



THE SCALE OF THE ISSUE

It is hard to identify the exact scale of trafficking in the UK - many cases of child trafficking go unseen.

In 2024, 31 per cent of referrals to the National Referral Mechanism were children - this equates to

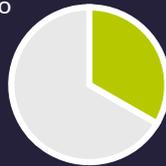
5,999 UNDER 18s.



78%
were male



& 22%
were female



3,335 of those were British national children - the remainder were non-British nationals.



DIG DEEPER

Modern slavery is the illegal exploitation of people for personal or commercial gain. Victims of modern slavery can be any gender, nationality, and ethnicity and unfortunately, children are not immune to this dreadful scourge.

Children are trafficked to the UK from a wide variety of backgrounds and from all over the world. Imogen Spencer Chapman, Head of Training & Practice Development at **ECPAT UK**, comments on recent trends: “in the last few years, high numbers of Vietnamese and Albanian children have been trafficked into the UK, primarily for criminal exploitation. We’ve also seen large numbers of children coming from the Global South and many children fleeing countries such as Sudan where there’s huge conflict. We’ve also met children from countries such as Chad and Eritrea. Like those from Sudan, they pass through Libya, a country where refugees are routinely captured and trafficked to large immigration detention centres where they experience high levels of abuse, torture and exploitation, before journeying onto the UK and other countries where they seek asylum. We also witness children coming from West Africa who are trafficked into the UK, commonly for domestic servitude and sexual exploitation.”

WHY IS EXPLOITATION GROWING AROUND THE WORLD?

Modern slavery and exploitation are increasing because of the huge levels of poverty and inequality across the world. Individuals and families are driven away from their homes and communities because of war, conflict and climate disasters and end up in places where exploiters loiter, knowing they can target vulnerable parents and children.

Imogen adds: “In recent years, we’ve seen unaccompanied refugee children facing greater risks of being trafficked once they’re here in the UK. They may not have been trafficked into the UK but on arrival, they face new levels of vulnerability which criminal gangs seek to capitalise on. There are links between organised criminal groups that operate internationally, UK-based criminal groups and young refugees in the care system. There is also a lot of debt bondage and family members are threatened or held ransom by militia groups in the countries children have come from until they pay off their debts.”

The main forms of exploitation that affect children are labour exploitation; sexual exploitation; domestic servitude and criminal exploitation.

1 Labour exploitation

Victims work for offenders in businesses or sites that offenders directly control. In more organised examples, offenders act as gangmasters, controlling teams of victims on single or across multiple sites. Victims often live in a single overcrowded residence.

2 Child sexual exploitation (CSE)

Vulnerable child victims are targeted for grooming either in person or online. Offenders sexually exploit the children for personal gratification and sometimes force them into sex work in fixed or changing locations. Victims may already be known to the authorities for other reasons. A large proportion of CSE victims have an unstable home life, mental or physical health issues or alcohol and drug use.



3 Domestic servitude

Probably the most hidden form of trafficking, victims, sometimes as young as 10 or 11, live with offenders and are forced to undertake household chores such as cooking, cleaning and childcare. There is generally one victim per household. Some victims are even specifically trafficked for work in diplomatic households. Victims usually lead very isolated lives with little or no unsupervised freedom. They may, however, attend school. Their own privacy and comfort will be minimal, often sleeping on a mattress on the floor, hidden in a cellar or locked room and they are frequently subjected to harsh treatment, both physical and verbal. Sexual abuse of victims is not uncommon.

4 Child criminal exploitation (CCE)

Victims are forced to take part in often highly organised gang-related criminality. This could be county lines drug trafficking, cannabis cultivation, shoplifting, pickpocketing or forced begging. Each of these different types of criminal activities may affect different types of children. For example, most children involved in cannabis cultivation are Vietnamese children who speak no or minimal English.

Recruitment by Organised Criminal Groups (OCGs) commonly occurs in person in the country of origin of the victims. In some cases, the victims' families approach an agent in the hope of giving their child a better life. In contrast, most county lines' victims are from the UK, yet there is also a small but significant number of Albanian child victims, trafficked to the UK from Albania by OCGs.

OCGs exercise high levels of control over their victims, often making it hard for them to be identified and protected. Rates of child victims going missing and returning to traffickers are a significant concern for professionals working to protect them and when identified they may be wrongfully prosecuted rather than identified as a victim of trafficking.

Global and domestic trends of CCE are constantly in flux, impacted by global and domestic politics and social issues such as the cost-of-living crisis driving more families into poverty. Some foreign national children in CCE are extremely hidden, unknown to statutory services, and may only come to light following serious incidents of harm against the child.

Often, one form of exploitation may make a child vulnerable to other types of abuse and exploitation. For example, a child trafficked for domestic servitude may end up being sexually abused by the adults in the household too.



WATCH THE FILM

Learn more about child trafficking in the UK by watching our short interview with Imogen Spencer Chapman of ECPAT UK.



<https://youtu.be/6ssTUKCmsy8>

1. What struck you as you watched the film?
2. Did you know about the high levels of children trafficked into the UK?
3. Were you aware that child victims of trafficking might turn up in your church when they are being exploited or afterwards?
4. Do you feel you and your church are equipped to spot the signs and know how to respond? Remind one another how to raise a safeguarding concern.
5. What do you understand by the phrases 'trauma-informed care' and 'professional love'?
6. How can we help child victims of trafficking not be defined by their trauma?



READ LUKE 18 V1-8

The Power and Purpose of Prayer



Faced with the scale and horror of child exploitation, it is easy to feel powerless and frustrated. Jesus tells his disciples this parable to show them that when faced with suffering and injustice they should always pray and not give up. It is a story about the power of persistent prayer and our inbuilt desire for justice.

The parable reminds us that the systems and powers which organise our world (such as the judge) can fail to notice the suffering of the most vulnerable. Children are often hidden from public view. We are called to notice, pray and seek God's guidance and grace in bringing to the world's attention, the horrific exploitation of children.

Of course, we should not think that our God is like the unjust and reluctant judge in the parable! Rather we can feel encouraged that if this is what an unjust judge is like, how much more will our good and merciful God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night.

How does this parable:

- help you understand the purpose, nature and power of prayer?
- encourage you to be more persistent in prayer, especially for children in their hidden suffering and exploitation?
- Remind you about the potential failings of established systems and our role in speaking up for the vulnerable?

'However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?'

- What can we do in our daily lives to nourish and express the kind of faith that Jesus is encouraging?



PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as you long to give grace and justice to your children, may we learn better to recognise the marks of exploitation and abuse, so that our voices can be raised to you for mercy. Help us become a place people feel safe to share their struggles, and pursue healing and recovery together by the gentle power of your love. Teach us to persist in prayer even when it is difficult.

We pray in faith and hope.

Amen.



STORY OF HOPE – AMIRA’S STORY



WATCH THE FILM

Watch this bonus film as ‘Amira’ shares some of her experiences, to help inform faith communities about the realities of child trafficking.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKNh2crBKco>

Amira shares some of her experiences, to help inform faith communities about the realities of child trafficking.

‘Amira’ is a member of ECPAT’s lived-experience Youth Advisory Group. She was trafficked to the UK when she was a child and, from the age of 17, received huge support from ECPAT UK as she rebuilt her life. She is now a mum herself and is passionate

about her role on the Youth Advisory Group and helping people understand the sort of challenges faced by child survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking.

She explains: “you find yourself in a country you didn’t choose to come to. Everything is different and as a young person, you have no understanding of the legal systems and a lack of trust, particularly of adults because the people who trafficked you were adults and made lots of promises but ended up mistreating you.

“You’ve managed to run away from your exploiters, but you find yourself with other adults, like social workers and solicitors, who are making promises. These adults are saying, “we are here to support you... we are here to help you” but the young person doesn’t know what to believe. They’ve learned to fight for themselves either by running away, keeping quiet, or being angry.

“Sometimes you’re facing homelessness but the people who trafficked you are still reaching out to you and they’re frightening you and threatening your family members. They might claim that the police in UK won’t look after you and so many young people end up running back to their original traffickers and are mistreated once again.”



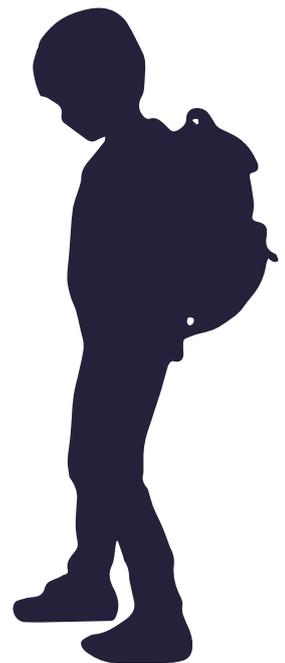
www.ecpat.org.uk

Another challenge facing child survivors is the issue of telling their story, repeatedly to different adults and organisations, trying to prove their age and the truth of their exploitation." Amira shares: "People tell you they don't believe your age, or they don't believe your story or that you've been trafficked."

Through Amira's role on the Lived Experience Advisory Board, she tries to raise awareness of the different warning signs to look out for and what to do if you have suspicions. She says: "You might come across young people with inappropriate sexual behaviour, for example, using words that you wouldn't expect, being dressed in a provocative way or acting around other people in a more grown-up manner than usual. You might notice a young person with an adult who is not allowed to speak and the adult does all the talking. The young person might keep looking at the adult when you ask them a question and you feel that, in their eyes, they are screaming out for help and support."

Amira believes that faith communities have an important role to play as victims of human trafficking and modern slavery may be taken along to mosques or churches by their exploiters or may seek out these communities after they've left exploitation. Amira explains: "I would like to tell people in churches and mosques to look out for these signs because you can save someone's life. Do not ignore what you see - do something. Provide regular training about trafficking to your church or mosque members because it could make a big impact to a young person's life and also to the community life. Speak about it often so that people can learn to recognise the signs and know what to do. Most of all, be friendly and welcoming when young people come into your group and make sure you have good safeguarding policies in place."

ECPAT UK's youth advisory group was set up in recognition that young people affected by trafficking are the experts in their own lives. The group is made up of former members of ECPAT UK's youth programme and longer-term members who are in a position to get involved with steering its organisational campaigns and strategy. The youth advisory group meets monthly, and members take part in awareness-raising activities, public campaigning and training for frontline professionals.



ECPAT UK

ECPAT UK (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking) is a small London-based, child rights charity that works throughout the UK to protect children from trafficking and transnational exploitation.

There are three main strands to its work:

1. research, campaigning and influencing – it lobbies UK local and central governments and governments around the world to improve legislation and policy
2. delivering training to improve the child protection response of professionals. ECPAT UK provides training to frontline professionals including social workers, police, immigration, legal, Prisons and Probation service, the CPS, health professionals, teachers and foster carers.
3. running a youth programme for young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who've experienced child trafficking.

Over the last three years, more than 150 children and young people have engaged with ECPAT UK's youth programme. It provides tailored and gender-specific support and mentoring as well as practical help with case work.

Imogen Spencer Chapman, Head of Training & Practice Development at ECPAT UK, explains: "Often the cases can be complex because young people are having to navigate multiple systems – immigration, care, legal and mental health systems – and engage with multiple professionals who don't always talk to each other. We spend a lot of time working closely with the young person to make sure their needs and the different parts of their lives are being connected and everyone's talking to each other. We have an open space where young people are encouraged to drop in and have a session with their youth mentor.

We also have two therapists who offer specialist, trauma-informed therapeutic care to young people.

"We have a fantastic ESOL teacher who offers weekly English language classes, and we also run a boys' group and a girls' group where, if funding allows, we take the young people on residential to a wonderful interfaith centre in Gloucestershire. For a couple of days, we provide them with a sense of escape and peace and do fun outdoor activities such as tree climbing."

Imogen sees a huge opportunity for churches and faith communities to offer care and understanding: "We need more specialist foster carers. Living in a stable home and receiving love and support can have such a profound impact on child victims of trafficking. This is something that churches and faith communities could really encourage and spearhead. I would urge anyone who thinks they may have the time and energy to become a foster carer to make enquiries with their local authority or with an independent fostering agency."



www.ecpat.org.uk





ACTION – JOIN THE FIGHT

There are many ways you can join the fight against child exploitation. A first step is to increase your own awareness and understanding of child exploitation.

1. Ask your church to organise some safeguarding or general training about modern slavery.
2. Commit to raising awareness amongst your networks and in your local area – start following The Clewer Initiative on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn and share our awareness raising campaigns with your friends and networks.
3. Could you (or someone you know) consider fostering or hosting a child victim of modern slavery? Pray that the God of all compassion would raise up more foster carers from within the church to respond to this practical need.
4. Download posters from The Clewer Initiative's website about the signs of exploitation and display them in your community halls.
5. Persist in prayer for victims of child trafficking, for their protection, recovery and hope for their future.

