ancient customs in South Asia, such as the Devadasi, the Joginis and others, maintain the tradition of forcing girls into sexual exploitation. These girls are not only trafficked within their communities but also in the large urban areas of the country. Yet, the extremely poor socioeconomic context of the communities remains one of the main drivers behind the persistence of this form of sexual exploitation.

Children on their own

Court cases collected by UNODC include examples of traffickers targeting children who had no parental care. The absence of a family is particularly prevalent in the cases of children trafficked for sexual exploitation, but also reported in cases of trafficking for begging and forced criminal activity.

Field studies conducted in West Africa revealed the situation of some boys and girls, mostly teenagers, trafficked into sexual exploitation to cover basic needs for food and for a place to sleep. Some court cases in European countries reveal that traffickers specifically targeted “girls who had lived in orphanages”. Similarly, a study on trafficking in persons in Sri Lanka indicated that traffickers target children deprived of parental care for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The absence of a family also has an economic connotation as these children have find a way to survive on their own. In a court case reported by the Dominican Republic, for instance, authorities reported a girl without parents, living in extreme poverty with no fixed home, as an easy target for a trafficker who sexually exploited her. Homeless children are present in many urban areas of the world struggling on the streets, sometimes in a trafficking-like situation. Traffickers may target street children for sexual exploitation or forced criminal activity in exchange for food, clothing, shelter, or other basic survival needs.

A study conducted on children in a situation of homelessness in Juba, South Sudan reported that about 3,000 children living in the streets either on their own or with caregivers were unable to financially meet their basic needs. Among these, researchers identified large numbers of children who were victims of sexual exploitation, forced labour and/or trafficking.
these children experienced the death of their parents, and between 30 and 80 per cent were not living with their parents.196

Children deprived of parental care in migratory situations face the same risks. Unaccompanied and separated children migrating, often along irregular migration routes, are exposed to traffickers, both along the route and upon arrival in transit and destination countries.197

**Dysfunctional families and behavioural disorders**

While the absence of a family is a risk factor for child trafficking, children being raised with dysfunctional parenting may also present a vulnerability easily exploited by traffickers.

The literature and court files show cases of parents or siblings being directly involved in the trafficking of children.198 Cases of child trafficking at the hands of the parents are reported in different parts of the world and for different forms of exploitation, though, mostly, these cases involve sexual exploitation.199 In these cases, parents procure children directly to buyers for sexual intercourse in return for a payment. Field studies conducted in West Africa, for example, show that up to 35 per cent of children in sexual exploitation have a parent organizing their trafficking.200 Other than sexual exploitation, cases where parents are found to be involved in the trafficking of their children range in form of exploitation, including exploitative begging, forced marriage and child sexual abuse imagery (pornography).201

When children are not trafficked by their parents, they may still be easily targeted by traffickers as a result of a dysfunctional family. Literature reports children with family problems at home were recruited for the purpose of sexual exploitation and for forced criminal activity.202 In these cases, traffickers appear to create some attachment with or sense of belonging for the victim.

The need to be part of a group seems to be one significant factor in attracting children to be recruited or deceived by the trafficker. For example, in the so-called “county lines” cases in the United Kingdom, traffickers target children of separated parents or those looked after by social services, including those with behavioural or developmental disorders.203 Trafficked children, as well as victims emotionally attached to their traffickers, can also be incited to use drugs or alcohol, thereby increasing the control the traffickers have over them.204

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197 Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material; and trafficking in persons, especially women and children, 18 July 2017 A/72/164.


