



REGIONAL OVERVIEW: SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

2020



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INTRODUCTION

The MENA region is home to heterogeneous countries ranging from wealthy oil-exporting countries in the Persian Gulf to some of the world's poorest and least developed countries such as Sudan and Yemen. As of 2018, the region has a population of 447.89 million, of which children account for 155.6 million.¹ Despite declining fertility rates, the regional population is still expected to reach 1 billion by 2100, straining an already burdened infrastructure, housing, sanitation provisions, educational and healthcare services, and employment opportunities.² According to an overview of the MENA by the World Bank, the region is facing multiple challenges that are affecting its overall economic growth.³ In addition to violence and the consequences of war in several countries (such as the risk of a whole generation of children in some countries missing school due to fragility, conflict and violence), the region suffers from slow-paced reforms, rising debt levels and high unemployment rates, particularly among youth and women.⁴

In addition to the multiple political, economic and demographic challenges, the region is home to devastating levels of armed conflict in six countries: Iraq, Libya, State of Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The MENA has the highest concentration of humanitarian need in the world, with two ongoing current emergencies rated as “level 3 emergencies” in Syria and Yemen and many countries facing protracted

difficulties.⁵ Advancing child rights and protection in areas of conflict and turmoil is strained by grave conflict-induced displacement (within and across borders), lack of adequate funding, fragmented and strained protection systems, and limited professional capacity. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of June 2019, a total of US\$244 million was raised to fund humanitarian needs in Yemen (US\$113.8 million), the Syrian crisis in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey (US\$72.8 million), Iraq (US\$45.3 million) and the State of Palestine (US\$12.4 million).⁶

Addressing the sexual exploitation of children falls within the scope of child rights and protection activities and with welfare systems stretched beyond breaking in many places, this means the issue receives little prioritization within these countries. From a legal standpoint, all governments in the region have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and most have officially ratified its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC). However, current domestic legislation in many MENA countries does not fully reflect these conventions as is the intention of such international laws.⁷ In fact, several countries have provisions in domestic legislation that are contradictory to that of international standards they have ratified, such as criminalizing children who are victims

1 UNICEF. (2019). *The state of the World's Children 2019*. 195.

2 McKee, M., Keulertz, M. et al. (2017, October), Demographic and Economic Material Factors in the Mena Region. Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture.

3 The World Bank. (2018, October). Overview: Middle East and North Africa. The World Bank Group
4 *Ibid.*

5 UNICEF. (2019, December). Middle East and North Africa: Regional Office 2020 requirements.

6 UNOCHA. (2019, June). *Middle East and North Africa: Humanitarian Pooled Funds*.

7 ECPAT International. (2016, June). *Global Study on the Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism: Regional Report: Middle East and North Africa*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

of sexual exploitation.⁸ Furthermore, countries that took measures to change their penal codes to implement provisions against the sexual exploitation of children, such as Morocco, Kuwait and Oman, are slow to implement these changes.⁹ In reviewing the definition of sexual exploitation of children (SEC) in the national legislations of countries in the region, ECPAT International notes that countries across the MENA carry multiple different definitions of SEC, and many tend to be general and not specific for each different manifestation of this crime.¹⁰

Finally, a lack of reliable data on child rights in general and sexual exploitation of children in particular in many countries of the MENA, is a major challenge towards understanding the multiple issues that face children and consequently hampers efforts towards recognizing and addressing these issues. Ongoing crisis within a country impacts the urgency and efficiency of responses to grave infractions; at the same time as impacting the availability of data, statistics and evidence. In its latest concluding observations to Saudi Arabia,¹¹ Qatar,¹² UAE¹³ and Iraq,¹⁴ the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed similar concerns about the lack of systems, mechanisms and policies to collect disaggregated data that can be used to assess progress achieved in the realization of children's rights. Furthermore, turmoil and conflict has further weakened already flawed and fragile data collection systems.¹⁵ Armed conflict, lack of professional capacity,

and limited access of international and UN organizations to several conflict-affected areas and countries, such as Libya, further exacerbates the gravity of the scarcity of data. The prolonged unrest within the respective countries oftentimes means that responding to, implementing commitments, and reporting child protection concerns becomes extremely challenging.¹⁶

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

This Regional Overview of SEC in the MENA consolidates the relevant existing data to map the context, risk factors, region-specific issues, responses and gaps in the fight against the sexual exploitation of children. In addition to providing external audiences with a summary and analysis of the SEC situation in MENA, this report will also serve as an advocacy tool that highlights good practices by governments and other actors, and identifies opportunities for improvements.

The Regional Overview will be used to further guide the development of ECPAT's strategy for evidence-based advocacy in the MENA and the engagement of member organisations and other stakeholders in the efforts to prevent and respond to the sexual exploitation of children in the region. This Regional Overview is based on a comprehensive desk review of secondary data and literature across 19 countries, including Algeria; Bahrain; Djibouti; Egypt; Iraq; Jordan; Kuwait; Lebanon;

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October). *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Saudi Arabia. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*

12 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2017, June). *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Qatar. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*

13 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October). *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*

14 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*

15 UNICEF. (n.d.). Programme: Child Protection. New York: UNICEF.

16 UNICEF. (2017, September). *Protecting the Rights of the Child in Humanitarian Situations.*

Libya; Morocco; Oman; Qatar; Saudi Arabia; State of Palestine; Sudan; Syrian Arab Republic; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates; and Yemen. Evidence gathered and analysed include research publications, news reports, reports published by national and international NGOs and universities, and UN reports, such as State party reports to and concluding observations from the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Special Rapporteurs.

Furthermore, the research team interviewed experts in the region and ECPAT partners to refine the framework of the Regional Overview as well as learn from the experiences of partners, particularly in relation to how to address the issue of SEC in the MENA.

The Regional Overview includes an examination of the key risk factors for sexual exploitation of children in the MENA region in the next section.

Section three describes in close detail, four pressing issues related to the sexual exploitation of children that are of specific concern to the region; including the impact of humanitarian crises and

discrimination. Whilst the scarcity of data and available statistics on the scope and prevalence of the different forms of SEC have been amongst the main challenges in this Regional Overview, section four strives to present the available data and identify evidence-based linkages between the risk factors identified and children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. The available data on the different forms of SEC in the region include sections about online child sexual exploitation (OCSE), sexual exploitation in travel and tourism (SECTT), exploitation of children in prostitution, child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and sale and trafficking of children for sexual purposes. Section five highlights selected examples of effective programmes, initiatives or interventions from multiple countries across the region. Finally, section six outlines key recommendations towards preventing and addressing SEC in MENA.

Throughout this report, the authors have used terminology and definitions surrounding the topic of sexual exploitation of children as recommended in the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.¹⁷

¹⁷ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*. Bangkok: ECPAT International and ECPAT Luxembourg.

RISK FACTORS FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

This section sheds light on the defining features that are affecting children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation of children (SEC) in the MENA as we examine the context in which they are living. Understanding the multiple factors at play in the exploitation and protection of children in the region paves the way for a comprehensive understanding of the problem and consequently the development of robust recommendations and interventions that would address the root causes of the various manifestations.

In reviewing the elements of child protection and welfare; political stability, strong and accessible services (such as health and education), a robust legal system, equality, and employment are all considered essential foundational elements contributing to children's welfare and protection from abuse and exploitation. To the contrary, contexts characterized by discrimination, high levels of poverty, armed conflict, and political instability disrupt the efforts and structures needed to protect children and promote their wellbeing.¹⁸

Unfortunately, instability, political turmoil, and economic stresses are a few of the recurring elements that define the context of many countries in the MENA. As stated by the Moroccan NGO, MENARA's paper on "Demographic and Economic Material Factors in the MENA region",¹⁹ the region is one of the world's most rapidly transforming regions

politically, economically, demographically and environmentally, posing continuous pressures on governments and organizations to address the disparities and challenges underlying such transformations, particularly those impacting on the region's children.

In terms of child welfare and child protection, UNICEF's Child Protection Programme in the MENA notes with concern that even in non-conflict countries there are high prevalence rates of violence against children in the region (including child marriage, female genital mutilation, physical punishment, sexual violence and gender-based violence, which will be elaborated on in further sections of this report).²⁰ Additional concerns are raised for the violence and exploitation suffered by many refugee and migrant children, particularly those who travel unaccompanied. In terms of national Child Protection Systems, UNICEF explains that :

"Overall, public financing of child protection systems and services remains inadequate in all MENA countries. The social services infrastructures and workforce are limited, often under-resourced and with inadequate capacity, thus hindering the availability of high quality services at national scale".²¹

18 See e.g. UNICEF. (October, 2017). *Preventing and Responding to Violence against Children and Adolescence - Theory of Change*. Annex B. 46. New York: UNICEF.

19 McKee, M., Keulertz, M. et al. (2017, October). *Demographic and Economic Material Factors in the Mena Region*. Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture.

20 UNICEF. (n.d.). *Programme: Child Protection*. New York: UNICEF.

21 *Ibid.*

The complexity of identifying and measuring SEC; the extremely taboo nature of discussing this issue in conservative contexts; and a lack of robust existing SEC data for the MENA requires a complex lens for analysing and understanding SEC in the region. According to ECPAT, children living in or suffering from poverty, social exclusion, lack of educational and vocational opportunities, or racial discrimination are often the most vulnerable to being forced into sexual exploitation.²² All of these phenomena are present in different settings and forms in MENA region countries. The following sections explore some of the key multiple vulnerabilities affecting children in the region. Understanding these risk factors may also indicate the existence and scope of SEC.

POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

While it is well-established that sexual exploitation happens in across all socioeconomic groups, poverty is an unambiguous and critical risk factor for SEC.²³ It's a vicious cycle, where poverty leads to the marginalization of children, and hence their denial of essential services, such as health and education. Marginalization and lack of services and education could then consequently lead to exploitative child labour, and other situations of abuse, violence and exploitation.²⁴ Poverty is also a root cause for trafficking, and when combined with exclusion or conflict, poverty forces many families and children to migrate. It could even contribute to the separation of children from their

families, where parents migrate in search of employment and income generating opportunities, leaving their children behind unsupervised and vulnerable to risks, including of SEC.²⁵

The MENA region is characterized by a high income and wealth heterogeneity, ranging from wealthy oil-exporting countries to some of the world's poorest and least developed countries. Moreover, the region tends to have a dual social structure with an extremely rich group at the top and a much poorer and bigger group at the bottom.²⁶

The eradication of poverty and hunger is the number one goal for the Sustainable Development Goals, which are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.²⁷ Over the past two decades, poverty worldwide declined by more than half. However, that is not the case in the Arab world.²⁸ High levels of political unrest and conflict in the region have reversed advancements made in poverty alleviation in the region. Despite the optimism that followed the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, many countries in the region, such as Egypt and Tunisia, have actually seen increasing rates of poverty. In 2015, UNICEF reported that poverty rate in Egypt reached 27.8%, with over 10 million children living in conditions of multiple deprivations, including lack of access to services and support systems.²⁹ According to a report on "Children in the State of Palestine (2018)" by UNICEF, over one third of Palestinian families live below the poverty line, and a little over half the population is in need of direct humanitarian assistance.³⁰

22 ECPAT International. (2016, March). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity: Understanding the Forces Driving the Demand for Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International

23 *Ibid.*

24 UNICEF. (2006). *Child Protection Information Sheets*. New York: UNICEF.

25 International Organisation for Migration. (2013). *Children on the Move*.

26 Facundo, A., Assouad, L., Piketty, T. (2018, August 13). *Inequality in the Middle East*.

27 United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable Development Goals*. New York: UN.

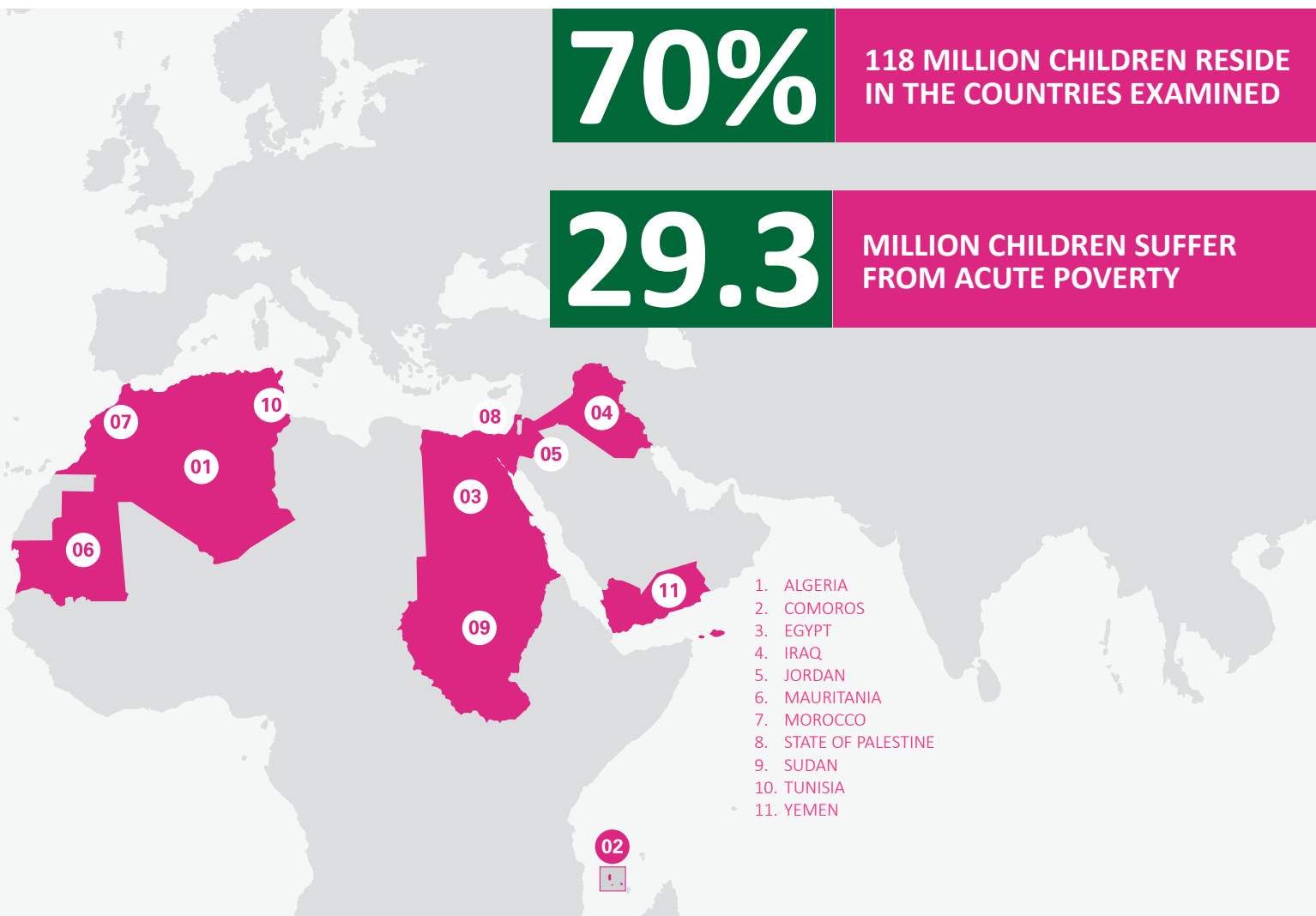
28 Brookings. (2016, February). *The persistence of poverty in the Arab world*. Washington: Brookings Institution.

29 UNICEF. (2017). *Annual Report 2017: Egypt*. New York: UNICEF.

30 UNICEF. (2018, November). *Children in the State of Palestine*. New York: UNICEF.

In a recent study on child poverty in the Arab world, UNICEF examined multidimensional poverty³¹ in 11 countries in the region; these include: Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, State of Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. 118 million children reside in the countries examined, almost 70% of the child population in the region. Results revealed that 1 out of 4 children in these countries (29.3 million children) suffer from acute poverty and almost half of all the children included in the study suffer from moderate poverty (44.1%).³²

Sudan, which is home to 19 million children, has the highest incidence of both moderate and acute poverty among the countries assessed, where 14 million children suffer from acute poverty, and 9 out of 10 children suffer from moderate poverty.³³



31 Multidimensional poverty refers to multiple deprivations at the household and individual level, not only in relation to income but also health, education and standard of living. See e.g. UNDP. (2019). Multidimensional Poverty Index.

32 UNICEF. (n.d.). *Child Poverty in the Arab States: Analytical Report of Eleven Countries*. New York: UNICEF.

33 *Ibid.*

GAPS IN BIRTH REGISTRATION

Article 7 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stipulates that every child has a right to a nationality and registration at birth.³⁴ According to UNICEF, birth registration ensures securing legal recognition, and facilitates safeguarding of children's rights and a monitoring of child rights violations.³⁵ The lack of official state registration leaves children extremely vulnerable to a magnitude of rights infractions; such as being denied access to healthcare and education as well as vulnerability to exploitative child labour, early child marriage and trafficking - all risk factors to sexual exploitation.^{36,37}

Based on UNICEF Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, and other nationally representative surveys, censuses and vital registration systems between 2010-2016;³⁸ overall, the MENA region has an official birth registration rate of 92% for children less than five years of age.

Although the region reflects a high level of birth registration compared to other regions, disparities between rural and urban communities were noted according to the same sets of data, where there has been a 96% registration among urban communities compared to 87% in rural communities, hence further underlining the vulnerabilities of children in rural areas. Vast disparities between countries also exist; the Demographic and Health Survey in Yemen in 2013 revealed that the total registration of children in the country is only 31% with rates as low as 17% among the poorest quintile.³⁹

In times of war and conflict, the challenges to birth registration are further aggravated. According to a report from UNICEF, the majority of countries with less than 40% birth registration are either war stricken, extremely poor countries or both.⁴⁰ This is exemplified in the challenge of birth registration for Syrians and Syrian refugees. The closure and destruction of many civil registry offices in Syria affected the ability of



34 UN General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 7. OHCHR.

35 UNICEF. (2017, December). *Birth registration*. New York: UNICEF.

36 Plan International (2009). *Count Every Child: The right to birth registration*. Woking UK: Plan International.

37 UNICEF. (2017, December). *Birth registration*. New York: UNICEF.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

40 UNICEF. (2007). *Innocenti Insight: Birth Registration and Armed Conflict*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

civilians to receive marriage and birth certificates, thus leaving many internally displaced families without such formal records.⁴¹ Families who lost their records also face the challenge of reissuing such documents since not all records are digitally preserved. Additionally, the report explains that Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries face challenges in issuing birth certificates, either for lack of records to prove marriage, lack of familiarity with registration processes, or prohibitive costs. These challenges can lead refugees to resort to risky coping mechanisms, such as purchasing falsified documents, which can expose them to protection risks including exploitation.⁴²

Through the assistance of UNHCR, positive measures have been put in place to assist the Syrian refugee community in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. In Jordan, Syrian refugees can use their UNHCR Asylum Seeker Certificate to replace a birth certificate,⁴³ and in Lebanon costs have been reduced and waived for Syrian refugees who have failed to register their children, born in the country between January 2011 and February 2018, within the one-year legal period.⁴⁴ However, it remains to be a challenge for displaced and refugee communities. In the case of Libya, there is a complete lack of available data on various child protection indicators, birth registration being one,⁴⁵ highlighting just how vulnerable children are to a variety of different protection concerns.

Another important risk factor highlighted by UNHCR stipulates that children without official registration are particularly vulnerable to trafficking since these children are more likely to migrate and travel through informal or illegal passages.⁴⁶ According to UNHCR, refugee children in certain sub-regions of MENA engage in mixed migratory movements and travel and are thus being exposed to risks of being sexually and economically exploited, trafficked and sold.⁴⁷ Thus, ensuring official birth registration of refugee children has immense value for their protection.

Furthermore, failure to officially and rigorously register children's births also leaves girls particularly vulnerable to early marriage. Falsifying ages due to inconsistencies in birth certificate registration leaves girls at a greater risk of early marriage,⁴⁸ since they become more likely to be married off at younger ages. Thus, there is a range of protective implications in enforcing laws for birth registration. In some cases, birth registration laws and policies should be reviewed so that States ensure an open registration process, without discriminating those children born outside of wedlock or those born of parents who do not possess their own identity papers. Birth registration fees and lengthy procedural processes can also be further impediments.⁴⁹

41 Clutterbuck, M., Cunial, L. et al. (2018, February). *Establishing Legal Identity for Displaced Syrians*. Refugee Studies Centre.

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 UNHCR. (2018, August). *Lebanon eases birth registration rules for Syrian refugees*. UNHCR.

45 UNICEF. (n.d.). *Country profiles: Libya*. New York: UNICEF.

46 UNHCR. (2014). *Protection of Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNHCR.

47 *Ibid.*

48 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Thematic Report: Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

49 See e.g. UNICEF. (2013). *Every child's birth right. Inequities and trends in birth registration*. New York: UNICEF. Plan International. (2009). *Count every child. The right to birth registration*. Surrey, UK: Plan International.

CHILDREN OUT OF SCHOOL AND DISPARITIES IN ACCESSING QUALITY EDUCATION

Education and child protection are deeply interrelated.⁵⁰ Whilst education is a fundamental child right enshrined in a number of declarations and conventions, including the UNCRC (specifically article 28)⁵¹ and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, child protection is a condition to guarantee their wellbeing and development. The provision of holistic, quality and inclusive education services in any context empowers children, regardless of their race, gender or ethnicity, and allows them to concretely pursue their goals and reach their potential. Schools can also act as important connections to broader welfare and other support services. Consequently, attendance and completion of school contributes to children's development, engagement and resilience hence their protection and the fulfillment of their rights.⁵²

Most countries in the MENA region have made significant progress towards increasing children's school enrolment, attendance and completion as part of the Millennium Development Goals' commitments. According to a comprehensive analysis on education in the region by UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics,⁵³ which consolidates nine national studies on out-of-school children in MENA (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen) enrollment rates at both primary and lower secondary levels have been improved. Remarkable progress in the enrollment of primary age children has been made in Djibouti, Morocco and Yemen. The 2019

UNICEF State of the World's Children report corroborates this evidence, with the percentage of out of school lower secondary age children in 2019 in the MENA region being 12% for males, and 15% for females. Both these figures were slightly lower than the global average, which is 15% for males and 16% for females.⁵⁴

However, while progress has been made, education exclusion remains to be a major challenge in the region. Children's exclusion is associated with inequalities that are based on gender, household wealth and location. Reducing the gender gap by increasing girls' participation, at both the primary and lower secondary levels, has been recorded, yet many countries still favor boys' participation.⁵⁵ Disparities based on wealth also recorded high within several MENA countries; such as Tunisia (19% of lower secondary age children from the poorest wealth quintile are out of school compared to only 1 per cent of the same age group from the richest quintile) and Sudan (42% of children from the poorest households compared to only 3% of children from the richest households),⁵⁶ thus further emphasizing the vulnerability of children in rural communities. Unequal access to education and the quality of education are major challenges towards school children's attendance and completion. Highest rates of school dropout from primary education were specifically recorded in the region's poorest countries, with additional risks associated with children from rural communities. School drop-out among lower secondary aged children was specifically high in a quarter of the MENA countries. According to the report, "at least one of every four lower

50 Save the Children. (n.d.). *Education and Child Protection Strategy 2014 - 2016*. Toronto: Save the Children Canada.

51 UN General Assembly (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Article 28. OHCHR.

52 Save the Children. (n.d.). *Education and Child Protection Strategy 2014 - 2016*. Toronto: Save the Children Canada.

53 Out-Of-School Children Initiative. (2014, October). *Regional Report: On Out-Of-School Children*. New York: UNICEF.

54 UNICEF. (2019). *The state of the World's Children 2019*. 231.

55 Out-Of-School Children Initiative. (2014, October). *Regional report: On Out-Of-School Children*. New York: UNICEF.

56 *Ibid*.

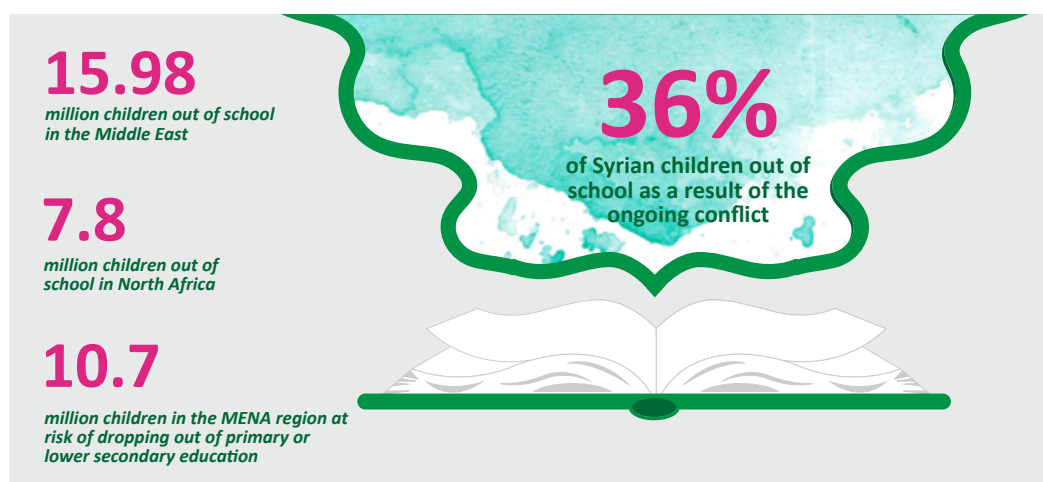
secondary age children were still out of school in 2012, with the highest levels of exclusion recorded in Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen”.⁵⁷

Furthermore, negative school environment, which entails corporal punishment, violence and bullying, stands out as another important factor for children’s school failure and dropout in the region.⁵⁸ Violence as a means of discipline at home and in school is widely accepted in many countries in the MENA region, jeopardizing children’s safety and contributing to their vulnerability to multiple risk factors, including exploitation. Schools do have the power to be a protective mechanism when children experience a safe environment in which they can develop in a structured way, be supported (particularly during stressful times), have access to trusted adults and learn key skills that would further contribute to their awareness of their rights and their empowerment.⁵⁹ Institutional violence diminishes the potential for schools to reduce children’s vulnerabilities, including to SEC.

According to the most recent data released by UNESCO in 2018, it was

estimated that in the Arab States, there were 15,980,545 out of school children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary school age.⁶⁰ In Northern Africa, the figure was lower, however there were still 7,808,937 out of school children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary school age.⁶¹ In 2016, it was also estimated that in the MENA region there were 10.7 million children at risk of dropping out of primary or lower secondary education.⁶²

In addition to gender discrimination, education quality and poor school environments, political instability and prolonged humanitarian crises constitute major barriers to school access and completion. In Syria, over 2 million children (36%) are out of school as a result of the ongoing conflict.⁶³ Amongst the above numbers, girls, poor children, children affected by conflict, and children from rural areas or minority groups are at even more heightened risk of being out of school. These types of disruptions have life-long consequences, with limited education being a precursor to early marriage, and limited economic options.⁶⁴



⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Landgren, K. (2005, February). *The Protective Environment: Development Support for Child Protection*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁶⁰ UNESCO. (n.d.). *Education: Number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary and secondary school age*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² UNICEF. (2018). *Middle East and North Africa Out-of-School Children Initiative: Regional Fact Sheet 2018*.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Thematic Report: Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

EDUCATION DISRUPTED BY CONFLICT

The education of children affected by conflict in the region is another major concern and one that is affecting a whole generation in several countries. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, the State of Palestine, and Sudan are exposing children to extreme risks and vulnerabilities and burdening already weak systems in neighbouring countries receiving refugees, hence pulling the region way back from some of the progress made in child education over the past decade.

Over 61 million children are living in countries affected by conflict in MENA.⁶⁵ Education has been shown in various conflict situations across the world to be a critical protection element for children, including from risks of SEC.⁶⁶ Education provides a safe and structured place for children to learn and build their identity; allows them access to support and a social network; in addition to building and refining their cognitive abilities and skills.⁶⁷ However, the education of children affected by conflict in the region is alarming. As reported by UNICEF in 2015, In Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya, nearly 9000 school buildings were either destroyed, used as shelters for families running away from violence, or occupied by parties to the conflict.⁶⁸

Furthermore, fear prohibits many families in these countries from sending their children to school as well as drives

thousands of educators to abandon their jobs. According to UNICEF, since the eruption of conflict in Syria, more than 2.8 million children have missed out on their education.⁶⁹ As of 2015, an additional 700,000 refugee Syrian children were also unable to attend school in neighbouring countries due to overburdened national educational infrastructures, poverty and difficulty to adapt to school curricula and local languages.⁷⁰ The fact that some of these children have never been to school before, whereas others missed up to seven years of schooling contributes strongly to their vulnerabilities to child labour, early marriage and forms of sexual exploitation. Initiatives like the Safe Schools Declaration highlight the importance of children having the opportunity to continue their education even in conflict settings.⁷¹

CHILD LABOUR

Another significant risk factor that increases children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation is exploitative forms of child labour. Linkages between exploitation of children for labour and sexual purposes are many and often hidden due to factors such as the employment in the private sector, which is outside the public eye, and the lack of protection for children living and working on the streets. Children involved in child labour are prone to exploitation when they are looking for work as well as when they're involved in it.⁷² Their status, financial need and the illegal

65 UNICEF. (n.d.). Programme: Child Protection. New York: UNICEF

66 Nicolai, S. and Triplehorn, C. (2003, March). *The Role of Education in Protecting Children in Conflict*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

67 Ibid.

68 UNICEF. (2015, September). *Education Under Fire: How Conflict in The Middle East Is Depriving Children of Their Schooling*. New York: UNICEF.

69 UNICEF. (n.d.). *Press Release: Nearly 5 Million Syrian Children Accessing Education despite Over Seven Years of War on Children*. New York: UNICEF.

70 UNICEF. (2015, September). *Education Under Fire: How Conflict in The Middle East Is Depriving Children of Their Schooling*. New York: UNICEF.

71 The *Safe Schools Declaration* provides states the opportunity to express broad political support for the protection and continuation of education in armed conflict. The following countries in the MENA region have endorsed the declaration: Djibouti, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Yemen. Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. (2019, May 25). *Safe Schools Declaration Endorsements*.

72 ECPAT International. (2013, October). *Unseen Vulnerabilities: The Links between Child Labour and Sexual Exploitation of Children*. ECPAT International's Journal Series.

setup of their engagement in the labour force sets the ground for exploitation and violations that are not easily spoken about or reported. Specific groups of working children are at an additional risk of being sexually exploited, these include: children out-of-school, children from conflict-ridden families, migrant or displaced children, children from minority groups and homeless children.⁷³ These groups are at an additional risk due to the combination of vulnerabilities with their work. They are often in extremely vulnerable positions from a dire need for work, and hence inability to refuse exploitative and dangerous working conditions. An example in the region being the *petites bonnes*, child domestic workers, mostly female, often exploited by their employers.⁷⁴

Besides the fact that child labour can be a risk factor to sexual exploitation of children, several forms of SEC are themselves also defined as types of (the worst forms of) child labour. The ILO Convention 182 defines: “The use, procuring or offering a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for the pornographic purposes” are among the worst forms of child labour.⁷⁵ Hence the inter-linkages

between child labour, sexual exploitation and the other risk factors (such as poverty and school dropout) are complex and clearly established.

An ILO report on modern slavery and child labour stipulates that 1.2 million children were involved in child labour in the Arab world in 2016; of which 616 thousand are involved in hazardous work.⁷⁶ However, it’s well established that statistics are very likely an underestimate of the extent of labour as much child labour is highly informal. This issue with child labour data was highlighted by the ILO in its 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians.⁷⁷ The ILO presented the challenges related to child labour statistics and accordingly produced guidance concerning States’ measurement of such. The lack of a statistical framework for measuring employment in the informal sector was also highlighted, particularly the measurement of informality in agriculture. This is very relevant to understand the risks to children in MENA given that agricultural work predominates child labour in the Arab States (60% in 2016).⁷⁸



73 IPEC–ILO. (2008). *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents. The ILO’s Response*. Geneva: IPEC-ILO.

74 UNICEF. (2007). *La situation des enfants au Maroc. Analyse selon l’approche basee sur les droits humains.*; Humanium. (2017, June, 26). Morocco: children deprived of an education.

75 International Labour Organization. (1999, June). *Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

76 Alliance 8.7. (n.d.). *Regional Brief for the Arab States: 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery and Child Labour. Alliance 8.7*

77 ILO Department of Statistics. (2018). *Report III: Report of the Conference, 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (Geneva, 10–19 October 2018)*. Geneva: ILO.

78 Alliance 8.7. (n.d.). *Regional Brief for the Arab States: 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery and Child Labour. Alliance87.*

The age breakdown of known children in child labour in the Arab States in 2016 indicated that 38% are in the 5–11 years age bracket, 32% are aged 12–14 years and 30% are 15–17 years. The oldest age group resembled the largest group in hazardous work.⁷⁹ Work in the urban informal sector, seasonal agriculture, street work, and domestic labour were the major forms of child labour identified.⁸⁰ The remaining was in the services sector (27%) and industry (13%).⁸¹

Some progress can be seen. Based on national statistics in Morocco, in 2017 there were 247,000 working children, out of which 65% carry out life-threatening tasks in agriculture, construction, mining, forestry, handicrafts and fishing industries.⁸² In the State of Palestine, high unemployment rates among persons 15 years and above (26.9%),⁸³ weaknesses in the education system, high levels of poverty and a weak social security system have all contributed to the rise of child labour in Gaza and the West Bank.⁸⁴

Additionally, as the Syrian conflict drags on, the deepening poverty of Syrian refugees in urban communities in Jordan and Lebanon pushes more families

to rely on child labour as a coping mechanism.⁸⁵ Syrian refugee families in Jordan (2017)⁸⁶ and in Lebanon (2018)⁸⁷ continue to rely on child labour as a coping mechanism. Refugee working children were reflected in a survey assessing child labour in Jordan, which reported that 1.89 % of all children in Jordan aged 5-17 years are working children, paid or unpaid, the majority of which are boys (88.3%). Of these, 57.3% of working children are 15-17 years of age, and 14.6% are Syrian.⁸⁸ In Lebanon, 5% of Syrian refugee children were working, with more working boys compared to girls.⁸⁹ 82% of working children reported performing an economic activity, with the age group 15-17 working the longest hours (60 hours/week).⁹⁰

In 2019, it was estimated that 5% of children in the MENA region were involved in situations of child labour, which is significantly lower than the region of Sub-Saharan Africa (29%), but higher than all other regions measured in the State of the World's Children Report.⁹¹

79 *Ibid.*

80 ILO (n.d.). *Child labor in Arab States*. Geneva: ILO.

81 Alliance 8.7. (n.d.). *Regional Brief for the Arab States: 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery and Child Labour*. Alliance 8.7.

82 Haut-commissariat au Plan. (2018, June 12). *Communiqué de presse du Haut-commissariat au Plan à l'occasion de la Journée mondiale contre le travail des enfants : Le travail dangereux des enfants âgés de 7 à 17 ans au Maroc*.

83 Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Household Budget. Ramallah: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics*.

84 ILO (n.d.). *Enhanced Knowledge and Capacity of Tripartite Partners to address the Worst Forms of Child Labour in the Occupied Palestinian territory*. Geneva: ILO.

85 UNHCR. (2017, October). *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. UNHCR citing Human Rights Watch (2016, August). *'We're Afraid for Their Future': Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan*; United Nations Children's Fund, World Food Programme, and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2015). *Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*.

86 UNHCR Cash Based Interventions (CBI) team. (2018, July). *Jordan Vulnerability Assessment Framework: 2017 Population Survey Report*. UNHCR.

87 UNHCR, UNICEF, et al. (2018, December). *VASyR 2018: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Rome: WFP.

88 Center for Strategic Studies, ILO, et al. (2016, August). *Summary Report on Main Findings: National Child Labour Survey 2016 of Jordan*. Amman: Center for Strategic Studies.

89 UNHCR, UNICEF, et al. (2018, December). *VASyR 2018: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Rome: WFP.

90 *Ibid.*

91 UNICEF. (2019). *The state of the World's Children 2019*. 235.

GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Globally, inequality between males and females as well as gender discrimination and discrimination against minority groups contributes to increased risk of SEC.⁹² This notion is not foreign to the MENA region.

As noted in its concluding observations to Qatar, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern that girls continue to be subjected to multiple gender-based discriminatory perceptions and practices. These begin at birth and continue onwards with minimal and unsystematic efforts taken to bring change to such attitudes and practices.⁹³ Similar concerns were expressed to Saudi Arabia,⁹⁴ UAE⁹⁵ and Iraq.⁹⁶ In addition to jeopardizing equality and the rights of female children as enshrined in the UNCRC, the Committee on the Rights of the Child stipulates in the 2016 report

to Saudi Arabia,⁹⁷ the 2014 report to Jordan⁹⁸ and Iraq's 2015 report,⁹⁹ that discrimination exposes girls to violations of their rights, including domestic violence, psychological and sexual exploitation and abuse; early, forced and temporary (*muta'a*) marriage; and limited access to education.

Under its legal outlook, many countries in MENA incorporate forms of Islamic *Shari'a* law into their legal systems, which mainly regulates personal status laws; and while the laws themselves do not necessarily directly articulate discrimination against women or girls, patriarchal interpretations and consequently practice of Islamic law regularly contributes to inequality and discrimination.¹⁰⁰ Hence, although all countries in the MENA are signatories of the UNCRC, national level representation in local law and practice of the UNCRC rights are not always consistent with

- 92 ECPAT International. (2016, March). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity: Understanding the Forces Driving the Demand for Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International
- 93 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2017, June 22). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Qatar**. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 94 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October 25). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia**. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 95 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October 30). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates**. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 96 Committee UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 3). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq**. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 97 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October 25). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia**. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 98 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2014, June 13). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the consolidated fourth and fifth periodic reports of Jordan*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 99 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 3). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- 100 Ebersole, L., Hunter, k., et al. (2014, May 5). *Gender Equity in the Middle East and North Africa: Integrating Men and Boys*. Washington, DC: American University Freedom House Practicum Team. cited in Child Marriage in MENA UNICEF.

State's obligations, especially when it comes to the definition of the child, listening to children's voices, and discrimination against girls.¹⁰¹

SPECIAL CASES

Discrimination against other groups of children in the region have been identified by multiple CRC reports¹⁰² and reports by UN and international agencies,¹⁰³ as violations and issues of concern. These include discrimination against children belonging to ethnic or religious minority groups, children with disability, children born out of wedlock and children of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE, also commonly known as LGBTQ).

The following section examines two special cases of child populations in MENA who experience heightened discrimination. They are included as examples of highlighting how discrimination exacerbates the risks to children of sexual exploitation.

The Sexual Exploitation of Boys

The limited evidence available suggests that the sexual exploitation of boys could represent a far more significant phenomenon than is commonly recognised. While the huge impact of sexual exploitation on girls is widely

accepted, the impact on boys continues to be relatively under-researched, unrecognised in relevant legislation and policy, and broadly unaddressed in programming.¹⁰⁴ A culture of silence around this issue also plays a massive role in perpetuating the cycle of violence. In the MENA region, just as in other regions around the world, data on the sexual exploitation of boys in particular is needed in order to further address and prevent these violations. "When countries do collect prevalence data on child sexual abuse or exploitation, it is usually limited to adolescent girls... prevalence data for boys is even more scarce."¹⁰⁵

While evidence on sexual violence against boy and girls in the region is severely lacking, exploratory studies reveal that boys are subjected to sexual violence, particularly in humanitarian settings.¹⁰⁶ Also, as previously stated, boys are more likely to be sent to work outside of the homes than girls due to cultural norms within the region, which can result in increasing working boys' vulnerability to sexual exploitation. There is an attitude, both in the community and amongst over-stretched services forced to prioritise, that boys are better able to 'look after themselves'. Gender norms often mean boys are more likely to be unsupervised and may naively be put into contexts deemed too risky for girls (such as unsupervised street work), with little consideration of the fact that

101 Defence for Children International. (2015). *Overview of Child Rights Situation in Arab Countries*.

102 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October 25). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2014, June 13). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the consolidated fourth and fifth periodic reports of Jordan*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). and UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 3). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

103 Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion. (n.d.). *Stateless Persons in the MENA*. Eindhoven: Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.

104 Josenhans, V., Kavenagh, M., Smith, S., Wekerle, C. (2019). *Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys*. Child abuse and Neglect.

105 The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018) *Methodology paper Out of the Shadows: Shining light on the response to child sexual abuse and exploitation – a 40-country benchmarking index*, London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 3

106 UNHCR. (2017, October). *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. UNHCR

boys are equally powerless to stop abuse against them.¹⁰⁷

The socio-cultural norms in the region regarding masculinity and honour may initially lessen the protection families offer to boy children versus girl children. Secondly norms may prevent boy children from reporting abuse when it occurs. The social stigma attached with being a victim of sexual violence for males impede reporting as well as access to health care services following the incidence of violence and accordingly has severe implications on these survivors' mental health and wellbeing. A seminal publication from the All Survivors Project in 2018 states:

“Sexual violence has devastating consequences for male survivors, their families and communities. In addition to physical injuries, short- and long-term psychological impacts on survivors include shame, loss of confidence, sleep disorders, feelings of powerlessness, confusion and suicidal thoughts.”¹⁰⁸

Within Syria, several accounts have been made about the sexual violence that Syrian men and boys have been exposed to within Syria and also in their countries of asylum.¹⁰⁹ Recent research reported that unaccompanied Syrian minors in Greece were sexually exploited in exchange for money, food and clothing.¹¹⁰ The study also cited a needs assessment conducted in Libya

of 122 migrant women and children who reported that boys experience “various forms” of sexual violence during migration.¹¹¹ A UNHCR report on sexual violence against men and boys affected by the Syrian crisis revealed refugee boys reported sexual exploitation in informal working conditions in countries of asylum and that between 19.5 and 27% of male respondents in three separate samples from Jordan, State of Palestine and Lebanon confirmed having experienced sexual harassment or sexual contact as boys (between the ages of 13-15 years).¹¹²

The Sexual Exploitation of SOGIE Youth

Globally, children with diverse sexual orientation gender identity and expression (SOGIE, also known as LGBTQ) are more vulnerable to SEC.^{113,114} The experiences of these children and adolescents are unique, complex and dangerous. More often than not, they are also very hidden. Within the region, SOGIE adolescents are vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly during armed conflict as was experienced in Syria.¹¹⁵ This is due to a variety of different factors, notably because their sexuality sets them apart and they often experience discrimination from families that may disown them or throw them out of home. Consequently, these adolescents may have difficulty finding or maintaining accommodation or work, and lack social support and protection. In these vulnerable states,

107 Pawlak, p. and Barker, G. (2012). *Hidden Violence: Preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of adolescent boys*. Oak Foundation.

108 All Survivors Project. (2018, September 6). *“Destroyed From Within”: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in Syria and Turkey*. All Survivors Project.

109 Chynoweth, S., Freccero, J., et al. (2017). *Sexual violence against men and boys in conflict and forced displacement: implications for the health sector*. Taylor & Francis.

110 *Ibid.*

111 *Ibid.* citing UNICEF. (2017, February). *A deadly journey for children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route*. New York: UNICEF.

112 UNHCR. (2017, October). *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. UNHCR.

113 Schmitt, V. (2016, May). *Sex Trafficking and LGBTQ Youth*. Washington, DC: Polaris.

114 ECPAT International (2017). *Casting light on the care, recovery and (re)integration needs of commercially sexually exploited children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

115 UNHCR. (2017, October). *We Keep it in our Heart: Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. UNHCR.

traffickers may easily exploit them. Additionally, SOGIE youth may refrain from reporting sexual exploitation due to the repercussions they face from police or officials who may refuse to protect or hear their reports of violence and abuse due to their sexual orientation and gender identity and/or due to the additional violence they may suffer as a result of reporting.¹¹⁶ Seventy-three countries around the world still outlaw any homosexual contact, including many in the MENA region.¹¹⁷ This can mean that boys who report crimes against them are regularly prosecuted themselves for homosexual acts – whether they are gay or not.¹¹⁸ This effectively stops boys who have been sexual exploited from reporting or seeking help.

The data available on the sexual exploitation of SOGIE children and youth in MENA is very scarce, and while little specific data was available, one report did provide some insights to treatment of SOGIE youth. The aforementioned UNHCR publication on sexual violence against men and boys in the Syria crisis revealed that SOGIE men and boys in Syria were exposed to sexual violence by armed groups and also in countries of asylum by various perpetrators including landlords and neighbours under threats of eviction or other persecution. They also faced “double stigmas” due to their refugee status and due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Participants also reported that SOGIE refugees experienced daily threats of sexual violence and exploitation often in the workplace due to their illegal work status in countries of asylum.¹¹⁹

According to the report, “survival sex” was even reported by some refugees as a form of housing rental payment, highlighting the increasing risk these refugees experience of sexual violence and exploitation.¹²⁰

The concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq reported concerns of children who are/suspected of being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. These children are being exposed to discrimination by police forces and the courts. The report also states that SOGIE young people are exposed to torture and even death.¹²¹ In Saudi Arabia, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children are also subjected to ongoing discrimination, to which the Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed repeated concerns to the State.¹²² These findings highlight the vulnerability of this specific group of children and call for the need for specialized efforts to ensure their protection within the region.

ESTABLISHED GENDER NORMS

Both girls and boys are exposed to a range of entrenched and inflexible gender norms that are imposed by societies and cultures. Generally, boys and girls are treated very differently and traditionally they are required to ascribe to certain roles. The consequences they will face as a result of certain decisions they make or circumstances they have fallen into are also very gender oriented. In the MENA region, the taboos of

116 *Ibid.*

117 Erasing 76 Crimes. (2019, March 14). 73 Countries Where Homosexuality Is Illegal. Erasing 76 crimes (website).

118 Family for Every Child. (2018). *Caring for Boys Affected by Sexual Violence*. Family for Every Child.

119 UNHCR. (2017, October). *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*. UNHCR

120 *Ibid.*

121 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2015, March 3). *Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*. Para. 27.

122 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October 25). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Third and Fourth Periodic Reports of Saudi Arabia*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

discussing sex and sexuality matters impacts boys and girls differently.¹²³ At very broad levels, boys are expected to be masculine and dominant while girls are expected to be submissive and take on the role of gatekeepers of their “purity/virginity”; ultimately creating power imbalances and dangerous outcomes for both sexes and various gender identities. These global inequalities as well as certain social and cultural constructs may either increase the risk or endorse the sexual exploitation of children; as they reinforce the notion that men should and can dominate women and girls sexually.¹²⁴

In the MENA, several negative attitudes towards women and children in the region also exist and male family members often undertake family and child welfare related decisions unilaterally and often without purposefully facilitating children’s participation. Patriarchal values also impact the socialization of girls and boys and ultimately impact how sexual violence manifests in girls versus boy children. For example, due to the cultural outlooks on the male child, boys are deemed to be at lesser risks to exploitation than girls and therefore the abuses they face may remain undetected;¹²⁵ as such, much more work is needed at the regional level to challenge this notion. The region also suffers from gender inequality. While

several strides have been made to promote the status of women in MENA, significant setbacks also exist; gender-based violence is widespread and female labour force participation in MENA is only 20.19% as of 2019.¹²⁶ Additionally, while the majority of countries in the region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,¹²⁷ a pervasive culture of silence around the sexual exploitation of girls is still very much evident. The social stigma and fear of retaliation by family and community attached to sexual violence outweighs the need to report and hold perpetrators accountable.¹²⁸

VICTIM BLAMING

Social norms in the region around ‘chastity’ and ‘virginity’ are two pressing issues that are highly relevant to the topic of SEC and can be highlighted from a gender discrimination lens. The loss of virginity can be perceived as dishonoring a family even in the cases of sexual abuse and/or exploitation, and girl victims pay a far different price to boys.¹²⁹ In such cases, ‘family honour’ outweighs girls’ rights and becomes the ‘issue’ instead of the abuse and exploitation. Penal codes in several countries, including Jordan and Iraq, consider the so-called ‘honourable motives’ as mitigating factors in cases

123 DeJong, J., Shepard, B., et al. (2007, April 19). *Young People’s Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Middle East and North Africa*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.

124 ECPAT International. (2016, March). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity: Understanding the Forces Driving the Demand for Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

125 ECPAT International. (2018, June 5). *Strategic Framework July 2018 – June 2021*. Bangkok: ECPAT International

126 ILOSTAT. (2019, September). *Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate)*. Geneva: ILO.

127 United Nations. (1979, December 18). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. New: United Nations, Treaty Series.

128 UNICEF. (2017, September). *Situation Analysis of Children in Jordan: Summary*. New York: UNICEF and ECPAT International and Defence for Children-ECPAT Netherlands. (2016, June). *Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children In Travel and Tourism: Regional Report*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

129 UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office and IRCW. (2017, November). *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: UNICEF.

of crimes against women and girls, including murder.^{130,131}

Given the social norms outlined above, girls who fall victim to sexual exploitation may not even be viewed as victims at all. In many cases, girls and women who are sexually abused are perceived by some as being responsible for the violence they suffered and thought to have been careless in protecting themselves.¹³² The cultural taboo associated with sexual exploitation of children in the region and the culture of shame that haunts victims of sexual exploitation further conceals the true scope of the problem and further halts the accessibility of victims to the limited services and intervention programmes. Female victims can be even coerced or pressured to marry their perpetrators (such as is the case in Iraqi law¹³³) or be punished for getting involved in a sexual relationship out of marriage in countries where *Shari'a* law is adopted and whipping and stoning are practices that could be possibly carried out in response to *Zinā*, or sex out of wedlock.¹³⁴ This has the double effect of punishing victims, and discouraging

others to come forward - a child victim who runs the risk of being charged with committing a sexual crime will seldom report the abuse or exploitation.¹³⁵

Victim blaming can also be partially attributed to power inequalities between males and females and also between adults and children.¹³⁶ These power discrepancies between adults and children that are influenced by gender, may further promote common attitudes that blame victims for sexual violence as well as further the incidence of abuse.¹³⁷ An additional dimension related to victim blaming exists due to what some reports call a 'devaluation' of children from a rights perspective; which leaves room for exploitative activities against children and results in abusers placing the blame on children due to their perceived inferiority within the social structure.¹³⁸ Abusers may often resort to certain claims that 'excuse' or justify exploitation by stating that they either pay for sexual acts or stating that these children aren't 'forced' into these exploitative activities¹³⁹ removing blame from abusers and placing it ultimately,

130 The Jordanian Penal Code n°16 of 1960, *Palestinian Women and Security- A Legal Collection* Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code stipulates: 1. A husband who surprises his wife or a close female relative in the act of adultery with another person, and kills, injures or harms either of them, or both, shall benefit from a mitigating excuse. 2. The perpetrator of a killing or an injury shall benefit from a mitigating excuse if he surprises a spouse, ascendant, descendent, or sibling with another person in an unlawful bed

131 Iraq Penal Code n°. 111 of 1969

Article 409 of the Iraqi Penal Code stipulates:- Any person who surprises his wife in the act of adultery or finds his girlfriend in bed with her lover and kills them immediately or one of them or assaults one of them so that he or she dies or is left permanently disabled is punishable by a period of detention not exceeding 3 years. It is not permissible to exercise the right of legal defense against any person who uses this excuse nor do the rules of aggravating circumstance apply against him

132 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October 30). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

133 Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 (Amended in March 2010). (1969). Article 398.

134 Oxford Islamic Studies Online. (2019). Zina.

135 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October 30). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

136 ECPAT International. (2016, March). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity: Understanding the Forces Driving the Demand for Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International

137 Save the Children. (2013). *Unspeakable Crimes against Children Sexual Violence in Conflict*. London: Save the Children.

138 ECPAT International. (2016, March). *Power, Impunity and Anonymity: Understanding the Forces Driving the Demand for Sexual Exploitation of Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

139 *Ibid*.

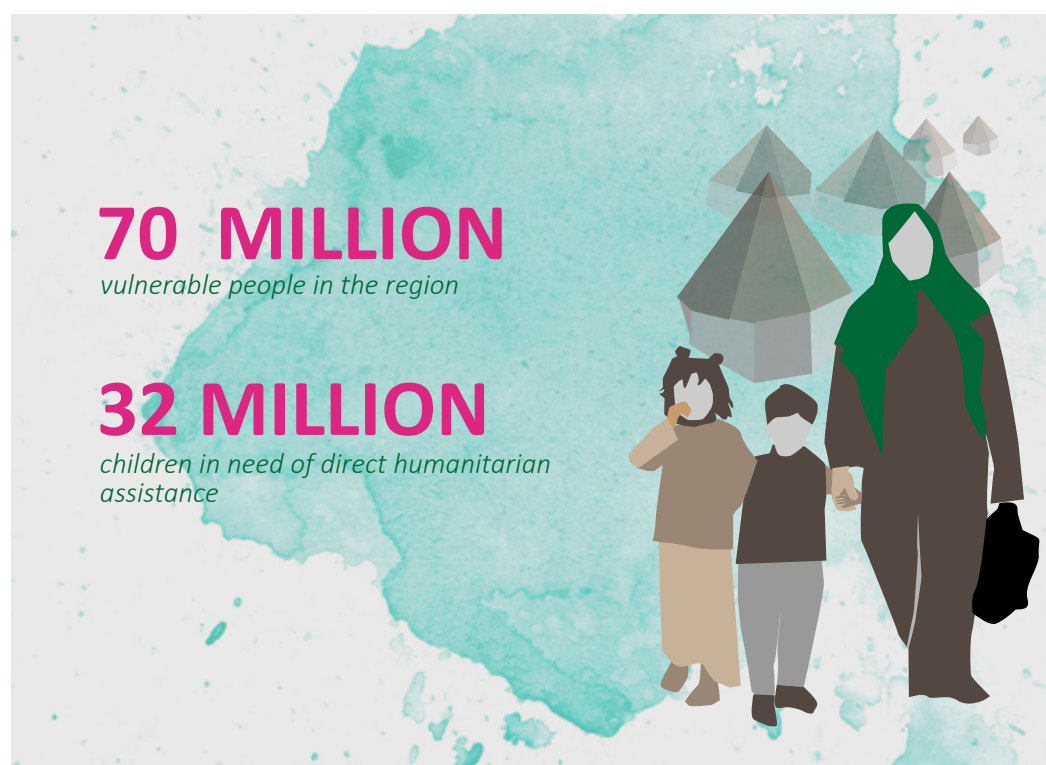
on children. Regardless of what may be argued, children can never consent to their own exploitation by adults.¹⁴⁰

HUMANITARIAN CRISES

As has been previously stated, the region is currently considered one of the most unstable regions in the world with ongoing conflicts and political tensions in six countries: Syria, State of Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Sudan, and political unrest in several others. One in every three children is living in countries affected by war in the region (almost 61 million children out of 166 million).¹⁴¹ Furthermore, and in line with the demographics of the region summarized previously, adolescents and youth in these contexts are the most exposed to protection risks such as child marriage,

recruitment by armed groups and the worst forms of child labour.¹⁴² Difficulty accessing basic services, increased poverty levels, and separation from family members in conflict affected areas makes it more likely that children will marry early, work before the legal age or in exploitative conditions, drop out of school or face violence at home, at school and the community.¹⁴³

Overall, the region's protection needs as a result of the humanitarian crises are paramount and in their wake, leave children prone to many risks and violations including sexual exploitation. In addition to the surmounting devastation that these countries have witnessed, the presence of terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) also contributes to additional complex challenges resulting



140 ECPAT International and ECPAT Luxembourg. (2016, January). *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

141 UNICEF. (2017). *Child Protection: Protecting Children from All Forms of Violence and Exploitation*. New York: UNICEF.

142 *Ibid.*

143 UNHCR. (2014). *Protection of Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNHCR.

in grave human and child rights infractions across the region.¹⁴⁴

UNICEF estimates that in 2019 there were more than 70 million vulnerable people in the region, including over 32 million children, requiring humanitarian assistance.¹⁴⁵ According to UNICEF's Middle East and North Africa appeal as of December 2019, the region "has the greatest concentration of humanitarian needs in the world".¹⁴⁶ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) has declared Level-3 Emergency situations in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, with Syria constituting the largest refugee population on a global level according to UNHCR.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has been announced by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs as "the worst in the world".¹⁴⁸

Since the war erupted in Syria in 2011, more than half of all Syrians have been forced to leave their homes. According to UNHCR, 5.6 million Syrians have fled the country to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt and 6.6 million have been displaced within the country.¹⁴⁹ The United Nations estimates that 11 million people require humanitarian assistance, including 4.7 million children.¹⁵⁰ In displacement, these children continue to face many child protection risks, including child labour, early marriage,

and sexual and gender-based violence. Refugee children, although they may find safety from conflict, often face distressing experiences, including violence, exploitation and family separation on the move and in temporary accommodation.¹⁵¹ According to a regional report by UNFPA on the Syria Crisis, child marriage rates among Syrians in 2017 were four times higher now than before the crisis,¹⁵² whereas UNICEF stated that child marriage in Syria's refugee hosting countries tripled in the last few years.¹⁵³ According to a 2016 UNICEF survey, in Lebanon alone, 40.5% of Syrian refugee women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18 years.¹⁵⁴

The ongoing conflict in Iraq has internally displaced 2.6 million people and forced 220,000 Iraqis to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Jordan and the Kurdistan region. According to UNICEF, in 2020, 4.1 million people, half of which were children, required humanitarian assistance.¹⁵⁵ As of 2016, nearly half of internally displaced children across Iraq Centre and KRI remain out of school.¹⁵⁶ The concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted that internally displaced girls are particularly exposed to domestic violence, forced, temporary marriages (*muta'a*) and early

144 UN Security Council. (2018, May 16). *Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Security Council.

145 UNICEF. (n.d.). *Humanitarian Action for Children 2019: Middle East and North Africa*. New York: UNICEF.

146 *Ibid.*

147 UNHCR. (n.d.). *Regional Summaries: Middle East and North Africa*. UNHCR

148 UN OCHA. (2018, January). *Humanitarian Response Plan*. New York: UN OCHA.

149 UNHCR (2018). *Syria Refugee Crisis*. UNHCR.

150 UNICEF. (2020). *Humanitarian Action for Children: Syrian Arab Republic*.

151 UNHCR. (2014). *Protection of Refugee Children in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNHCR

152 UNFPA. (2017, January). *Regional Situation Report for Syria Crisis*. New York: UNFPA

153 UNICEF. (2017). *Child Protection: Protecting Children from All Forms of Violence and Exploitation*. New York: UNICEF.

154 UNICEF Lebanon. (2016) *Child Protection Baseline Survey 2016 - key findings presentation and draft results paper*. Shared by Nina Kokol, GBV/HPM Specialist/Emergencies via personal communication, August 17, 2016 as cited in UNICEF and ICRW. (2017). *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa – Lebanon Country Brief*. New York: UNICEF

155 UNICEF. (2020). *Humanitarian Action for Children*.

156 UNICEF. (n.d.). *The cost and benefits of education in Iraq: an analysis of the education sector and strategies to maximize the benefits of education*.

marriage, and sexual exploitation.¹⁵⁷

The ongoing conflict in the State of Palestine has had devastating impacts as well, 2.4 million Palestinians requiring humanitarian assistance, including 1.06 million children.¹⁵⁸ According to UNICEF reports on the Gaza Strip, the socio-economic and humanitarian situation is impacting children resulting in “negative coping strategies such as child labour and early marriage.”¹⁵⁹ According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, as of the end of 2015, 23.7 per cent of the total married population in the Gaza Strip had married while they were children.¹⁶⁰

Yemen is one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes the world has seen, with more than 24 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including 12.24 million children.¹⁶¹ According to CARE, Yemeni women and girls are particularly exposed to an increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.¹⁶² The Country Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting in Yemen has reported that more than 6,700 children have been killed or maimed since the start of the conflict and more than 2,700 boys have been recruited into armed forces and groups, while 2 million Yemeni children are out of school.¹⁶³

In North Africa, Libya is facing devastating consequences and a complete breakdown of state protection and rule of law systems, bearing grave social and economic consequences on the Libyan people.¹⁶⁴ According to UNHCR, as of March 2020, 355,672 Libyan people are internally displaced.¹⁶⁵ Libya presents another challenge as it also hosts, as of March 2020, 48,079 refugees and asylum seekers, from Syria, Sudan, Eritrea, Palestine, Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen.¹⁶⁶

These urgent situations in conflict affected countries and humanitarian settings thus create opportunity and space for extremely grave and dangerous situations for vulnerable children.¹⁶⁷ Humanitarian crises compromise children’s protection and shatters available support networks and structures. The greater chances of forced migration, family separation, reduced adult supervision and poverty during conflict often increase the chances of children being exposed to violence and exploitation.¹⁶⁸ Lastly, sexual violence and exploitation may also be used as a tactic of war, which has its own tragic outcomes on children’s safety and wellbeing.¹⁶⁹

It is regularly noted just how challenging it is to document data on sexual

157 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 3). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

158 UNICEF. (2020). *Humanitarian Action for Children: The State of Palestine*

159 UNICEF. (2-10, January 29). *Humanitarian Action for Children 2019-2020: State of Palestine*. New York: ReliefWeb

160 As cited in UNRWA. (2017, July 20). *Girls Not Brides: Ending Child Marriage in Gaza*. New York: UNRWA.

161 UNICEF. (2020). *Humanitarian Action for Children: Yemen*.

162 Care. (n.d.). *Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen*. Geneva: Care.

163 UNICEF. (2018, March 27). *If Not In School: The paths children cross in Yemen [EN/AR]*. New York: ReliefWeb

164 UN OCHA. (n.d.). *About OCHA Libya*. New York: UN OCHA.

165 UNHCR. (2020, February). *UNHCR Update: Libya*.

166 *Ibid.*

167 UNICEF. (2018, January). *Humanitarian Action for Children 2018: Overview*. New York: UNICEF

168 *Ibid.*

169 United Nations. (2017, May 15). *Shame, Stigma Integral to Logic of Sexual Violence as War Tactic, Special Adviser Tells Security Council, as Speakers Demand Recognition for Survivors*. New York: United Nations

violence in such humanitarian crises. Nevertheless, limited data does exist which sheds light on the harrowing realities of children exposed to sexual violence within the humanitarian settings in the MENA. In Syria, a total of 98 verified reports were made between November 2013 and June 2018 of which 95 involved girls as young as eight years of age as well as three boys, ages ranging between 12-16 years of age.¹⁷⁰ These violations against 98 children included rape, forced marriage to armed fighters, sexual trafficking/enslavement and assault and were attributed among others to ISIL, government forces and *Nusra Front-led Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*.¹⁷¹ Both boys and girls were subjected to different forms of sexual violence in Syria by pro-government forces. Some of these survivors were returned to their communities to then be stigmatized as “victims of rape” in an effort to encourage rejection by their families.¹⁷² In this instance, sexual violence was used intentionally to bring shame to families and perhaps as a measure to force people from their homes.

In June 2019, the UN Security Council published a report on children in armed conflict, which highlighted violations, including figures on verified cases of sexual violence, against children from January-December 2018.

In Iraq, there were no verified cases of sexual violence against children, which the report attributed to stigma and fear of retribution.¹⁷³ Likewise, in Libya, there were also no verified cases of sexual violence, however the report does suggest that “refugee and migrant children were reportedly subjected to sexual abuse, including forced prostitution and sexual exploitation, in conditions that could amount to sexual slavery”.¹⁷⁴

In Sudan, there were 68 verified cases of girls being subject to sexual violence, representing an increase of 55% compared to 2017.¹⁷⁵ Verified cases were also present in Syria, where 38 cases which involved forced marriage, rape, trafficking and sexual violence¹⁷⁶ were highlighted, however it is worth noting that 30 of these cases occurred outside of the reporting period.¹⁷⁷

Finally, the report also highlights how in Yemen, there were 9 verified cases perpetrated against children between the ages of 9-17.¹⁷⁸

170 UN Security Council. (2018, October 30). *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Security Council.

171 *Ibid.*

172 *Ibid.*

173 United Nations Security Council. (2019, June). *Children and Armed Conflict*. 13

174 *Ibid.* 17

175 *Ibid.* 25

176 *Ibid.* 27

177 *Ibid.* 27

178 *Ibid.* 30

EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN PROSTITUTION

Upon searching for data, statistics and reports on the prevalence of exploitation of children in prostitution in the MENA region, it becomes evident that while data and reports on the magnitude of the problem are scarce, reference to the issue and its occurrence in many countries across the region has been documented. Reports on prostitution in the MENA refer to the engagement of young girls, yet the scope of the problem and the percentage of children (including of boys) involved compared to adults is rarely researched and documented. However, evidence about the significance and gravity of multiple risk factors and root causes across the region is sufficient to drive attention to the issue.

The legal status of prostitution and whether certain acts (i.e. providing or buying services) are criminalized, decriminalized or legalized, it means that the dynamics regarding who is committing a crime or an offence change. This can therefore affect how children who are engaged in this trade are protected or at risk. Taboo nature of prostitution within the region and the stigma associated with anyone

involved in prostitution contribute to the underreporting of cases of sexual exploitation of children in prostitution as well as to its 'under-cover' nature. Fear of reporting further contributes to the clandestine nature of the problem, whereby victims of sexual abuse and exploitation are at risk of being charged for having committed a sexual crime and even sentenced to punishment in several countries in the region including UAE¹⁷⁹ and Iraq.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, girls sold into prostitution could even be deprived of their liberty to protect them from reprisal for bringing shame on their families and communities, such as is the case in Iraq.¹⁸¹ Even when they are released, victims find it difficult to find assistance and support and can therefore become vulnerable to being re-trafficked and exploited.¹⁸²

Conflict creates demand for prostitution, including the exploitation of children through prostitution. The 2019 US State Department Report on Trafficking in Persons refers to prostitution rings in Libya forcing women and girls from Sub Saharan Africa and Nigeria into brothels in Libya.¹⁸³ In Yemen, Yemeni girls have been found to be sexually exploited in the hotels and clubs of the governorates of Sana'a, Aden and Taiz.¹⁸⁴

179 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October 30). *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates*. 8.

180 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 5). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Report Submitted By Iraq under Article 12, Paragraph 1, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

181 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 5). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Report Submitted By Iraq under Article 12, Paragraph 1, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

182 *Ibid.*

183 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report: Libya*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

184 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report: Yemen*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

In its concluding observations to Iraq, the Committee on the Rights of the Child raised concerns that the State is not strongly addressing the root causes that are leading to trafficking and exploitation of children, including in prostitution.¹⁸⁵ The committee highlighted concerns with cases such as reports of children being trafficked from Iraqi orphanages by employees for the purpose of forced prostitution.¹⁸⁶ A report on the Survival of Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon, “Running out of Time”, referred to the dire needs, poverty and social isolation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, leading to the engagement of Syrian women and girls in sex rings in the Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and the outskirts of Beirut.¹⁸⁷

Impunity from a breakdown in the rule of law and States’ law enforcement structures contributes to the increase of such incidents, particularly during times of conflict. A graver situation presents when corruption is present and law enforcement personnel become involved themselves in soliciting illicit activities including sexual exploitation. For example, accounts of police guards in Kurdistan (called Asayish guards) allowing men into the refugee camps to solicit sex with refugee girls in exchange for permissions to leave the camp have been reported.¹⁸⁸ Anecdotal reports of Syrian refugee women and girls engaging in survival sex was reported in a study on Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, in addition

to sex with aid workers in exchange for food vouchers or humanitarian services.¹⁸⁹

In its report “Trafficking and Forced Prostitution of Palestinian Women and Girls: Forms of Modern Slavery”,¹⁹⁰ SAWA looks into trafficking and forced prostitution in Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza. The report notes that although it is not sophisticated and organized, trafficking and prostitution are evident. Women and girls involved become trapped with no means to escape. Accounts of women forced into prostitution are recounted in the report shedding light on the stigma and rejection that haunts victims, and although the recounts are for adult women, a few have noted that they became involved when they were under the age of 18 years.¹⁹¹

Furthermore, with deteriorating economies in the region and an increase in the number of children ‘on the street’ in several countries, there is an increased risk for these children to be drawn into prostitution and sexual exploitation. For instance, the economic situation in Egypt, which deteriorated after the Arab Spring, increased the number of children living and working on the street, who are susceptible to myriad risk factors including sexual exploitation and prostitution.¹⁹² Illicit activities including prostitution have also been documented

185 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March 5). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Report Submitted By Iraq under Article 12, Paragraph 1, of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

186 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

187 FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University. (2014, January). *Running Out of Time: Survival of Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon*. Massachusetts: Harvard School of Public Health.

188 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report: Iraq*. U.S. Department of State Publication; Amnesty International. (2018). *The condemned. Women and children isolated, trapped and exploited in Iraq*.29; Vigaud-Walsh, F. (October, 2017). *Guilt by Association: Iraqi Women Detained and Subject to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. 2.

189 FXB Center for Health and Human Rights (2014, January) *Running out of Time: Survival of Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon*, Boston: FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University

190 SAWA. (2008, June). *Trafficking and Forced Prostitution of Palestinian Women and Girls: Forms of Modern Slavery, a Briefing Paper*. Jerusalem: SAWA.

191 *Ibid*.

192 Essays, UK. (2018, November). *Street Children in Egypt*.

among Lebanese and Syrian refugee adolescent girls on the streets (15-17 years of age) in Lebanon according to an ILO study on Street Children in Lebanon.¹⁹³

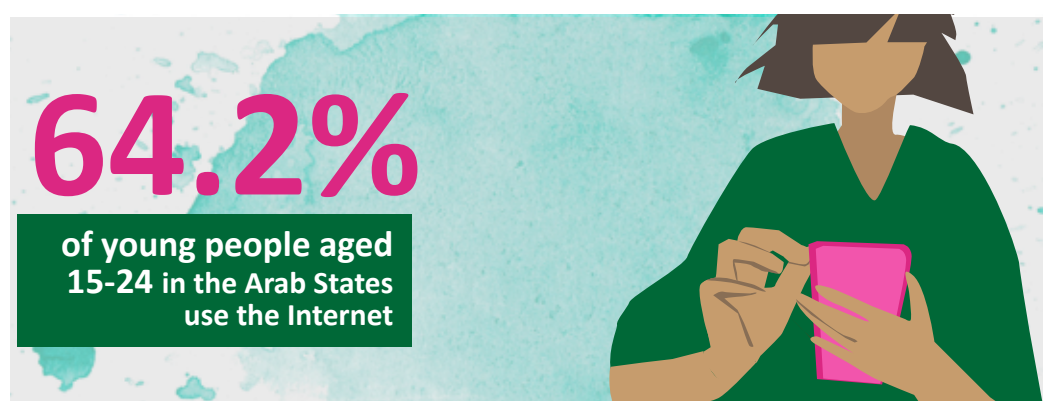
Despite active attempts to find information on boys for this review, boys are not described in any formal data related to sexual exploitation of children in prostitution.

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

As stated in UNICEF's 2019 State of the World's Children Report, one in three global Internet users is a child.¹⁹⁴ While technology offers significant benefits to children and adolescents' overall development, the online world can also present a range of risks to children. According to 2019 ITU statistics, there were 221 million Internet users in the Arab States,¹⁹⁵ and 288 million active mobile broadband subscriptions.¹⁹⁶ While no specific statistics are available on the number of child Internet users in the region, ITU data from 2017 reveals that the proportion of young people aged 15-24 using the Internet is 64.2% (in Arab States).¹⁹⁷

Online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) statistics in MENA are not available and general understanding of the scope and urgency of the situation is problematic. While now a few years old, a 2011 UNICEF report on child safety online noted that Africa and the Middle East lagged in monitoring and coordination mechanisms for children's online protection.¹⁹⁸ This appears to still be the case. Without the knowledge of trends, statistics and overall nature of OCSE in the region, efforts to design and implement programmes that target these offences cannot be tailored to the context.

Research indicates that a variety of factors challenge progress in preventing and responding to OCSE in the MENA region; these include the novelty which online technologies present, cultural sensitivities around discussions of sex, lack of knowledge regarding children's online activities, and the prevalence of crimes committed online.¹⁹⁹ Another critical factor is the way data about OCSE crimes are often categorized and stored by law enforcement, as online crimes are not necessarily disaggregated from offline offences.²⁰⁰



193 ILO. (2015, February). *Children Living and Working on the Streets in Lebanon: Profile and Magnitude*.

194 UNICEF. (2019). *State of the World's Children*. 144.

195 ITU. (2019). *ICT data for the world, by geographic regions and by level of development*.

196 *Ibid.*

197 ITU. (2017). *ICT Facts and Figures 2017*. Geneva: ITU

198 UNICEF. (2011, December). *Child Safety Online: Global Challenges and Strategies*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

199 Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. (2016, August). *Child Online Protection in the MENA Region*.

200 *Ibid.*

While consistent reliable data on OCSE crimes are not forthcoming, news reports do anecdotally indicate the scope of the problem is wide. For example, media reported that in 2017, Abu Dhabi police investigated 774 cybercrime cases (number of child victims was not reported)²⁰¹ while news reports in Saudi Arabia in 2016 claimed that over 2,000 OCSE-related notices were received by the Public Security over the preceding three years in the country.²⁰²

In a report released by Child Helpline International and UNICEF in 2016, child helplines in the region reported that cyber-bullying, online sexual harassment, trolling, grooming and sexual extortion are main concerns for children.²⁰³ Additionally, helplines are reporting that children have greater access to the Internet through cybercafés. This is a significant child protection concern as these children are accessing the Internet without parental knowledge or supervision.



A greater pressing concern identified in the report sheds light on the lack of national institutional structures which hinder both reporting and prosecution efforts of OCSE; and in these instances, helplines do not have much choice other than to report these abuses to police units, which often lack the time and resources to review these allegations.²⁰⁴ Positive steps have been made with Jordan a positive example. A specialized cybercrime unit was established in 2016 within the Family Protection Department, as the Public Security Department (the police force), identified that children were increasingly becoming victims of cybercrime in Jordan. The unit received specialized training and conducts awareness-raising sessions in schools on the risks of online exploitation. While little data on their work is public, it was reported that the unit dealt with 21 cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in 2017.²⁰⁵

At the regional level, inter-country coordination mechanisms that can prosecute the often trans-national crimes of OCSE are essential.²⁰⁶ However, terminology on child sexual abuse and exploitation can differ in legislation and amongst services as many terms do not readily translate to the cultural context. Projects such as translating and contextualizing the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse²⁰⁷ have helped in certain parts of the world but has not yet happened for Arabic. Other important findings related to the region were weak partnerships

201 The National. (2018, January 22). *Almost 800 Cybercrime Cases Handled by Abu Dhabi Police Last Year*. The National.

202 Habor, H. (2016, November 10). *Saudi Arabia: More than 2,000 Notices for 'Sexual Exploitation of Children Online' in 3 Years*. Asharq Al-Awsat.

203 Child Helpline International. (2016). *A New Reality: Child Helplines Report on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse from Around the World*. Child Helpline International.

204 *Ibid*.

205 UNICEF. (2017). *State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a digital world*; Ibáñez Prieto, Ana. (2017, December). *Children not protected enough from dangers of digital world*. The Jordan Times.

206 Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. (2016, August). *Child Online Protection in the MENA Region*.

207 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation*.

with law enforcement entities and the technology industry.²⁰⁸

When looking at a few examples of specific issues at the country level, a clear need for consistent, official data collection for OCSE is clear. Algeria for example, enacted a cybercrime law in 2009, which affords the government monitoring powers of websites suspected of illegal activity.²⁰⁹ Children contact child helplines in regards to exposure to child sexual exploitation material, cyber bullying, online grooming and trolling and online sexual harassment, yet no formal national statistics were provided in the publication on any of these issues.²¹⁰

In 2016 in Jordan, the national child helpline reported receiving calls about OCSE yet the helpline had not yet received advanced training on this topic, nor had it developed specialized protocols for documenting and responding to OCSE cases.²¹¹ Jordan has been enacting laws on cyber-crime through the Law on Information Systems and Cybercrime and on cyber-security, through the Electronic Transaction Act yet it does not have any current legislation on online protection of children.²¹²

The previously mentioned Centre for Crime Prevention research provided some interesting insights into region-specific perceptions of children and their online interactions through a series of interviews and discussions. Most

stakeholders considered children as “passive” rather than “active” agents in the discussions around OCSE.²¹³ This becomes a critical viewpoint in light of recommended online protection strategies for children that focus on “digital citizenship” and “positive and proactive use of ICTs.”²¹⁴ Additionally, there seems to be a lack of understanding in regards to the different forms of OCSE, as the report states responses of stakeholders interviewed usually focuses on extreme cases of abuse and overlooks grooming and cyber bullying for example.²¹⁵

These regional intricacies are important to address and have significant implications on how different forms of OCSE are handled in the future at both national and regional levels. Moreover, these findings coupled with a complete lack of data on the status of online SEC in the region act as major impediments to prevention and intervention efforts. Finally, the lack of appropriate and timely legislation efforts, which reflect the fast changing pace of technology on both national and regional levels is worrying and derails response mechanisms within individual states, which should inform investigative and prosecution procedures.

TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN FOR SEXUAL PURPOSES

Trafficking in persons is an ongoing and urgent concern for the region.

208 Child Helpline International. (2016). *A New Reality: Child Helplines Report on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse from Around the World*. Child Helpline International

209 Specific Legislation on Child Online Protection is enacted through Articles 303, 324 -344 and 347 of the Criminal Code, the Law to Prevent and Combat ICT Crime (Article 12) as well as Loi no 15-12 du 28 Ramadhan 1436 correspondant au 15 juillet 2015 relative à la protection de l'enfant (Law on Child Protection July 2015) as cited in Child Helpline International. (2016). *A New Reality: Child Helplines Report on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse from Around the World*. Child Helpline International.

210 Child Helpline International. (2016). *A New Reality: Child Helplines Report on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse from Around the World*. Child Helpline International.

211 *Ibid.*

212 *Ibid.*; WIPO. (n.d.) *Electronic Transactions Law*. (2011).

213 Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. (2016, August). *Child Online Protection in the MENA Region*.

214 *Ibid.*

215 *Ibid.*

According to the US Department of State's 2019 Report on Trafficking in Persons²¹⁶ Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan were placed in Tier 2 Watch-list, Kuwait in Tier 2, whereas Saudi Arabia, and Syria were placed in Tier 3. Libya and Yemen were classified as special cases beyond the three tiers, because of the difficulties in finding information due to conflict and humanitarian crises.²¹⁷ Additionally, Yemen is one of the few countries that are not state parties to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Crime.²¹⁸

National and regional statistics on trafficking of children in the MENA region are scarce, an indication of itself that the issue is not receiving enough attention. As with other forms of exploitation, children also refrain from reporting incidents of trafficking due to their fear of traffickers, the stigma behind the abuse as well as due to mistrust towards authority personnel.²¹⁹

The region presents multiple and complex trafficking routes; whereby trafficking occurs both internally and across borders. According to the UNODC trans-regional trafficking taking place in the Middle East specifically "registers the highest share of inbound trafficking from other regions."²²⁰ These compound trafficking channels present

a myriad of challenges to the region, as tracking these children and their abusers is significantly challenging. Yet, understanding these various and complex routes is essential for combatting the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.

Yemen has been identified as a key source country, namely to Saudi Arabia²²¹ and the report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to Yemen in 2014 expressed concerns over the trafficking of girls for sexual purposes under the guise of marriage.²²² Even prior to the current conflict, Yemen was a transit point and a destination for women and children from the Horn of Africa who were subjected to sex trafficking and forced labour.²²³ Morocco is categorized as source, destination, and transit country for victims subjected to sex trafficking.²²⁴ Moroccan children have been documented as trafficked for sexual purposes to Europe and the Middle East while foreigners also have been identified engaging in sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism within Morocco's borders.²²⁵ In Iraq, evidence of Iraqi children being sold into neighboring countries and to Europe for sexual exploitation has been recorded.²²⁶ Additional trends on trafficking of children for sexual purposes within the region also exist. Exploitation in domestic labour is frequently reported and children involved in national domestic work also experience sexual

216 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

217 *Ibid.*

218 *Ibid.*; United Nations Treaty Collection. (n.d.). *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime*.

219 Tidey, C. (2018, July). *Children Account for Nearly One-Third Of Identified Trafficking Victims Globally*. UNICEF.

220 UNODC. (2014). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*. United Nations Publication. page 41

221 UNODC (2016). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016*. United Nations Publication.

222 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2014, January). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Yemen*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

223 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

224 *Ibid.*

225 *Ibid.*

226 *Ibid.*

exploitation.²²⁷ According to the UNODC's country profile of Tunisia, girl children are particularly vulnerable to domestic servitude and sexual exploitation and the Tunisian Ministry of Interior reported that 443 victims of sexual exploitation were girls, and 66 Tunisian girls were victims of sexual exploitation abroad.²²⁸ Separately, in Morocco, 400 child victims of trafficking were reported between 2012 and 2015 of which the majority were identified as trafficked for sexual exploitation (however no specific breakdown of those trafficked for sexual purposes was provided).²²⁹

Trafficking and Armed Conflict

Trafficking of children is further amplified during times of conflict such as civil unrest, armed conflict, terrorism and urban violence. As aforementioned, the region's political instability means children become particularly vulnerable to being trafficked into sexual exploitation when they are on the move.²³⁰ Additionally, within conflict zones the demand for sexual exploitation can amplify, particularly in the absence of rule of law.²³¹ Conflict zones decrease the protection awarded by national structures and often times lead to gender imbalances as well as migration.²³²

Migrant, refugee and displaced children can become particularly vulnerable to trafficking, especially as during conflict many children experience separation from their families or pursue livelihood opportunities that can place them in

vulnerable situations.²³³ Identifying official statistics on children trafficked for sexual purposes and responses to allegations of SEC in conflict zones and humanitarian settings in MENA once again proved to be extremely challenging for this review. However, several findings on the incidence of trafficking in conflict zones were important to capture and are presented here.

UNODC research revealed that some families residing in both camp settings and urban contexts in MENA as a result of conflict had traded their daughters for marriage for financial gains which resulted in some girls and women being coerced into sexual exploitation.²³⁴ The same report states that as a result of displacement, less scrutiny to job offers had also led to the sexual exploitation of young women and girls, as well as men and boys by traffickers.²³⁵ The concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq, stated that displacement and sectarian violence in the country had profound impacts on the levels of child trafficking for sexual exploitation, though no statistics were provided.²³⁶

The situation of child trafficking in Syria is critical. Data is limited, yet grave instances are still documented. Yazidi girls captured by ISIL in Iraq have been trafficked into Syria, where they were openly sold and used as sex slaves.²³⁷ Syrian refugees are also identified as highly vulnerable to experiencing trafficking in multiple neighboring countries; particularly

227 UNODC. (2014). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*. United Nations Publication.

228 UNODC. (2016). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2016*. United Nations Publication.

229 Ibid.

230 UNICEF. (2017). *Harrowing Journeys. Children and youth on the move across the Mediterranean Sea, at risk of trafficking and exploitation*. New York: UNICEF.

231 UNODC. (2014). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*. United Nations Publication.

232 Ibid.

233 Tidey, C. (2018, July). *Children Account for Nearly One-Third Of Identified Trafficking Victims Globally*. UNICEF.

234 UNODC. (2018). *Trafficking in Persons In the Context of Armed Conflict*. United Nations Publication.

235 Ibid.

236 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

237 UN Security Council. (2018, October 30). *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Security Council.

Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey.²³⁸ The 2019 US State Department report on Trafficking in Persons states that Syrian refugees residing in Egypt are forced into child labour, sex trafficking and transactional marriages.²³⁹ In Lebanon, where 1.3 million Syrian refugees reside, Syrian men, women and children are at high risk of sex trafficking and forced labour.²⁴⁰

Reports on Yemen indicate that, as a result of conflict and economic hardships, an increase in sexual exploitation of children has been noted; according to the United States Department of Labour, girls are trafficked within Yemen for the purposes of sexual exploitation²⁴¹ as accounts have been made of the trafficking of children as young as 15 years exploited for sex at hotels and clubs in two governorates of Yemen.²⁴² Other children, mostly boys have also been trafficked within Yemen as well as to Saudi Arabia where they engage in forced labour for work in small shops and begging.²⁴³ On the streets, these children are also exposed to very high risks of sexual violence and abuse and are highly vulnerable to SEC.²⁴⁴

Children Involved in Armed Conflicts

According to the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children

and Armed Conflict “the recruitment and use of children associated with armed groups nearly always constitutes trafficking in persons.”²⁴⁵ The reasons behind recruitment of children in armed conflicts vary, from those taken by force, to other children who join as a result of social and economic pressures; and displaced children as well as those living in poverty are most vulnerable to recruitment.²⁴⁶ Being involved in armed conflicts has different impacts on boys and girls. Girls are generally used in ‘support’ roles and often go unseen compared to boys who usually take on more combative roles.²⁴⁷ Accordingly and within these conflict zones, children are exposed to high rates of rape and sexual slavery.²⁴⁸

The statistics of verified cases of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in the MENA region vary significantly. However, in 2019, the UN Security Council published data on verified cases of children used and recruited in conflict affected areas, including countries experiencing conflict in the MENA region. Figures vary by country, from 806 verified cases of children being used and recruited in Syria,²⁴⁹ to 39 verified cases in the conflict in Iraq.²⁵⁰ These official verified cases are likely only a fraction of the real

238 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Syria* U.S. Department of State Publication.

239 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Egypt* U.S. Department of State Publication.

240 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Lebanon* U.S. Department of State Publication.

241 United States Department of Labour (2017). *2017 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labour: Yemen*. Washington: United States Department of Labour.

242 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2014, January). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Yemen*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

243 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Yemen*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

244 ECPAT International (October, 2013). *Unseen Vulnerabilities: The links between child labour and sexual exploitation*. Bangkok: ECPAT International

245 United Nations Human Rights Council. (2018, January). *Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, A/HRC/37/47*, paras 15-16.

246 UNICEF. (2018, September 27). *Children Under Attack: Six Grave Violations Against Children in Times of War*. UNICEF.

247 Child Soldiers (2019, February 11). *Child soldier levels doubled since 2012 and girls’ exploitation is rising*. London: Child Soldiers.

248 Child Soldiers (n.d). *Child soldier myths*. 5.

249 United Nations Security Council. (2019, June). *Children and Armed Conflict*. 27.

250 *Ibid.*, 13

extent of the problem, an issue that is alluded to in the Security Council report, which highlighted that in Libya, despite receiving reports of the increased recruitment and use of children, information could not be verified owing to security and access restrictions.²⁵¹

While little data on sexual exploitation of child soldiers exists, several findings serve as examples of a likely widespread problem. Verified 2013 reports stated that 21 children were recruited by *Ansar Al Sharia* group in Yemen of which three boys were recruited for sexual exploitation purposes.²⁵² These boys were reportedly repeatedly exploited following the stigmatization they experienced within their communities. In Iraq, a report from the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict identified that girls in Iraq were forced into sexual slavery.²⁵³ Additionally, according to reports in 2015 from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ISIL had been committing periodic sexual and gender-based violence against Yazidi women and girls including rape and sexual slavery.²⁵⁴ Reports on the children recruited by ISIL in Syria are chilling; with verified accounts of 95 girls aged as young as eight years and 3 boys aged between 12-16 years being subjected to rape, gang rape, forced marriage to fighters,

trafficking, sexual enslavement and sexual assault.²⁵⁵

The recruitment of children by armed groups has been included in the UN's Security Council as one of "six grave violations against children."²⁵⁶ Children recruited or forced into combat are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.²⁵⁷ In this instance, trafficking for sexual purposes can take on many forms in conflict-affected contexts; such as forced marriage, forced combatant, sexual exploitation and sexual slavery; ultimately, leaving children highly vulnerable to grave abuses.²⁵⁸

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT) is on the rise globally,²⁵⁹ yet information for the MENA region is particularly scarce,²⁶⁰ similar to other forms of sexual exploitation of children discussed in this overview. Available data on the scope and prevalence of sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism in the MENA is very limited, as well as an in-depth understanding of trends, victims, and perpetrators. Yet again, poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization as

251 *Ibid.*, 17.

252 UN Security Council. (2013, June 28). *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Yemen*. UN Security Council

253 UN Security Council. (2015, November 9). *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Iraq*. UN Security Council.

254 The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2015 March 13). *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups*. Geneva: The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

255 UN Security Council. (2018, October 30). *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Security Council.

256 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (2013). *The Six Grave Violations Against Children During Armed Conflict: The Legal Foundation*. New York: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict.

257 UNICEF. (2018, September 27). *Children under attack: Six grave violations against children in times of war*.

258 Child Soldiers. (n.d.). *Children pay the heaviest price in conflict*.

259 ECPAT International and Defence for Children-ECPAT Netherlands. (2016, May). *Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

260 UNICEF. (2016). *Government, Civil Society and Private Sector Responses to the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism: A Technical Background Document to the Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*. New York: UNICEF.

well as online accessibility and a lenient legal framework are all risk factors to the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. The region is lagging behind significantly in adoption of national and regional action plans to address SECTT.

Furthermore, extra-territorial legislation for prosecuting offenders of sexual exploitation of children is largely absent in the region. This form of jurisdiction is an extremely :

“important step in protecting children from sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism, since it allows for prosecution of offenders under national laws in the home country.”²⁶¹

In a region that highly depends on tourism as a key source of national income, it is important not to underestimate the profit made from sexual exploitation of children for tourism. Worldwide, it is estimated that child sexual exploitation in travel and tourism could be worth 20 billion USD annually.²⁶² In its 2019 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness report on the MENA region, the World Economic Forum reported that the region had significantly improved its travel and tourism competitiveness since 2017.²⁶³ According to the report, international arrivals in the region reached more than 84.5 million,²⁶⁴ which shows an increase from 72 million in 2015 (approximately 16% increase).²⁶⁵ Of arrivals to the region, 66% arrived in the Middle East compared to 34% arriving in North Africa.²⁶⁶ Increased competitiveness has been associated

with “safety and security, international openness, environmental sustainability and air transport infrastructure pillars.”²⁶⁷ However, these factors that increase tourism competitiveness can also be viewed as risk factors to the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism unless regulated and monitored. According to UNICEF, an unregulated tourism sector, combined with unemployment, gender inequality, prevailing social norms around masculinity and sexuality and weak law enforcement and protection systems contribute to the vulnerability of children and adolescents to various forms of sexual exploitation, including sexual exploitation in travel and tourism.²⁶⁸

Arranged ‘temporary marriages’ to foreigners are a dangerous phenomenon in the MENA and one that can be classified under SECTT. Marriages taking place in Egypt, in which wealthy men mainly from the Gulf engage in so-called *misyar* or ‘summer marriages’ that would only last for the duration of their vacation. Girls are abandoned afterwards and if the marriage involved a pregnancy, usually men abandon their responsibilities towards children born out of such marriages. The US Department of State 2019 report on Trafficking in Persons similarly notes this phenomenon in Yemen referenced accounts of temporary marriages authorized by Islamic authorities and mostly committed by Saudi men sexually exploiting Yemeni girls as young as ten years old.²⁶⁹

Several news agencies have also covered the phenomenon of marriage brokers

261 *Ibid.*

262 United Nations, Human Rights office of the High Commissioner (April 10, 2013), *Combating Child Sex Tourism*.

263 World Economic Forum. (2019). *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019: MENA*. 42.

264 *Ibid.*, 42

265 World Economic Forum. (2017). *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report: Middle East and North Africa results*.

266 World Economic Forum. (2019). *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019: MENA*. 42.

267 *Ibid.*, 42

268 UNICEF. (2016). *Government, Civil Society and Private Sector Responses to the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism: A Technical Background Document to the Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*. New York: UNICEF.

269 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Yemen*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

and marriage agencies in Egypt. In its report “Underage Girls are Egypt’s Summer Rentals”,²⁷⁰ the Inter Press Service covered the gravity of wealthy men from the Gulf approaching marriage brokers for a summer with underage girls from poor communities in Egypt. Men pay money for brokers and families to marry young girls for a short period of time during their holiday, and then return them again to their families to be married off again. The report notes, “Some girls have been married 60 times by the time they turn 18. Most ‘marriages’ last for just a couple of days or weeks.” The report further documents that these marriages can be arranged for as little as 800 Egyptian pounds (approximately 50 USD as of March 2020) split between the broker and the girl’s parents.²⁷¹

In July 2018, Aljazeera Network published a report about sex tourism in the Arab world.²⁷² The report sheds light on sex tourism in UAE (specifically Dubai), Morocco, Lebanon and Egypt, referring to the fact that children are also involved as well as adults. The situation of child sexual exploitation in travel and tourism in Morocco has also raised alarms particularly in light of the country’s reputation for sex tourism. As revealed by several media reports in 2013, the country witnessed a national outcry when then 64-year-old Daniel Galvan, a Spanish

citizen received a royal pardon after he was sentenced to 30 years in prison for raping 11 Moroccan children aged between 4-15 years. He was later rearrested in Spain.²⁷³

A video report released by France 24 in 2011 reveals just how intertwined sexual exploitation of children is with travel

and tourism in Morocco. The report revealed that Morocco has been painted as a pedophile “heaven” for Europeans allowing easy access to disadvantaged children, with the approximate price of spending the night with a child costing tourists a mere 30 Euro for the night. According to the report, the practice of tourists picking up children for sex has become normalised²⁷⁴ and some of the youth interviewed noted this survival sex was the only means of financial income available to poverty stricken families.

A 2013 Italian TV investigation²⁷⁵ highlighted the gravity of child sexual exploitation in travel and tourism in Morocco. Marrakech was specifically highlighted as a city in which children were easily available for tourists who travel specifically to the city for sexual exploitation purposes. The director of Defence for Children in Morocco noted in the investigation that many variables exist in Morocco that allow for such a violation to happen:

“The wealth gap between the rich and the poor in the country, the booming of the tourism industry, and the weak legal and law enforcement structures in implementing and protecting children’s rights, lead to tourists who travel to Morocco specifically looking for sex with children.”

Pimps are widespread soliciting girls, even within schools, for having sex with tourists in the evening. The girls in the report are as young as 12 years old. The director of Defence for Children

in Morocco highlighted the gravity of pimps having access to children in safe places, such as schools, for exploitation in tourism. He also noted that:

270 Inter Press Service. (2013, August 5). *Underage Girls are Egypt’s Summer Rentals*. Inter Press Service.

271 *Ibid.*

272 Midan Aljazeera. (2018, July 10). *Sex Tourism*. Midan Aljazeera.

273 The Guardian. (2013, August 5). *Freed pedophile rearrested in Spain after Morocco pardon fiasco*. The Guardian.

274 France 24 English. (2011, June 24). *Reporters - Morocco: the hellish world of sex tourism*.

275 As cited in Midan Aljazeera. (2018, July 10). *Sex Tourism*. Midan Aljazeera.

“despite relatively strong legislative frameworks, corruption could undermine progress by buying silence from some law enforcement.”²⁷⁶

CHILD EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

Child marriage is a direct violation of children’s rights, and a systematic yet unrecognized route to sexual abuse and exploitation,²⁷⁷ with girls being disproportionately affected.²⁷⁸ Child marriage challenges sustainable development; paired with social, economic and political instability in conflict zones, the outcomes of early marriages on girl children in particular are very concerning. As noted by the UN Human Rights Council, child, early and forced marriages impedes girls’ autonomy, status, health and wellbeing as well as obstructs their empowerment and participation.²⁷⁹ Yet, beyond the implications of child marriage on girls’ wellbeing and development, ECPAT notes that child marriage could be a channel or a form to sexual abuse and exploitation, when it takes place in exchange of financial or in-kind gains by the child or a third party.²⁸⁰ Whilst child marriage as a potential channel to other forms of exploitation is widely recognized, child marriage as a form of sexual exploitation is not.²⁸¹

Child marriage is a product of multiple cultural, social, and religious beliefs and practices intertwined with economic hardships, political instability, conflict

and displacement.²⁸² The fact that child marriage finds roots in social and religious beliefs, the economic element is often overlooked. However, poverty, economic hardships and conflict in the region have been identified as major risk factors towards the practice of child marriage,²⁸³ hence its correlation to sexual exploitation of children.

Within that framing, UNICEF has underlined the vulnerability to child marriage of poor girls, girls from rural communities, girls from conflict-affected countries, and out-of-school girls to the practice of child marriage in MENA.²⁸⁴ Although the overall prevalence in the MENA has dropped from one in three in 1990 to one in five in 2015 girls married before the age of 18, the political and economic turmoil that the region has gone through over the past decade has impeded continued progress on that front.²⁸⁵ This is reflected by the fact that in 2019, 18% of girls in the region were married before the age of 18, and 4% were married before the age of 15.²⁸⁶ Countries with the highest levels of child marriage are either least developed countries with high levels of poverty or affected by conflict such as Sudan, Yemen and Iraq. Girls in conflict contexts can be viewed by families as an economic burden rather than individuals with economic potential.²⁸⁷ According to the traditions of many of the different cultures in MENA, the groom’s family has to pay a bride price (dowry) in order to marry. Families living in poverty can therefore find financial incentives in marrying their daughters, whereby the dowry can alleviate some of the

276 France 24 English. (2011, June 24). *Reporters - Morocco: the hellish world of sex tourism*.

277 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

278 UN Human Rights Council. (2017, June). *Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings*. New York: UN General Assembly.

279 *Ibid.*

280 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

281 *Ibid.*

282 *Ibid.*

283 UNICEF. (2017) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNICEF MENARO.

284 UNICEF. (2018). *A Profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: UNICEF.

285 *Ibid.*

286 UNICEF. *The State of the World’s Children 2019*. 235.

287 UNICEF. (2017) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNICEF MENARO.

family's hardships and debts and the marriage would decrease the number of dependents that the family needs to support.

Furthermore, disparities also exist between girls in urban and rural communities, as well as girls from poor and rich families. Statistics show that 27% of women aged 20-24 were first married before the age of 18 in rural areas compared to 13% in urban areas. Additionally, in all of the countries of the region (except for Yemen, Syria and Algeria), women from the poorest households are at least twice as likely to have married in childhood compared to women from the richest households.²⁸⁸ In Egypt for example, although the Child Law of 2008²⁸⁹ sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 years without exceptions, child marriage is still practiced in traditional unions, particularly in rural areas, where it is three times higher than urban areas, under what is identified as *urfi* marriage (informal marriage).²⁹⁰ Poverty, discrimination and school dropout have been key contributing factors to child marriages in Egypt.²⁹¹ Informal marriages are not registered nor are the children born out of these

marriages, hence multiplying the future risks to children of such a practice.

In addition to poverty, gender discrimination presents itself as another significant risk factor towards child, early and forced marriage,²⁹² and one that clearly comes into play in the MENA. In many countries across the region, women and girls have "limited social status with restricted rights, privileges and opportunities", which in turn affects their social and economic development.²⁹³ Accordingly, in many of child marriages, girls don't give their consent but are rather forced into unequal marriages with older men in return for a price (dowry) and a perceived form of 'social protection' known as *sutra*.²⁹⁴ In its observations to several countries in the region, the Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concerns towards systemic discrimination against girls in the region. For example, in its comments to Saudi Arabia, the Committee expressed :

"deep concern that [...] the State party still does not recognize girls as full subjects of rights and continues to severely discriminate against them in law and in practice and to impose on them a system of male guardianship that conditions their enjoyment of most of the rights enshrined in the Convention, namely the rights to freedom of movement, access to justice, education, health-care services and identity documents, among others, upon the agreement of a male guardian".²⁹⁵



288 UNICEF (July 2018) *Profile of Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*.

289 *Child Law Egypt* (2008), Article 31 bis

290 The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood in Egypt supported by UNICEF, (2017) *Policy for Action: Ending Child Marriage*.

291 *Ibid.*

292 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

293 UNICEF. (2017). *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNICEF MENARO.

294 International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. (2013) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. A White Paper*.

295 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2016, October). *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Saudi Arabia*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Similar comments on discrimination against girls were provided to Qatar (2017),²⁹⁶ Iraq (2015),²⁹⁷ and UAE (2015).²⁹⁸ All of which contributes to vulnerability to child, early and forced marriage, and thus potentially to SEC.

From a legal standpoint, many countries in the MENA region allow the marriage of those under 18 with the consent of parents or the authorization of court. In Jordan for example, while the age of marriage for girls is set at 18 years, marriage at 15 years is permitted with judicial consent.²⁹⁹ A similar case presents in Morocco, whilst the minimum age of marriage was raised to 18 in Morocco's 2004 Family Law, it also provided judges with the discretion to authorize marriages of girls under 18.³⁰⁰ A report evaluating the implementation of the family law (*almudawana*) in Morocco (2014) found that there has been an increase in child marriage although *almudawana* increased the minimum age of marriage to 18 years, for both boys and girls. Child marriages (many of which were forced by parents) increased from 18,340 in 2004 to 35,152 in 2013³⁰¹ and were strongly linked to poverty and rural communities.³⁰² Yet, other countries in the region do not specify a minimum age for marriage, thus legalizing such practice. Yemen does not specify a minimum age for marriage

but rather identifies puberty as the stage upon which marriage can be practiced.³⁰³ Until recently, it was the same in Saudi Arabia, however the Saudi government has now approved regulations to prohibit marriage for children under 15,³⁰⁴ and made judicial consent mandatory for marriages involving children under 18.³⁰⁵

Moreover, social and traditional concepts and perceptions in the region also play a crucial role in promoting child marriage and facilitating its social acceptance.³⁰⁶ The connection between family honour and women's purity, places families (and particularly males in the family) in a position to supposedly protect its honour by ensuring that women's purity is preserved until marriage and is not tainted by any sexual activity that could dishonor the family. Consequently, protecting the family's honour and the perceived gender roles also has implications on girls' mobility, activity and participation. The notion that a girl belongs to the home, and once married to the home of her husband and in-laws further limits girls' agency, voice and mobility.³⁰⁷

Whilst gender discrimination, poverty, and low educational levels have been defined as contributing factors to child marriage, they are also key consequences to such a practice. The

296 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2017, June). *Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Qatar*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

297 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

298 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, October). *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of the United Arab Emirates*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

299 Girls not Brides. (n.d.). *Child Marriage Around the World*.

300 UNICEF. (2017) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNICEF MENARO.

301 Ministry of Solidarity, Family, Equality and Social Development. (2016). *Ten Years for the Implementation of the Family Law: Changes in the Representations, Attitudes and Practices of Citizens*. Rabat: Ministry of Solidarity, Family, Equality and Social Development.

302 *Ibid.*

303 Sandstrom, A and Theodorou, E. (2016, September 12). *Many Countries Allow Child Marriage*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center.

304 Kanso, H. (2019, January). *Is Saudi Arabia on the road to ending child marriage? Reuters*.

305 Abdul Malik, A. (2020, January). *Saudi Arabia's child marriage ban a leap forward. Arab News*.

306 UNICEF. (2017) *Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa*. UNICEF MENARO.

307 *Ibid.*

power imbalance between a child bride and her husband further engraves gender roles and gender inequality. Additionally, girls who are out of school as a result of marriage will have lower chances of entering the labour market and consequently generating income.

Temporary marriages in Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Yemen and among refugee communities in Jordan and Lebanon are many times a guise towards sexual exploitation and forced prostitution.³⁰⁸ Families living in poverty in countries such as Egypt and Yemen have been resorting to what is called ‘temporary marriage’ or ‘*mut’ah* marriage’, in which a formal yet temporary marriage agreement takes place between the family of a young bride and wealthy men, many times coming from the Gulf region.³⁰⁹ These arrangements are often used essentially as a form of prostitution, and in some cases trafficking. A *mut’ah* (pleasure) marriage is a contractual marriage where the duration of the union is predetermined and usually agreed upon in return for financial gains (mainly for the bride’s family). In Iraq, poverty and unemployment is driving many families to ‘sell’ their daughters under the *mut’ah* marriage which many times force married girls into prostitution after marriage. When married, girls can also easily travel with their supposed ‘husbands’ to other countries in which they can be further exploited and abused.³¹⁰

In Egypt, men from the Gulf engage in temporary ‘summer marriages’ with Egyptian women and girls.³¹¹ These marriages are some of the channels through which children are forced into the sex industry.³¹² However, the fact that these marriages are legal under the *Shari’a* law makes it more difficult to abolish and prohibit.

A study by the International Organisation for Migration highlighted the frailty of vulnerable communities in Yemen as a result of conflict and poverty to the practice of what they called a ‘tourist marriage’. Through such marriages, households aim to protect the honour of the family and address poverty. In the long-term they aspire to have kin with legal residence out of Yemen. However, in reality, the long-term outcome of such marriage is only harm and trauma, particularly for young girls who suffer the most.³¹³

According to the 2019 US State Department report on Trafficking in Persons, Syrian refugee girls in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon are vulnerable to temporary marriages for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation.³¹⁴ In Jordan for example, displaced and refugee women often lack legal work permits that would allow them to formally work, hence become at risk of exploitation by landlords, informal employers and criminal networks, with some being forced into prostitution and marriage.³¹⁵ These refugees can be

308 Buchbinder, S. (2015, April 27). *Sex, Lies and Crime: Human Trafficking in the Middle East*. The Islamic Monthly.

309 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

310 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

311 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019: Egypt* U.S. Department of State Publication.

312 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

313 International Organisation for Migration (IOM). (2014). *Pilot Study: Tourist Marriage in Yemen*.

314 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

315 United Nations (2016, August 6). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children - Mission to Jordan*.

young adolescents who didn't reach the age of 18 years.³¹⁶ In the report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, on her mission to Jordan, the Special Rapporteur discusses the severity of exploitation through the story of a 17 year old Syrian refugee who had been forcibly married by her single mother and a family friend to 13 different men from Jordan and the Gulf over the course of two years. Each marriage could last from one day to one month.³¹⁷

As cited in ECPAT's thematic report on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, these temporary marriages – when they involve a child, are considered a form of exploitation of children in prostitution.³¹⁸ In addition to being exploitative, once discontinued, girls become vulnerable to social stigmatization and abandonment which could lead them to other forms of sexual exploitation.

Child Marriage in the Context of War and Conflict

In addition to child marriage being practiced in times of peace, conflict and displacement exacerbate risk factors encouraging child marriage; such as poverty, insecurity, instability and lack of access to services such as education, thus increase the prevalence of child marriage.^{319,320,321} At times of conflict and humanitarian crisis, families view child marriage as a way to cope with economic

hardships and protect girls from sexual violence.³²² Families, therefore, resort to child marriage as a means to protect their daughters and ensure their *sutra*- referring to protecting a girl's honour and livelihood.³²³ By marrying their daughters, families transfer the responsibility of protecting girls to the husband and his family, as well as decrease the number of dependents in the family. Families also receive a dowry (*mahr*) in return, which contributes to alleviating their hardships.³²⁴ However, they also relinquish the possibility to protect their daughters, which in some circumstances is exploited.

In the case of Yemen, for example, child marriage rates have increased to alarming rates during the conflict. Although Yemen was among the countries that exhibited progress in decreasing child marriage in previous decades, according to UNICEF, rates of girls married before the age of 18 increased from 50% to two thirds.³²⁵ Child marriage is especially common in governorates that host large numbers of displaced people.³²⁶ The conflict in Syria has also increased the prevalence of child marriage among Syrian communities inside Syria and within refugee communities in neighboring countries. A 2014 study on child marriage in Jordan revealed that registered child marriages among Syrian refugees increased from 12% in 2011 to 31.7% in the first quarter of 2014.³²⁷ Prior to the war, between

316 *Ibid.* Para 11 and 18.

317 United Nations (2016, August 6). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children - Mission to Jordan*

318 ECPAT International and Plan International. (2015, October). *Unrecognized Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

319 Michael, S., Roupetz, S. et al. (2018, May). *Caught in Contradiction: Making Sense of Child Marriage Among Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality.

320 Girls not Brides. (n.d.) *Conflict and Humanitarian Crises*.

321 UN Human Rights Council. (2017, June). *Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings*. New York: UN General Assembly.

322 Girls not Brides. (n.d.) *Conflict and Humanitarian Crises*.

323 Women's Refugee Commission. (2016, March). *A Girl No More: The Changing Norms of Child Marriage in Conflict*. New York: Women's Refugee Commission.

324 Girls not Brides. (n.d.) *Conflict and Humanitarian Crises*.

325 UNICEF. (2017, March). *Falling through the Cracks: The Children of Yemen*. UNICEF Yemen.

326 *Ibid.*

327 UNICEF. (2014). *A study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014*. Amman: UNICEF.

2000 and 2009, 13% of women between 20 and 24 reported being married before the age of 18.³²⁸

Child Marriage as a Weapon of War

In addition to increase in the prevalence of child marriage during times of conflict and war, child marriage is also used as a weapon of war.³²⁹ According to Girls not Brides report on child marriage in humanitarian settings, out of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are fragile or extremely fragile countries.³³⁰ Several reports on the crisis in Syria, Iraq and Yemen have referenced accounts on abducting girls and forcing them into marriage to combatants. During a Care Rapid Protection and Gender Assessment of the Kobane refugee camp in Turkey in October 2014, refugees indicated that one of the main reasons that they fled their homes was to protect their girls from sexual violence and forced marriage to armed combatants.³³¹

In a UN Secretary- General report on Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic covering the period from November 2013 - June 2018, a total of 68 girls as young as eight years of age were exploited by ISIL through forced marriage. The aggression however does not end there, with these young girl children being forced to marry men whose identity was unknown to them.

Furthermore, often times these girls were abandoned or divorced by these men or forced to marry multiple men over period of a few years, and were forced to be on the move with their husbands.³³²

In Iraq, ISIL kidnapped and abducted thousands of women and children since 2014 from a range of ethnic and minority groups. Yazidi women and girls have been particularly vulnerable to abduction and trafficking by ISIL, where they are subjected to forced marriage, sexual slavery, and rape in both Syria and Iraq.³³³ Moreover, and according to the CRC observations, girls in Iraq are being used as “gifts” or “bargaining tools” by the different tribes, and are reportedly sold and trafficked either within the country or to neighboring countries (including Jordan, Syria, UAE and Yemen).³³⁴

328 UNICEF. (2011) *The State of the World's Children: Adolescence: An age of opportunity*. New York: UNICEF.

329 Girls not Brides. (n.d.) *Conflict and Humanitarian Crises*.

330 *Ibid*.

331 Cited in CARE. (2015, May). *“To Protect her Honor” Child marriage in emergencies - the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence*. UK: CARE International.

332 UN Security Council. (2018, October 30). *Children and Armed Conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary-General*. UN Security Council.

333 US Department of State. (2019, June). *Trafficking In Persons Report 2019*. U.S. Department of State Publication.

334 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). (2015, March). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding Observations on the Combined Second to Fourth Periodic Reports of Iraq*. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

REGIONAL ACTION AGAINST SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

This section identifies and documents what the existing literature has identified as ‘successful interventions’ aimed at tackling SEC within the region. Identifying innovative and good practice is a critical element needed to inform and augment the design of future programming and national/regional efforts to address and combat SEC, borrowing from regional models and learning from past experiences. The good practices outlined in this section encompass regional actions, national initiatives such as awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building programmes, as well as legislation and policy reform practices that have addressed SEC. Presenting these varying approaches found in the secondary data is useful as ECPAT International promotes strategies to combat SEC that involves implementing multi-sectoral and consolidated efforts.³³⁵ It is important to note that the list is not exhaustive and key regional actions working towards combating SEC go beyond the examples included.

REGIONAL ACTIONS

The MENA’s efforts to address some forms of the sexual exploitation of children, while slow, also indicate potential. At the regional level, UNICEF and UNFPA have led a consortium of UN agencies and civil society organizations to combat child marriage and have developed a Regional Accountability

Framework of Action to End Child Marriage (RAF) in the MENA. The RAF intends to prioritize efforts to end child marriage in the region and specifically addresses humanitarian settings.³³⁶ An advantage to the RAF is that it also encompasses a research component, through a Regional Research Reference Group formed in partnership with research institutions which seeks to support regional research on child marriage by developing common tools and methodologies.³³⁷ This research component has important implications to the region. Primarily, data produced can offer a deeper understanding of the prevalence and incidence of child marriage including child marriage for sexual exploitation. Additionally, hard data can be used to inform policy and develop effective strategies to end child marriage. Lastly, research and ongoing monitoring can assist in aligning regional and national practices to international standards.

Other regional initiatives to address the online sexual exploitation of children have also been documented. In 2015, Abu Dhabi hosted the WePROTECT Summit to protect children from online sexual exploitation, which produced commitments from the ICT sector, organisations and countries to end sexual exploitation of children and awarded the UAE a permanent seat on the WePROTECT International Advisory Board, in recognition of its efforts in the

335 ECPAT International. (2017, June). *Online child sexual abuse and exploitation*. France: ECPAT International.

336 UNICEF. (2018). *Child marriage in humanitarian settings: Spotlight on the situation in the Arab region*.

337 Girls not Brides. (2018, August). *Child marriage in humanitarian settings*. The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage; Care (2019, January). *A future she deserves: ending child marriage in MENA*.

field of child protection.³³⁸ Countries in the region who participated in the conference and committed to address OCSE include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Sudan and the UAE, thus reflecting a regional participation and obligation produced from the countries in attendance.³³⁹ Additionally, in 2016 Saudi Arabia hosted the National Forum for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Children via the Internet. The forum hosted speakers from Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the U.K. as well as representatives from 12 countries, the ICT sector and Interpol³⁴⁰ and concluded with a recommendation to create a national strategy to protect children from online sexual exploitation.³⁴¹ Although the country's efforts were commended in Saudi Arabia's concluding observations report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child for 2018,³⁴² the strategy has yet to be developed as of March 2020. At the same time, significant opportunities to further advance these efforts in the region also exist. These include the need for robust data collection efforts that will shed light on the scope of the manifestation of OCSE, informing future design of interventions and contributing to legislation and policy reform.

The MENA network afforded by Child Helpline International is another valuable resource that encompasses great potential to combat SEC at the regional level. The region is home to 18 member child helplines in 16 countries.³⁴³

According to CHI's 2019 data, helplines in the MENA region received approximately 517,734 contacts from children and youth,³⁴⁴ with the majority of contact coming from Yemen.³⁴⁵ The main issues these contacts were about psychosocial/mental health, followed by abuse and violence.³⁴⁶ In these situations, majority of callers were female (58.3%).³⁴⁷ Child helplines present a dynamic and efficient data recording and analysis mechanism for the region. At the same time, a detailed classification for data collection and management on the various manifestations of SEC is required within helpline databases. More current data is evidently needed and the vast potential that this regional network presents needs to be more effectively utilized.



338 Abu Dhabi Police. (2015, November). Permanent seat for the UAE MoI on the WeProtect International Advisory Board .Press release. UAE: Abu Dhabi Police.

339 WeProtect. (2015, November). Statement of action by governments to tackle online CSE: Abu Dhabi WeProtect Summit. UAE: WeProtect

340 Saudi Arabia Ministry of Interior. (2016). *National Forum for the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation of Children via the Internet*. Riyadh: Saudia Arabia MoI.

341 Arab News. (2016). *Cyber safety center recommended to prevent child abuse*. Dubai: Arab News.

342 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2016, October 25). *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Saudi Arabia*. Geneva: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

343 Child Helpline International. (n.d.). *Child Helpline Network*.

344 Child Helpline International. (2019). *Voices of Children and Young People: Child Helpline Data for 2017 & 2018*. 9.

345 *Ibid.*, 26.

346 *Ibid.*, 26.

347 *Ibid.*, 26.

LEGISLATION

STATUS OF RATIFICATION OF INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS					
Country	Convention on the Rights of the Child - 1989 ³⁴⁸	Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography - 2000 ³⁴⁹	ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour - 1999	UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children – 2000 ³⁵⁰	
Algeria	1993	2006	2001	2004	
Bahrain	1992	2004	2001	2004	
Djibouti	1990	2011	2005	2005	
Egypt	1990	2002	2002	2004	
Iraq	1994	2008	2001	2009	
Jordan	1991	2006	2000	2009	
Kuwait	1991	2004	2000	2006	
Lebanon	1991	2004	2001	2005	
Libya	1993	2004	2000	2004	
Morocco	1993	2001	2001	2011	
State of Palestine	2014	2017	/	2017	
Oman	1996	2004	2001	2005	
Qatar	1995	2001	2000	2009	
Saudi Arabia	1996	2010	2001	2007	
Sudan	1990	2004	2003	2014	
Syrian Arab Republic	1993	2003	2003	2009	
Tunisia	1992	2002	2000	2003	
United Arab Emirates	1997	2016	2001	2009	
Yemen	1991	2004	2000	/	

348 United Nations Treaty Collection. (2019). Status of ratification: Convention on the Rights of the Child. Last updated 19 August 2019.

349 United Nations Treaty Collection. (2019). Status of ratification: Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. Last updated 19 August 2019.

350 United Nations Treaty Collection. (2019). Status of ratification: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Last updated 19 August 2019.

Legislative reform provides the much needed legal framework for protecting children against sexual exploitation as well as holding perpetrators accountable. Effective legislation also ensures access to justice through prosecution procedures as well as an alignment with international law. Within the region, a number of countries have made advancements in legislation to ensure the protection of children from different forms of exploitation; yet there is much room to continue to address children's vulnerabilities through policy and legislative reform.

A few examples of national legislation's innovative provisions and amendments aimed at protecting children from sexual exploitation are provided by Jordan and UAE, with specific focus on OCSE. Jordan passed the Information and Cyber Crime Law in 2010 which penalizes a few conducts related to child sexual abuse material.³⁵¹ However, the Cyber Crime Law is currently being amended³⁵² and according to the latest available draft, the article on the use of information systems to sexually exploit children has been slightly revised in terms of penalties.³⁵³ In the UAE, the Federal Law on Child Rights (Wadeema's Law), besides comprehensively criminalizing conducts related to child sexual abuse material³⁵⁴ goes one step forward and obligates telecommunications companies and Internet service providers to notify authorities on activity related to the circulation of child sexual abuse material as well as to provide

information on those involved in its dissemination.³⁵⁵ The law also forbids an offender convicted for crimes related to child sexual abuse material to hold a job that allows him/her direct contact with children, even after an eventual rehabilitation.³⁵⁶

Various countries in the region have made critical legislative advancements that although not specific to SEC, may decrease girls and women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, by securing their rights. For instance Tunisia adopted in 2017 a law on the eradication of violence against women, which includes, *inter alia*, the suppression of a provision within the Tunisian Penal Code that allowed rapists to escape punishment in the case that the perpetrator marries his victim, even if a child.³⁵⁷ Similarly, in Jordan strides have been made to amend discriminatory laws against women and girls. In 2017 the abolishment of Article 308 in the Penal Code by the Parliament.³⁵⁸ This provision allowed a rapist to escape prosecution if he married his victim.³⁵⁹ Correspondingly in Lebanon, Article 522 of the Penal Code was repealed.³⁶⁰ The article also allowed rapists to escape prosecution and have a suspension of punishment, if already convicted, in the instance that they married their victim.³⁶¹

An important step in legislative reform towards securing children's rights was taken by Egyptian courts in 2017, establishing that children born into customary (*Urfi*) marriages can also

351 Jordan Information Systems and Cyber Crime Law. (2010). Article 8.

352 Araz, S. (2020, January). Jordan adopts sweeping cybersecurity legislation. *Middle East Institute*.

353 Jordan Project Law 2017: Amended Law on Cyber Crime. (in Arabic).

354 UAE Federal Law No. 3 of 2016 on Child's Rights (Wadeema's Law). Article 37.

355 *Ibid.*, Article 29.

356 *Ibid.*, Article 54 (1).

357 Tunisia. (2017). Loi organique n° 2017-58 du 11 août 2017 relative à l'élimination de la violence à l'égard des femmes. Article 15; *See also*: United Nations. (n.d.). *Legal ban on violence against children*. UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children.

358 Tahan, Z. (2017, August 1), 'Historic day' as Jordanian parliament repeals rape law. *Al Jazeera*.

359 Jordanian Penal Code No. 16 (1960). Article 308

360 Anani, G. (2019). *Abolishing Lebanon's "rape law": Spotlight on ABAAD's campaign*. London: *Girls Not Brides*.

361 Lebanon. (1943). Legislative Decree No.340 of March, 1 1943 on the Criminal Code. Article 522. (in Arabic).

be legally registered, securing their legal rights to health and education services³⁶² and also minimizing their risk to exploitation. Legislative reform has also been witnessed in 2016 in Morocco where a law that bans the employment of children below 18 for domestic work, with a phase-in period of five years during which those aged between 16 and 18 years are allowed to work, was adopted.³⁶³

NATIONAL INITIATIVES

As a region, more significant efforts to combat SEC are needed, however several countries have taken crucial steps through various national initiatives to fight SEC.

Although documented evidence of cases of online sexual exploitation of children in Jordan is not available, significant advancements have been made within national police structures to combat the issue. This include the establishment in January 2017 of the Unit to Combat Sexual Violence Against Children through the Internet at the Family Protection Department.³⁶⁴ Separately in Qatar, the Qatar Foundation to Combat Human Trafficking was established in 2003.³⁶⁵ According to UN Women, the Foundation collaborates closely with other civil society organizations as well as religious institutions to raise public awareness on violence against women and children

through the lens of Islamic Law.³⁶⁶

Other regional efforts worth highlighting include the use of *Imams* (religious leaders) in dissemination of key protection messages in Jordan, the Cyber Peace Initiative in Egypt, which empowers youth with digital skills³⁶⁷ and the launch of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer communities hosted by the Government of the UAE which united religious leaders from around the world to address child online abuse and exploitation.³⁶⁸

The collaborative efforts of civil society and governments in MENA are praiseworthy. For instance, in Morocco through a partnership between UNICEF and a local NGO INSAF, the country has set up reintegration programmes for girls who have been exploited.³⁶⁹ Additionally, the country has set up an integrated child protection response programme, which is involving multiple ministries in Morocco.³⁷⁰ Bayti, a leading organization in the field of SEC in the region also runs several programmes for street children at risk of exploitation including rehabilitation services, reintegration into education and vocational training, in addition to leading advocacy efforts.³⁷¹ Furthermore, Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid, the founder of Bayti, was recently appointed to the Civil Society Advisory Board on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse³⁷² and as the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General

362 Cairscene Team. (2017, April). *Egyptian court grants children born into Urfi marriages birth certificates*. Cairo: Cairscene.

363 Morocco (2017). Loi no. 19-12 fixant les conditions de travail et d'emploi des travailleuses et travailleurs domestiques. Article 6.

364 UNICEF. (2017). *Situation analysis of children in Jordan*. 42. Amman: UNICEF.

365 Arab.org. (n.d.). Qatar Foundation for Combating Human Trafficking.

366 UN WOMEN. (2003). *The Qatar Foundation to Combat Human Trafficking*.

367 Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. (August, 2016). *Child online protection in the MENA region*. South Africa: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

368 Child Dignity in a Digital World. (19-20 November, 2018). *Interfaith Alliance for Safe Communities: Child Dignity Online*. Vatican City: Pontificia Universita Gregoriana.

369 UNICEF. (2017). *UNICEF Annual Report 2016: Morocco*. Morocco: UNICEF.

370 Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention. (August, 2016). *Child online protection in the MENA region*. South Africa: Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.

371 Association Bayti (n.d.). Association Bayti (website). Casablanca, Morocco: Association Bayti.

372 Morocco World News (2019, February 20). *UN appoints Moroccan activist to sexual exploitation advisory board*. Morocco: Morocco World News.

on Violence Against Children.³⁷³ Thus increasing the region's representation on the global platform of efforts to combat sexual exploitation.

TACKLING TABOOS

An important component of good practice involves highlighting national initiatives that have attempted to challenge taboos and harmful social perceptions in the region. This is of particular importance as one of the most significant barriers to addressing SEC regionally is the social stigma behind these violations. One particularly challenging issue to address is around sex; and national initiatives are attempting to address these sensitive topics in culturally appropriate methodologies. For example, in Jordan, the National Centre for Culture and Arts conducted a Regional Theatre Based Y-PEER Training of Trainers "Performing Arts for Action" in cooperation with UNFPA in 2015 to raise awareness on issues pertaining to early marriage and reproductive/sexual health through participatory drama. The programme, which facilitated for regional participation, included representatives from Algeria, Tunis, Morocco, Egypt, Oman, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq, State of Palestine and Jordan.³⁷⁴

Another highly sensitive topic for the region is around diverse sexual orientation and gender identity/roles as well as the rights of LGBTQ people. Over the years, several initiatives have taken place in the region, which attempt to raise awareness on various sexuality issues. In Lebanon, MOSAIC foundation is a pioneer in the region, offering comprehensive services for marginalized groups, research and advocacy for policy reform and building knowledge and capacities on SOGIE-related issues.³⁷⁵ The Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality based also in Lebanon works with Arab states to support sexuality, gender and bodily rights movements in the MENA through a variety of activities such as capacity building, sexual health and security services and offering a gender and a sexuality resource center.³⁷⁶ These various efforts while important to highlight, require further advancement. There is substantial potential in investing in early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation services in the face of SEC at both national and regional levels. Advanced action is also necessitated from governments, the private sector and civil society.

373 United Nations Secretary General. (2019, May 30). *Ms. Najat Maalla M'jid of Morocco - Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children*.

374 Al-Masri, J. (2015). *The second regional theatre-based Y-PEER training of trainers: Performing arts for action*.

375 MOSAIC MENA. (n.d.). *MOSAIC MENA (website)*. Beirut: Mosaic.

376 Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality. (2018). *Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (website)*. Beirut: Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The complexity of the sexual exploitation of children and its inter-linkages with multiple risk factors as well as its overlap with several other forms of child abuse and violence against children including gender-based violence and exploitative child labour necessitates that SEC is addressed as part of comprehensive and multi-sectoral child protection strategies that address the root causes of the problem and contributes to addressing the problem at both national and regional levels. Inclusion of SEC within a comprehensive child protection strategy would ensure the following:

Within a comprehensive approach, synergies between the different stakeholders and the different programmes developed and implemented to enhance child welfare are more plausible. Furthermore, the possibility of engaging a larger number of stakeholders and a wider range of sectors in a comprehensive national strategy is higher. A multi-sectoral response also helps in establishing the link between child and social protection programmes to eliminate and reduce socio-economic barriers to child protection is necessary; this not only facilitates access to social services but also contributes to the prevention of sexual exploitation;

From this Regional Overview, it is clear that recognition and acknowledgement of the scale and scope of SEC seems to be particularly challenging at the public and governmental levels. The intricacy and difficulty of addressing sexual exploitation in a culture that condemns issues related to sex and sexuality makes it harder to identify and implement strategies at that front, yet once they are addressed as part of the bigger picture, the chances of their recognition, endorsement and implementation are higher.

Importantly of course, a comprehensive approach facilitates the engagement of multi-sectoral stakeholders, including public and private entities, civil society organizations, national and international NGOs and individual activists in the fight against SEC. Below are some of the areas and recommendations prioritized for action in the MENA region in the fight against SEC.

THE URGENCY OF HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

The gravity of war and armed conflict in the region and the implications of which on children as discussed in this Regional Overview are massive. Even amidst the scarcity of data on the scope, all other indicators show that the prevalence of the different forms of sexual exploitation of children affected by crisis in the region, particularly child, early and forced marriage, exploitation in prostitution and trafficking is alarming. Hence governments and national and international organizations among affected, displaced and refugee communities should give child protection, particularly from sexual exploitation due importance. Humanitarian intervention strategies should address the many risk factors that these children and their families are suffering from the onset to curb its prevalence; with special attention being provided to unaccompanied and separated minors due to the myriad of risks they are exposed to. Programmes, resources and attention to the exploitation of displaced and refugee children should be framed and allocated to save a generation in the region. At the most basic level, children caught up in emergency situations and conflicts require unhindered access to humanitarian support covering the basic

services of health, nutrition, education and protection. The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action is an important tool that sets essential practice standards and guidelines that aim to mitigate: dangers and injuries; physical violence and other harmful practices; sexual violence; recruitment and use in armed forces and armed groups; and child labour.

Mental health and psychosocial support is relevant to all humanitarian sectors, but is particularly essential for children who have been sexually exploited.

REGIONAL DIVERSIFICATION

Amidst the similarities of settings and conditions in which children in the MENA are living, it is clear from this Regional Overview that major differences rest between the different countries in the MENA. The heterogeneity of the region, the wealth disparities, the geographical map of war and armed conflict as well as the discrepancies in social norms and culture necessitates that responses to the problem of SEC is contextualized. There's no "one size fits all" in trying to understand or respond to sexual exploitation of children in the region, and whilst additional research and data collection will facilitate a more in-depth understanding and accordingly well designed strategies, responses, and policies, country specific plans and strategies are recommended. Sub-regions within the MENA (such as the Levant, the Gulf and the North African region) can also be considered when developing broader strategies and plans.

SPECIAL GROUPS

In addition to geographical diversification, particular attention should also be given to 'special' target groups vulnerable to sexual exploitation in the region. Special groups that were highlighted in the report, besides refugee and displaced communities, include boys and the LGBTQ community.

Moreover, the vulnerability of the LGBTQ community to sexual exploitation as discussed in this Overview as well as the social rejection and stigma that this group suffers from necessitates that they are explicitly included and addressed in national strategies and plans addressing the sexual exploitation of children. Targeted research and specific public education campaigns (e.g. around gender equality and gender identity) and advocacy (e.g. as law and policy changes so does attitudes) should be planned to prevent these children being victimized through sexual exploitation. Lessons learnt in protecting these special groups should be shared amongst countries in the region and from other parts of the world where considered relevant.

GENDER AND AGE SENSITIVE APPROACHES

Age-specific and gender-sensitive approaches, strategies and interventions are crucial when addressing the socially entrenched topic of sexual exploitation of children. In light of the gender gap in the region and the systemic gender discrimination, males and females are prone to carry different perceptions when it comes to children, sex, sexuality, exploitation, abuse and masculinity. More importantly, males and females are affected differently by the multiple risk factors and rights violations; hence require gender specific interventions and modes for engagement and participation. Similarly, differences among age groups, particularly in relation to children and adolescents versus adults should also be taken into consideration when designing and implementing outreach, prevention and intervention strategies and programmes, to ensure successful engagement and impact.

An effective approach to promoting and ensuring gender and age sensitive strategies and interventions is to encourage greater recognition and input of children's voices and opinions in these processes. Not only is children's participation in line with international

instruments, it also draws directly from girls' and boys' experiences, preferences and ideas.

ADDRESSING THE DATA GAP

The data gap is a critical limitation to understanding and consequently responding to the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the region. Data collection by national governments is essential to assessing the prevalence and severity of SEC, but moreover to understand the types, trends, forms and profiles of victims and perpetrators as well as routes and drivers of exploitation. The establishment of national systems that are capable of providing robust data on SEC disaggregated by gender, age, geographical location, nationality, as well as type of manifestations, and other relevant and useful criteria would facilitate a more in-depth understanding of the problem and consequently develop effective and efficient strategies, plans and policies. Furthermore, evidence on best and effective practices, interventions, policies and plans should also be collected, examined and accordingly disseminated nationally and regionally.

The establishment of national data collection systems would be greatly assisted by studies and research that explore further the scale and scope of SEC in the different countries in the region. Such studies need to analytically explore the economic, social and cultural factors that make certain children at particular risk. Even where research has been undertaken – such as the vulnerabilities of children affected by conflicts – the humanitarian situations are constantly evolving and the context and impact on children can quickly and dramatically change.

There is also a need to examine poorly understood phenomena around SEC such as the sexual exploitation of

boys and the vulnerability of sexual minorities. Research exploring the existing gap in the legal frameworks in the different countries in relation to SEC could also assist in evaluating the efficacy of the criminal justice systems in protecting all child victims. Identifying and documenting good practices from different parts of the region could also help in supporting policy formation, programme development and capacity building.

CHANGING SOCIAL NORMS AND AWARENESS RAISING

Identifying champions to challenge harmful social norms, specific public education campaigns and raising public and professional awareness about SEC in culturally sound and relevant mechanisms is a more effective approach to awareness raising. Such strategies need to comprehensively target its prevalence, risk factors, consequences, reporting mechanisms, services and programmes in order to unravel the taboo nature of the sexual exploitation of children, promote recognition of the problem and its consequences, and facilitate the involvement of multiple key stakeholders, such as children, women and refugees in the advocacy efforts against SEC nationally and regionally as well as enhance access of victims to services and interventions.

MOBILIZING RESOURCES

The scarcity of resources to understand the problem, reach out to vulnerable and at-risk communities, enhance the capacity of professionals, design interventions, and implement programmes is a major challenge towards a comprehensive approach to understanding, preventing and responding to SEC. Mobilizing resources from an array of public, private, bilateral and multilateral resources is key to

facilitate comprehensive, efficient and effective interventions, programmes and policies. Such resources can be used for capacity building of both government and civil society organisations, especially those tasked with providing services to child victims. The endorsement of SEC in wider child protection strategies and programmes also facilitates the mobilization of resources within broader frameworks and settings. It is also likely the provision of resources from within and across the region (as opposed to those from western donors) may be more acceptable and sensitive in targeting some of the harmful social norms and practices that put children at greater risk of SEC.

COORDINATION MECHANISMS

When realizing the multifaceted nature of SEC, its various forms and consequently the different venues, actors, routes and risk factors associated with it, it becomes evident that no one solution nor a sole entity/sector can address SEC, at both national and regional levels. Within that notion, systemic and institutionalized coordination mechanisms should be developed, implemented and continuously evaluated and enhanced. Such mechanisms can be developed at multiple levels, to enhance its effectiveness. These levels include but are not limited to:

- Multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms within a particular country to ensure a comprehensive and holistic approach in fighting SEC; Including the issue of SEC within updated and resourced National Plans of Action (NPAs) for children can be an effective approach. Generally, overall

coordination should be assigned to a particular government agency to oversee the activities of the various government and non-government agencies.

- Multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms in humanitarian settings to also ensure a comprehensive and holistic approach in fighting SEC and other protection issues at times of conflict and displacement; This could include the establishment of various multi-stakeholder task forces/working groups at regional, national and local levels (e.g. government, UN/IO agencies, civil society) with particular mandates for monitoring and addressing SEC risks and other related child protection issues.
- Multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms at sub-regional and regional levels, to comprehensively address forms of exploitation that happen across borders as well as share lessons learnt and best practices within the region; Bi-lateral agreements and Memoranda of Understanding are one concrete mechanism that enables inter-governmental cooperation and information sharing.
- Coordination mechanisms and new partnerships within similar sectors at sub-regional and regional levels to address exploitation of children across borders, manage data of victims or offenders across borders as well as share lessons learnt and best practices. Examples include coordination and sharing of information between police departments, child helplines, and research centres in the region.

LAWS, POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

The signing, ratification and withdrawal of reservations and declarations around all the core international human rights treaties is an essential first step for the region. Aligning national legislation in the MENA with the standards and articles of these international treaties and instruments (including the UNCRC, the OPSC and the ILO's Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour among others), is crucial in the fight against SEC within and across countries of the region.

Legislations that clearly define and criminalise the various forms of SEC and protect child victims are a key pillar towards the realization of children's rights and protection. Whilst many countries in the region have legislation in place that criminalises many forms of SEC, there are still significant gaps (e.g. around OCSE, SECTT, the sexual exploitation of boys) that put groups of children at risk or in some cases criminalises them when in fact they are victims. Moreover, the adoption and endorsement of codes that promote the protection of children in travel, tourism and transportation by companies in the region are also protective elements in the fight against SEC, particularly SECTT, such as the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.³⁷⁷ Finally, a barrier to implementing legislation and policies is the lack of capacity building of law enforcement professionals in implementing aligned legislation or the articles of international treaties, as well as limited opportunities for capacity building of professionals in the multiple firms and organizations contributing to the protection of children against SEC. This then can be a significant cornerstone in the implementation of codes, treaties and legislations.

REFRAMING DEFINITIONS AND FRAMEWORKS

This Regional Overview revealed the challenges behind recognizing and defining the sexual exploitation of children from a cultural viewpoint. The differing and at times, competing perceptions around what constitutes sexual exploitation, the lack of distinction between sexual violence and exploitation as well as the complete lack of understanding regarding the various manifestations of SEC requires the development of a commonly shared/accepted definition within countries, sub-regions and the region. Furthermore, advanced professional capacity building in refining knowledge and understanding of various SEC terminology and concepts is required. Projects such as translating and contextualizing the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse into Arabic would help in this regard.

PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

The engagement of private sector companies within the region, whether they are privately owned companies hiring minors, ICT providers as well as businesses engaged in travel and tourism is critical. There is much potential in developing different methods of collaboration and engagement such as partnerships and CSR initiatives within the region. The UN Global Compact, the UN Principles of Business and Human Rights and the multi-stakeholder 'Children's Rights and Business Principles' are all tools that promote and guide sustainable policies and practices on human rights and child protection. Codes of Conduct should also be developed and signed up to by businesses that can have an impact on child rights (e.g. the tourism and ICT sectors).

³⁷⁷ The Code. (n.d.). About us.

ACRONYMS

ICT	Internet and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OCSE	Online child sexual exploitation
OPSC	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography
RAF	Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage
SEC	Sexual exploitation of children
SECTT	Sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism
SOGIE	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



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