



OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

INTRODUCTION

The “Ensemble” project is a three-year joint initiative (2022-2024) of ECPAT International, ECPAT France, and national partners Keogo (Burkina Faso), SOS Violences Sexuelles (Côte d'Ivoire), Monde Des Enfants (Guinea), and Association Nigérienne pour le Traitement de la Délinquance et la prévention des crimes (Niger).

In the first year of the project, ECPAT International and its partners explored the issue of sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and transport, through research aimed at documenting local knowledge and understanding of this problem in each country, as well as assessing practices and identifying localised responses. The results of the research have been consolidated in four country-specific situational analyses presented and discussed during national consultations which took place in each country in September - October 2023.

“Travel and transport” refers to the movement of people from one place to another by various means of travel, irrespective of the duration and purpose of the journey. The scope of the research included domestic travel and tourism and was therefore not limited to the crossing of a state border. The term covers both the notion of “travel”, which implies the action of moving from one place to another for whatever purpose, and that of “tourism”, which refers to the organisation and commercial exploitation of holidays and visits to places of interest.

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

The information presented in this summary and in the four country-specific situational analyses have been retrieved through four research activities:

- A literature review
- Interviews with local actors
- Interviews with key informants
- Field observations

The literature review consisted of a documentary search that gathered secondary data about sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and transport in the four countries, the legal framework governing this phenomenon, and the initiatives taken in this respect by each State, the private sector and civil society.

In addition, researchers from the four national non-governmental organisations partners in the project, conducted two series of semi-structured interviews with local actors and key informants.

Local actors were people working in the sectors of travel and transport. The sample included a total of 40 local actors across the four countries, including bus and taxi drivers, shop keepers in bus stations and *maquis*¹ and hotel managers. Key informants were individuals who could provide information and share their knowledge on the issue of sexual exploitation of children in the travel and transport sectors because of their role or position. The sample across the four countries included a total of 48 key informants representing the government, law enforcement, non-governmental organisations and transport syndicates and associations.

The researchers from the national partner organisations carried out also direct field observations in travel, transport and transit areas frequented by children, where sexual exploitation could potentially take place.

Choice of locations and times of observations was made through participatory mapping exercises for each country based on the knowledge of the local researchers and organisations. Locations included bus stations, often located near big markets in the cities, service stations, a parking area for heavy vehicles and buses, and a hotel and touristic site.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations encountered in the four research activities included: the absence of publicly available official documents adopted at the national level by Governments, the reluctance of the local actors to talk about the phenomenon probably out of the taboo nature of the subject, unawareness or fear of reprisals from their employment companies or people involved in the sexual exploitation of children, or of legal consequences. In addition, due to project-related constraints (timeframe and budget), the research was carried out over a limited period and only in the main cities of the four countries. Moreover, it was not possible to carry out research or consultation activities with children as available time and financial resources would have not allowed to ensure the needed safeguards.

1. OVERVIEW OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA, AND NIGER

The literature review conducted as well as the interviews carried out with the key informants and local actors indicated that child sexual abuse and exploitation is a reality across the four countries. In the cases of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, this situation is exacerbated by political-military crises, – including the ongoing crisis in Niger affecting the Sahel region - that cause massive population displacement, impoverish already vulnerable households, and increase the size of low-security areas due to the presence of non-state armed groups.²

1 According to the definition provided by the Le Robert dictionary, maquis are clandestine restaurants or dance bars in French-speaking Africa. Le Robert (n.d.). [Definition of maquis](#).

2 Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides. (2019). [Côte d'Ivoire - Les victimes de la traite des êtres humains à des fins d'exploitation par le travail](#). 9; ReliefWeb response (n.d.). [Protection de l'Enfant \(PE\) Burkina Faso](#). Contexte.

Security, climate-related and economic crises aggravate the condition of already impoverished households, which might rely on coping mechanisms harmful to children to make ends meet. The literature review further indicated that financial distress is one of the main causes of child, early and forced marriage. Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Niger are characterised by a high percentage of children married before the age of 18³ or 15,⁴ with Niger having the highest rates of respectively 76% and 28% girls married. Boys are also victims of child marriages, even though in lower percentages.⁵ Child victims of this practice generally come from poorer households in rural areas of the countries.⁶

Economic distress is further pushing children to engage in prostitution to provide financial support to their families, as shared by one local actor from Côte d'Ivoire. Twenty-one local actors out of 40 indicated poverty as one of the main drivers of the sexual exploitation of children, and one of them shared that in some cases families resort to survival strategies harmful to children. Official statistics on child exploitation in prostitution are not available in the four countries, therefore evidence of the widespread presence of this phenomenon is mainly brought by outdated research carried out by non-governmental organisation or by media channels.⁷

With regards to trafficking, the literature review, and the interviews with the local actors – in particular in Burkina Faso, indicated that intermediaries deceive parents into believing that their children will be sent abroad for

educational or professional opportunities, whilst they end up being removed from their families and exploited. Trafficking of children for sexual purposes is closely related to the phenomenon of sexual exploitation in travel and transport context and involves children at both national and international level, as reported by the U.S. State Department's Reports on Trafficking in Persons of 2023. In fact, recorded child victims of trafficking in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Niger were both nationals and foreigners, exploited both in their respective country and abroad.⁸ Of interest, local actors interviewed in all four countries reported the presence of children travelling alone and one key informant from Burkina Faso stated that the journeys of these children are monitored by intermediaries who, once the children have reached the border, take their mobile phones away to change their numbers, preventing them from being able to contact/be contacted by their parents and ensuring their dependency from the traffickers.

2. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

Regarding the national legal framework on sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism, the analysis conducted in the framework of this project has shown that even if the four countries have good provisions to protect children from sexual exploitation in general, gaps persist with regards to exploitation specifically happening within the travel and transport contexts.

3 Percentages of girls married before the age of 18. Guinea: 47% ; Côte d'Ivoire: 27%; Niger: 76%. There is no available data disaggregated per gender regarding Burkina Faso: 52%

4 Percentages of girls married before the age of 15. Guinea: 17% ; Côte d'Ivoire: 7%; Niger: 28%. There is no available data disaggregated per gender regarding Burkina Faso: 10%

5 Percentages of boys married before the age of 18. Guinea: 2% ; Côte d'Ivoire: 3,5%; Niger: n.a.

6 Filles, pas Epouses (n.d.) *Atlas du mariage des enfants – Guinée* ; UNICEF. (2022). *Le mariage d'enfants en Afrique de l'Ouest et centrale - Aperçu statistique et réflexion sur l'élimination de cette pratique*. 35 ; Iris Group (2020). *Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: A Political Economy Analysis of Burkina Faso*. 3,4 ; Iris Group (2020) *Mariage d'enfants, précoce et force: Une analyse d'économie politique du Niger*. 6.

7 Le Monde des Enfants, ECPAT International (2019). « L'examen sexuelle des enfants en Guinée Conakry » pour l'Examen Périodique Universel de la situation des droits de l'homme en Guinée Conakry ; SOS Violences Sexuelles, ECPAT France & ECPAT Luxembourg. (2016). *Analyse situationnelle de l'exploitation sexuelle des enfants à des fins commerciales en Côte d'Ivoire*. 30; ECPAT France, ECPAT Luxembourg (2014). *Étude sur la prostitution des enfants et ses liens avec la migration et la traite à Ouagadougou au Burkina Faso*. 4; InfoMigrant.net (2020). *Over 200 people rescued from slavery and prostitution in Interpol operation in Niger*.

8 U.S. Department of State (2023). *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Guinea*; *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Ivory Coast*; *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burkina Faso*; *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Niger*.

One of the main issues that all countries have in common is the inadequate or total lack of accountability for individuals working in the travel and transport sectors and of the companies themselves, as criminal responsibility for legal persons is not always provided for by national legislations. In addition, penalties for the violation of obligations on the part of travel and transport operators to ensure that passengers are in possession of the necessary travel documents do not exist or are very light.

Of relevance, Burkina Faso adopted in April 2021 a law on the “orientation of tourism” in the country, establishing as a general principle the prohibition for the tourism sector of all forms of sexual exploitation, including of children. In addition, the law imposes on tourists as well as tourism companies and professionals the obligation to comply with laws and regulations relating to public order and morality.

Notwithstanding, the legal provision does not provide any penalty in case of violation.⁹ The Code of Tourism of Côte d’Ivoire states that tourists must avoid any kind of exploitation of human beings, in particular sexual exploitation and against children; however, the relevant provision does not foresee any criminal penalty for breach of this obligation¹⁰. The Code of Tourism establishes that tourist operators are also required to comply with the laws and regulations relating to public order and public decency.¹¹ In addition, criminal liability of legal entities is recognised by the Ivorian Criminal Code, that punishes the offences committed on their behalf by their bodies or representatives, including the sexual exploitation of children, nevertheless with a simple fine.¹²

In 2019, Guinea adopted the *Code de l’Enfant*, that specifically criminalises sexual exploitation of children in prostitution and in the context of travel and tourism. However, the provision only targets crimes carried out by tourists and doesn’t cover legal persons operating in such sectors.¹³ On the other side, the Criminal Code recognises the criminal liability of such entities which, in case of conviction, can be dissolved or prohibited from engaging in professional or social activities.¹⁴

In Niger provisions on trafficking, smuggling, procuring and inciting to debauchery could be applied in cases of sexual exploitation of children within travel, tourism and transport contexts. In fact, the Criminal Code punishes any person owning managing or in charge of any place open to or used by the public who habitually allows persons to engage in prostitution in such place.¹⁵ However, criminal dispositions do not establish the responsibility of legal persons in relation to child sexual exploitation.

All four countries are yet to ratify the World Tourism Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation that covers a broad range of ethical aspects related to tourism, including impact on the environment, cultural heritage, and societies, and specifically refers to child protection that needs to be made an intrinsic part and an equal co-principle of all sustainable development discourse and practice.¹⁶

9 Republic of Burkina Faso (2021). [Loi n°011-2021/AN portant loi d’orientation du tourisme au Burkina Faso](#). Art. 5, 10, 15.

10 Republic of Côte d’Ivoire. (2014). [Code du Tourisme](#). Art. 54.

11 *Ibid.* Art. 42.

12 Republic of Côte d’Ivoire. (2019). [Code Pénal](#). Art.96.

13 Republic of Guinea (2019). [Code de l’Enfant](#). Artt. 852, 853.

14 Republic of Guinea (2016). [Nouveau Code Pénal](#). Art. 84.

15 Republic of Niger (2004). [Code Pénal](#). Article 294.

16 UN World Tourism Organisation (2019). [Framework Convention on Tourism Ethics](#).

3. SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

The research allowed to identify the main factors and situations making children vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism in the four countries.

- Children on the move are at risk of being sexually exploited along their route and once arrived at their destination. Local actors interviewed during the research reported that transport hubs such as bus stations and parking areas for taxis and minibuses are usually frequented by children who travel, also unaccompanied; some of them entrusted by their families to bus drivers, which have also been reported by the local actors and key informants as one of the main categories of sex offenders in these contexts. In addition, local actors have also indicated the presence of children working as vendors or spending the night in these places; their condition can expose them to the risk of being sexually abused or exploited to collect money to provide for their needs.
- Children are trafficked in the region for sexual or labour purposes and may become victims of sexual exploitation in the context of labour. Boys and girls are trafficked to the cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire and to the mining sites present in all four countries to be exploited for their labour and secondly sexually. Among other factors, the sexual exploitation relates to the existence of harmful cultural beliefs that associate sex with a better chance of finding gold, which increases the demand for trafficking for sexual exploitation in mining communities.¹⁷ Local actors from Burkina Faso and Niger reported that children are also sexually exploited in the context of entertainment venues such as *maquis* and hotels. The *maquis* employ young women, whose age cannot always be confirmed. According to local actors, prostitution happens in this context, which can therefore lead to situation of exploitation of girls below 18 present in those establishments. Overall, hotels do not employ children but are frequented by them, as their bars are often places of entertainment for people of all ages. Local actors from Niger reported that hotel rooms are used to sexually exploit children under the cover of business travels.
- Local actors from all four countries reported cases of child sexual exploitation in transport hubs, and two actors from Burkina Faso also in *maquis*. According to some examples shared during the interviews, local actors do not necessarily distinguish between sexual exploitation and cases of consensual relations between young peers, which may be perceived as socially unacceptable. One local actor from Côte d'Ivoire affirmed having sent away some girls who were known to have sexual relations with boys, without further inquiring the voluntary or coerced/exploitative nature of such sexual relations.
- Children's vulnerability is exacerbated by a stigmatising attitude of the community towards all child victims of sexual exploitation. In fact, when questioned on the causes of the sexual exploitation of children, five local actors from the four countries and several key informants from Niger listed the "children's greed and search for an easy profit". Such statement may link to a tendency to blame the children for the exploitation suffered but also neglect the responsibility of those who benefit from the exploitation. As a result, children are discouraged from asking for help to seek protection and support and their protection needs and external factors exposing them to various

17 Save the Children (2018). *Young and on the move in West Africa*. 15,16; U.S. Department of State (2023). *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Côte d'Ivoire*; *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Burkina Faso*.

forms of exploitation are not considered. The response of local actors witnessing or suspecting cases of sexual exploitation of children is often lacking due to the ignorance on the phenomenon or fear of reprisals.

- Traditional practices are also potentially harmful to children exposing them to the risk of being sexually abused or exploited. The most recurrent practice in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Niger is the so-called *confiage* concerning children, generally girls from rural areas, who are sent by their families to relatives or sometimes even strangers located in other parts of the country to receive accommodation and education in exchange for housework. Such a condition of dependency of these children is likely to expose them to situations of exploitation, including sexual, at the hands of the host family.¹⁸ In addition, in Niger the practice called *wahaya* or fifth wife is based on a hereditary and cast-based slavery system according to which young girls from poorer households are unofficially married to men in exchange of a sum of money, to become their domestic or sexual slaves.¹⁹
- As reported by key informants from all four countries, facilitators of child sexual exploitation often utilise social media and instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp to connect potential perpetrators with children and organise the meetings.
- Key informants interviewed during the research underlined how the unstable security situation of countries such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger is likely to exacerbate the risk of children being sexually exploited due to massive population displacements, resulting economic difficulties of household already in distress and the action of armed non-state groups, which recruit or traffic them.

- All key informant interviewed during the research reported that in each country there is no data collection mechanism in place assessing the extent of the child sexual exploitation even less so in the context of travel and transport; the only information available come from research, sometimes outdated, carried out by non-governmental organisations.

4. NATIONAL RESPONSE TO CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE CONTEXT OF TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT

The Governments of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Niger have at their disposal a set of Ministries, national authorities, and law enforcement departments in charge of protecting children, although not always specifically addressing the issues of sexual exploitation and in the context of travel and transports. Existing national plans and strategies, which could be accessed online during this research, generally address broader issues related to violence against children and trafficking, with limited or inexistent specific references and actions on sexual exploitation. Dedicated action and policies referring to the regulation of business operations were also inexistent or unavailable.

At the level of travel and transport industry, all local actors from the four countries confirmed the lack of codes of conduct, be it within companies, *maquis* or hotels that would address the protection of children from sexual exploitation. However, some of the local actors shared some practices adopted in their workplaces, such as verification systems for children travelling alone, awareness-raising initiatives among the staff, and the referral of cases to the police or the respective embassy. At the same time, no tourism business in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, or Niger is yet member to “The Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism” (The Code), an initiative

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Labor (2021). [2021 Findings on the worst forms of child labor](#); Cavoquista (2022). *Le confiage d'enfant, une pratique traditionnelle en Afrique de l'Ouest, pouvant mener à une grande vulnérabilité*;

¹⁹ Anti-Slavery International (2019). [Niger: “fifth wife” slavery practice outlawed](#).

that provides tools and support to the industry in due diligence process, to identify, address and take action to protect children.²⁰

According to the key informants interviewed, civil society organisations across the four countries do not target businesses and travel and transport relevant authorities with their actions aimed at addressing the sexual exploitation of children. Indeed, their interventions mostly consist in: awareness-raising activities targeting other national

authorities, transport unions, the private sector, families and the whole community; identification of cases; and provision of support services aimed at responding to immediate/basic needs like medical care. In addition, key informants from Guinea and Niger reported the presence of local committees respectively dealing with child protection and case management mechanisms, and counter actions to trafficking and sexual exploitation, especially in bordering areas with Burkina Faso and Benin.

5. WAY FORWARD

Recommendations tailored on each country situation were developed according to direct suggestions from key informants and following the analysis of the information collected through the research. The recommendations were also object of discussion during national consultations held in each country for contextualisation, in-depth analysis and prioritisation.



TO GOVERNMENTS

- Address the underlying factors of vulnerability that contribute to exposing children to sexual exploitation, in particular by creating safe educational opportunities for children and sustainable income generating opportunities, to enable respectively children and families to support themselves without resorting to coping mechanisms harmful to children, and to ensure that children on the move are protected through coordinated support systems.
- Establish care structures for child victims of sexual violence which take into account the specific situations of vulnerability of children on the move, in order to offer appropriate services and care and support mechanisms, particularly in transit areas and transport hubs, with heightened efforts in the areas affected by crisis and instability.

- Establish national child protection standards for the travel and transport industry to: identify, and address the risks related to children; and to incorporate child protection measures in the operations and services of this industry (including within their supply chains). These measures would include training staff working in the travel and transport sector on child protection, including identification of risk situations and referral to protective services, through due diligence processes.
- Through the dialogue and cooperation with civil society organisations, engage local travel, tourism, and transportation companies, including the informal sector, to take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual exploitation of children, to foster a culture that respects children's rights.
- Implement, in collaboration with civil society and travel and transport authorities and agencies, awareness-raising activities for the public and tourist operators to influence a change in perception of the issue of the sexual exploitation of children. This would include addressing social norms contributing to victim-blaming attitudes as well as the tolerance towards offenders and all those who benefit from the sexual exploitation of children.

TO BUSINESSES IN TRAVEL AND TRANSPORT SECTORS

- Establish effective mechanisms for reporting to protection services and ensure that the services are easily identifiable and known by children in difficulty or members of the community as agents of protection.
- Engage travel and tourism industry chains that are operating in the region that are members of The Code of Conduct to Protect Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism (The Code) to contribute to the creation of protective environments through their networks and supply chains by improving cooperation with local law enforcement, bars, transport companies, informal tourism service providers, as well as technology companies.

TO FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

- Ensure meaningful participation of children and young people, families, and communities to stimulate inclusive and constructive dialogue with duty-bearers, including authorities and travel, tourism and transport industry, towards creating sustainable destinations that offer opportunities to children and young people, and prioritise child protection from all forms of violence.

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