

Gendered assumptions and their consequences

We have likely all made assumptions based on another person's gender at some point in our lives. These assumptions are often based on stereotypical notions of who is 'male' and who is 'female', how men and women should act, and what is 'proper' or expected for one's gender. Such assumptions can have devastating consequences, and for those of us working to protect children from harm, they risk us failing to protect those who most need our support.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, our gender expectations and the cultural and social norms that underpin these can:

- prevent us from identifying the abuse and exploitation a child is experiencing
- stop a young person from being referred to the right service for their needs
- lead to services being designed and commissioned in ways that welcome some children but shut others out
- leave children trapped in the control of their abusers.

It is essential that we consider gender and inclusivity at every level of professional practice and work to identify and address our own assumptions and stereotypes. Only by doing so can we build a society that protects all children from exploitation and abuse.

We also ask professionals to look for and respond to child exploitation as a whole for children of all genders, rather than focusing on particular forms to the exclusion of others.

In this resource, we will focus on boys' experiences of sexual abuse and girls' experiences of criminal exploitation, while also recognising the barriers to protection faced by transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse young people.

Consider:

What assumptions do we make about young people based on how we interpret their gender? How might these impact our responses to child exploitation and abuse and the services children and young people receive?

Transgender and non-binary young people

While this resource considers the experiences of girls and boys and gendered assumptions made about each of these groups, it is fundamental that we recognise that there are not two binary genders and that an ever-growing number of young people identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender diverse.

Research into the experiences of these groups of young people is extremely limited, particularly in regards to the scale and nature of abuse and exploitation perpetrated against transgender and non-binary young people. However, some research is emerging that is beginning to explore the impact and experience of exploitation and abuse for these young people.

Dank et al. (2015) has found that "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth are often more vulnerable to rejection by their family and society and may experience discrimination and abuse from law enforcement and service providers. They may also suffer from other forms of disadvantage such as poverty and lack of employment, homelessness, and familial and community violence."¹

Transgender and non-binary young people may also experience gender dysphoria. This is when someone experiences discomfort or distress

¹ Meredith Dank, Jennifer Yahner, Kuniko Madden, Isela Banuelos, Lilly Yu, Andrea Ritchie, Mitchyll Mora, Brendan Conner, 'Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex' (2015). <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/surviving-streets-new-york-experiences-lgbtq-youth-ymsm-and-ywsw-engaged-survival-sex>

because their gender identity is different from the one they were assigned at birth.

Changing Lives, a charity that supports young people facing challenging circumstances, has found that young people experiencing gender dysphoria may be more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse due to its mental health impact and the potential lack of support provided to help them to understand and cope with these feelings and experiences.

It is currently not known how many transgender and non-binary young people experience sexual abuse, criminal exploitation, human trafficking, and modern slavery in the UK. While we never know the true scale of exploitation and abuse experienced by young people, this is compounded for transgender and non-binary young people as demographic data on gender and sexuality is collected inconsistently across society.

It is essential that exploitation and abuse services proactively work to include gender diverse young people and that professionals remain open and responsive to all the possible harms such young people may have or continue to be experiencing.

Responses must recognise and address these young people's unique barriers to disclosure and trust building. In particular professionals should be mindful of widespread societal and familial discrimination and rejection for trans, non binary and gender diverse young people and that experiencing these may have impacted their mental health and weakened their trust in support services.

Girls and child criminal exploitation

Gendered assumptions about girls and young women and how they experience harm can lead to oversights and adversely affect professionals' ability to identify and respond to their exploitation. When professionals view girls as potential victims, there can be an assumption that such experiences are always and only sexual. This means that their experience of other types of harm, including criminal exploitation may be overlooked and other issues and support needs may not be identified.

Often, professionals are less likely to actively look for indicators of criminal exploitation in girls and

young women. Girls forced to commit crimes under the control of perpetrators are frequently not spotted due to common perceptions that crimes like theft, serious youth violence, or the movement of drugs as part of county lines operations are only committed by boys and men.

However, threat, violence, control, and coercion are used to criminally exploit girls, often alongside their sexual exploitation and abuse. Perpetrators may groom girls through the relationship model, as the girlfriend or friend of someone involved in crime. Girls who are exploited in this way frequently then experience sexual abuse at the hands of one or more members of the criminal group. And their exploitation may not stop there, expanding to include criminal and financial exploitation too. That might mean carrying or concealing weapons, transporting drugs, committing theft, or laundering money.

Some barriers that exist to professionals identifying and responding to criminal exploitation in girls and young women include:

- **Young women and girls may be involved in controlling and coercive relationships.**

When girls are exploited through coercive and controlling 'relationships', they may live in fear of the consequences of saying no to their exploiter and abuser. They may be threatened with or experience physical and sexual violence if they refuse to comply or if they tell anyone about their abuse. This may be used as a test of loyalty within the relationship. Threats may extend to their children or other dependents. Perpetrators may also deceive young female victims into believing that professionals may separate them from their children or families if they disclose their own abuse.



- **They may be exploited to recruit other young people.** Like boys, girls can be coerced into grooming and recruiting other young people as part of their own exploitation. Girls who are exploited may see this as a way to protect themselves from sexual abuse. It is important for professionals to see this as a survival response, not a choice. It is important to recognise girls exploited in this way as victims in their own right and make sure they receive appropriate safeguarding and support.
- **They may lack power and status.** Especially within male-dominated organised crime groups, girls may lack status and be seen as subordinate to men or as 'commodities'. This reinforces wider social and cultural power imbalances and creates a situation where exploited girls have little power, status, or freedom of choice. It is important that professionals do not inadvertently reproduce this power imbalance when engaging with exploited young women. Instead, they should seek to develop their sense of self-worth and choice through safeguarding and support.
- **They may be at risk of financial exploitation.** At The Children's Society we are increasingly aware of girls experiencing organised financial exploitation, including for fraud and money laundering. Because these forms of exploitation are not well known or understood, they are often missed. Even when they are identified, victims may receive little safeguarding or support. When professionals are supporting young female victims, focus on sexual exploitation can sometimes cause them to overlook the possibility, impact, and significance of financial harms.

What can be done to overcome these barriers to identification and disclosure of criminal exploitation in young women?

It is vital that professionals recognise that perpetrators will target and exploit girls for multiple and ever evolving purposes. When identifying and responding to girls' experiences of sexual abuse, it is critical that professionals take a broader view of the potentially complex nature of their exploitation and remain alert and responsive to indicators of other harms.

Boys and sexual abuse

Common perceptions of boys and young men may create barriers to identifying and responding to their experiences of exploitation and abuse. Often, expectations of masculinity focus on concepts like strength, self-reliance, power, and stoicism. Many of these traits stand in direct contrast to our common perceptions of vulnerability and victimhood.

In recent years, there has been notable progress in recognising that boys can experience exploitation in criminal contexts – for example, how boys and young men are exploited to hold and move drugs around the country as part of county lines operations. But despite this, boys' experiences of sexual abuse are still rarely discussed or understood. Research is limited and there are growing concerns that boys are underrepresented within official data because male sexual abuse often goes unreported (Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA centre)).²

There is, however, growing evidence that boys experiencing criminal exploitation may also be sexually abused, with this abuse used as a way to coerce and control them. Perpetrators film sexual acts and then extort their victims into further exploitation and criminality. Like other young people, boys are also forced to carry drugs internally, including anally. The Children's Society considers this coerced internal concealment a further form of sexual abuse.

The CSA Centre has found that boys and men may also be at increased risk of sexual abuse in institutional settings.

In their report on key messages from research into institutional child sexual abuse, the CSA Centre states that "in the 2015–16 Crime Survey for England and Wales, adult male survivors of child sexual abuse were almost three times as likely as adult female survivors to report being abused by 'a person in a position of trust or authority'. And offender studies have found that institutional and other 'extra-familial' offenders are more likely to abuse male victims, or both male and female victims, than those who abuse in family settings."³

² Kairika Karsna and Professor Liz Kelly, 'The scale and nature of child sexual abuse: review of evidence', Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (2021). <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/scale-nature-review-evidence-0621/>

³ CSA Centre, <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/institutional-csa/>

Internationally trafficked boys and young men who are recognised as victims of forced labour or criminal exploitation may have also experienced sexual abuse, but this often missed by professionals. For many of these boys, ideas from their home culture and society around sex and sexuality can act as further barriers to disclosure and identification. For example, many of these victims will have experienced male rape and come from a culture where homosexuality is illegal and where any sex between men carries deep stigma or persecution, regardless of whether the act was consensual or not.

There are particular barriers to professionals identifying male sexual abuse and to boys disclosing their experiences. Some of these barriers include:

- **Trauma can impact behaviour.** For some boys and young men who have experienced sexual abuse, their trauma may present as anger, aggression, and other behaviours professionals may find challenging.^{4,5} Because this behaviour doesn't fit with our common expectations of victimhood, professionals may find it more difficult to feel empathy compared to how they respond to young people that appear more obviously vulnerable and in need of help.
- **Masculine norms may discourage boys from speaking out.** Young men may feel pressure from society or culture to hide their emotions and appear 'self-reliant', rather than express their vulnerability. This can make it difficult for boys and young men to tell someone about their sexual abuse.
- **Boys might have difficulty with being described as a 'victim'.** Some boys and young men might feel this suggests that they are seen as weak and vulnerable, rather than as someone who can protect themselves. Rejecting these ideas might also have been part of their grooming and exploitation, or part of a coping mechanism to survive it. Difficulty in hearing and accepting this term may impact a boy's willingness to disclose. On the other hand, rejecting the term 'victim' risks boys being mistakenly seen as willing participants in their exploitation.

■ **Risk assessment can be 'female-centric'.**

Because sexual abuse is more commonly associated with and identified in young women and girls, risk assessment tools, commonly used indicators, and sexual abuse services can be 'female-centric'. This can lead to male victims 'falling through the gaps', being 'put off' from seeking help, or seeing the support offered as not applicable to them.

What can be done to overcome these barriers to identification and disclosure of sexual abuse in young men?

In The Children's Society's experience, many boys and young men can report their experiences and do want to talk about them, when they're provided with safe spaces and the right approach from professionals.

However, it is important to understand that not every exploited or abused young person can or should be expected to disclose their abuse. As professionals, we should never wait on a disclosure to act on safeguarding concerns.

Intersectionality

When working to support young people in a holistic, child-centred way, it is vital that we do our best to recognise and engage with all the different parts of their identity and recognise how these intersect. This includes how their gender identity sits alongside their race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, disability and many other aspects. Young people's experiences and how they see themselves in the world are shaped by all these elements of their identity. This includes their experiences of discrimination, disadvantage, and abuse.

In the context of child exploitation and abuse, this can place some children at greater risk of harm and create barriers to their being identified and supported by professionals. For example, while professionals are largely more confident in identifying girls experiencing sexual exploitation than they are boys, this is not the case for black girls, whose experience of child sexual abuse is often missed by professionals.

⁴ John Frederick, Unicef, Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys in South Asia A Review of Research Findings, Legislation, Policy and Programme Responses (2010). https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2010_02.pdf

⁵ Sarah Chynoweth, 'We Keep It in Our Heart': Sexual violence against men and boys in the Syria crisis (2017). <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/we-keep-it-our-heart-sexual-violence-against-men-and-boys-syria-crisis/>

Research by Jahnine Davis describes how black girls are often viewed as more adult-like than their white peers and that the common perception of a child who is innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection is white.⁶ She writes “this concept goes beyond child sexual abuse, and goes beyond girls, and can be seen in the justice system where black children are perceived and treated as adults and therefore more likely to receive punitive responses, harsher sentencing, and decreased protection.”

⁶ Jahnine Davis, ‘Where are the black girls in our CSA services, studies and statistics’ (2019). <https://listenupresearch.org/what-we-do/research-publications/where-are-the-black-girls/>

Consider:

How might a young person’s identity alongside their own and their community’s experiences of discrimination, disproportionality, and oppression create vulnerabilities to exploitation and abuse?

How might these experiences also affect their trust in and interaction with professionals?

What can you do to respond to this within your practice?

Further reading

- A study by the British Journal of Educational Psychology highlights systemic discrimination experienced by transgender children even at primary school [here](#).
- Research in Practice have developed a resource on supporting young people who identify as LGBTQ+ [here](#).
- Donna Stenton-Groves and Lou Wilkins look at the issue of ‘gang-affected’ females in Nottingham, exploring coercion, consent, and harm [here](#).
- Jahnine Davis, Director of Listen Up, explores intersectionality [here](#) and questions where black girls are in our child sexual abuse services, studies, and statistics [here](#). Listen Up explores male child sexual abuse and why this continues to be missed by social workers [here](#).
- The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse looked at male sexual abuse [here](#).

