

CASE STUDY

FUNDACIÓN RENACER IN COLOMBIA

How to provide care services to boy survivors of sexual exploitation in an ethnically sensitive and gender-transformative approach.



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF **BOYS**



FUNDACIÓN **Renacer**
Contra la violencia sexual



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Table of Contents

CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION	2
INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE	4
THE APPROACH OF FUNDACIÓN RENACER TO WORKING WITH BOYS	5
THE INTEGRATION OF BOYS IN THE WORK OF FUNDACIÓN RENACER FROM THE VERY BEGINNING	6
THE MAIN CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH BOYS	8
THE CHILD CARE PROCESS AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GENDER ROLETTRANSFORMATION	11
BENEFITS OF CARE WORK IN COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETY	18
HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES REQUIRED	20
CONCLUSION AND POSSIBILITIES OF CAPITALIZATION IN WORKING WITH BOYS	22

DOCUMENTATION CONTEXT

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, [ECPAT International](#) launched the [Global Boys Initiative \(GBI\)](#) to explore the sexual exploitation of boys and the services available for their protection. The GBI embarked on a series of research projects in different countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of the sexual exploitation of boys: vulnerability and risk factors, the barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what needs to be improved in prevention and response strategies. Now that the first research phase of the Initiative has concluded, we can confidently speak on a number of pressing issues concerning the sexual exploitation of boys. Thus, we are able to consolidate what we know to influence and frame the agenda of the project, its advocacy actions and further research. We know that the sexual exploitation of boys is a global issue. We have consolidated information on the main factors leading to sexual abuse and exploitation and their context in which situations of risk, gender norms, and barriers to access are important points to consider. We now focus on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers involved in the fight against sexual exploitation.

In July 2022, we began mobilizing ECPAT members in different regions to inform them about the GBI. We explored possibilities of implementing the Initiative at national and regional levels and capitalizing on the wealth of experiences that our members have in their work with boys.

In discussions with Fundación Renacer in Colombia, several areas of interest and collaboration were identified as relevant to the success of the GBI nationally and globally. These included the documentation of work with child survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, the accompaniment of children in situations of mobility, and collaboration with local organizations supporting children of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGIE children).

To this end, the aim was to document the working practices of direct assistance to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in Colombia in order to capitalize on these experiences, to encourage learning from other organizations across the world, and to feed into GBI's practical knowledge - thus contributing to answering the global question: **“how can we work with boys at risk or survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in a gender-sensitive way?”**

INTRODUCTION

Fundación Renacer is a member of ECPAT International in Colombia and its mission is to contribute to putting an end on the sexual exploitation of children through the lens of protection, defense and restoration of children's rights. This is achieved by means of comprehensive care, prevention, research, training, collaborative work with organizations and local communities, and direct support to victims. The main focus of the work of Fundación Renacer is a humanist commitment that allows children to resume the exercise of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Fundación Renacer is headquartered in Bogotá, and operates its comprehensive care programs for children victims of sexual exploitation in Bolívar and La Guajira.

Care

In these municipalities, Fundación Renacer provides specialized care to children who are victims of sexual violence, with two dedicated care centers in Cartagena and Riohacha. Likewise, it provides legal advice for families and children who have been victims of different forms of sexual violence. In addition, further support is provided to population in situation of migration and displacement.

Community empowerment and social mobilization

The community leaders are trained by Fundación Renacer, who adapt their methodology to each relevant actor involved in the structures of protection. These consist of prevention agents and multipliers, who establish networks that allow child protection and develop actions to identify and care for victims of violence. At a community level, Fundación Renacer provides support by developing strategies and joint efforts to prevent child sexual exploitation. In particular, Fundación Renacer uses a communication process for social change as its central pillar, enabling learning scenarios where the language is adjusted to the sociocultural specificities of each target group and territory intervened. This way, the imaginaries that justify or normalize sexual exploitation and the practices that sustain them can be transformed.

A fundamental strategy in the prevention of sexual exploitation of children is the creation of networks of girls, boys, and young people as multiplier agents. The aim is to increase their organizational and self-management capacities to impact the community, school, and institutional spaces. And to make effective their political right to express their opinions, needs, and interests so that these are heard and considered in decisions related to protection against sexual violence. Young people from vulnerable communities and schools participate in these networks, as well as graduates of care programs.

Support to the institutional sector

Fundación Renacer provides support to local governors and mayors' offices for the developing of prevention strategies and care to sexual exploitation. These occur through training actions, the design of local plans or public policies and the support to law enforcement, prosecutors and judges for prosecution of sexual exploitation of children.

METHODOLOGY OF THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICES

The documentation of this case was carried out through an assessment and learning tool previously developed by ECPAT International's research and GBI teams, as well as through direct observations of the activities of Fundación Renacer in Riohacha (La Guajira) and Cartagena (Bolívar).

A questionnaire to evaluate the implementation phases of the different care and prevention processes was provided to Fundación Renacer¹ in La Guajira, Cartagena and Bogotá. Understanding the approaches, challenges, and opportunities in the methodology of the implementation work of each of the interventions was the starting point for the questionnaire. During the group interviews, new questions and opportunities for documentation practices arose and were integrated into the document. The answers provided by the different team members were recorded and verified in the successive meetings with the intervened population in La Guajira and Cartagena.

Each care and prevention team conducted field visits and interviews between late September and early October 2022. These were organized in collaboration between Fundación Renacer and ECPAT International and included voluntary participation of members² of the **Wayúu** community and the Venezuelan migrant community in La Guajira, and the male youth group and civil society organization “**Caribe Afirmativo**” in Cartagena.

Thanks to the studies done on the sexual exploitation of children in Colombia and other countries, we know that boys face unique challenges in accessing protection services. Disclosing information about a situation of sexual abuse and exploitation is harder for the boy and it has an impact on how assistance work is conceived and implemented. This case study then focuses on the approaches to care work and case management for boys and explores how the process of caring for boy survivors can represent an opportunity to transform ideas about masculinities and gender roles. The report is part of a series of case studies that cover various aspects of **working with boys**, providing insights and recommendations based on promising practices and knowledge acquired through implementing initiatives with boys.

1 Various members at Fundación Renacer provided the citations used throughout the document during the interview and in the process of documentation of these practices.

2 Participants of the mobilization and community empowerment activities run by Fundación Renacer in La Guajira and Bolívar.

The approach of Fundación Renacer to working with boys

Fundación Renacer approach to working with boys at-risk and survivors of sexual exploitation is innovative on several levels. The lessons learned from their practice contribute significantly to international knowledge on the issue.

In particular, it is worth highlighting how the use of **a mixed-care approach to boys, girls, and populations with diverse sexual and gender orientations** enabled the implementation of activities that transformed gender norms and ideas of masculinity during the processes of care and recovery. In addition, adopting a **sensitive approach to ethnic and cultural differences** in diverse areas of the country allowed Fundación Renacer to introduce sensitive topics related to sexuality, gender, and sexual violence in a respectful, impactful and sustainable manner.

The care homes for children in Cartagena and Riohacha are mixed. These homes result from the reflection that children are seen as human beings first and foremost. The fundamental intention of this approach is to teach how **to relate respectfully between genders and thus challenge gender norms and roles.**

“Boys and girls will have to interact outside the care home, in society. The mixed home allows transforming relationships healthily and respectfully.”

The care process of Fundación Renacer is based on continuous and systematic learning of the dynamics observed by the teams and on applying a clear child safeguarding policy.

The integration of boys in the work of Fundación Renacer from the very beginning

Since its inception in the late 1980s, Fundación Renacer has been able to identify sexual exploitation as a phenomenon that affects girls, boys, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The awareness of the involvement of boys in the dynamics of sexual exploitation in different parts of the country allowed Fundación Renacer to collect data and information disaggregated by gender in its research work over the years.

The first investigation on adult prostitution carried out in Bogotá in 1988 helped to identify the involvement of children in sexual exploitation. In particular, Fundación Renacer approached boys in street situations recognizing issues of labor and sexual exploitation during their fieldwork. The results of the studies and the availability of data on child sexual exploitation allowed the creation of a direct care program for children survivors of sexual exploitation regardless of gender. At first, these programs started in Bogotá and later in Cartagena, Barranquilla, and Riohacha in association with international cooperation agencies and later under the auspices of the Colombian state. The learning gained during the care processes immediately allowed the conception and development of prevention programs with families and communities and the creation of awareness messages adapted to the real risks and problems of children survivors.

“This knowledge allows us to focus clearly on prevention activities.”



In Cartagena

In Cartagena, a tourist destination in Colombia, the research provided an understanding of the risk factors for child sexual exploitation, the specific community and ethnic dynamics, and the impact of tourism in the area. The research confirmed that the dynamics of child sexual exploitation already existed within local communities and could be exacerbated by the influx of national and international tourists.

Cartagena is a very touristy place; however, many stereotypes about machismo and masculinity exist within the local culture. In this community, a boy with a diverse sexual orientation is treated very differently than in the interior of the country. The association of these children with the feminine universe also makes their bodies more sexualized. Some sectors of the local community consider these children more inclined to be involved in sexually exploitative dynamics and even encourage them to do so.

There are particular areas with a higher rate of child sexual exploitation, depending on socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic factors. The rise of information and communication technologies has facilitated the contact of exploiters and traffickers with children. Other related problems include the use and consumption of drugs, armed groups, extreme poverty, inadequate housing conditions, and the presence of the migrant population, especially from Venezuela.

In Riohacha

The research conducted in La Guajira and Riohacha in 2018 identified boys as victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, especially in dynamics related to the international tourism sector and migration from Venezuela. In this context, likewise, the care provided revealed different manifestations of child sexual exploitation and, from this evidence, defined awareness-raising messages adapted to the dynamics of local, Wayúu³, and migrant communities. Subsequent work approaching children in street situations also made it possible to update the research data and analyze the evolution of trends in child protection issues.

The work of identifying vulnerabilities carried out by Fundación Renacer made it possible to detect boys sexually exploited by men and women. In particular, since the beginning of the Venezuelan migration crisis, it has been possible to identify boys arriving unaccompanied and separated from their families in Riohacha. This situation increased their vulnerability and exposure to risks of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. At that time, no other organizations could respond to this specific problem, which confirmed the need to provide specialized care services to children in these areas.

In La Guajira, Fundación Renacer also works with the **Wayúu** community, where it launched intercultural dialogues with its members on issues related to the sexuality of children. Fundación Renacer focus on the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys within the communities themselves. These practices were associated with specific uses and ancestral customs, as well as with activities related to the tourism sector in the area.

³ The Wayúu communities are indigenous communities in La Guajira.

The main challenges in working with boys

Working with boys on issues of sexual abuse and exploitation entailed several challenges at the individual and community levels and in terms of the relationship with authorities. In general, communities did not necessarily want to talk about this problem, and issues of violence and sexuality were considered taboo. Moreover, in some disadvantaged communities, the sexual exploitation of children represented an income-generating opportunity that was not wanted at the time to be discovered and discussed.

Improving the community's living conditions was essential to change the community's attitude toward these problems. For instance, Fundación Renacer provided funds to respond to the needs of schools and places of public use. Likewise, it also trained adults in income-generation activities. This approach made it possible to integrate a community's social and economic development to create a safe space for dialogue on sensitive issues of violence and sexuality of children and thus be able to prevent child sexual exploitation.

At the level of the authorities, there are several barriers at different stages of the processes of prevention and care for boys. The gender norms that mean that a boy is not considered a subject at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation are reflected in the prejudices that protection actors may have and in the lack of safe and respectful procedures for accessing care services. Fundación Renacer met this challenge by using its lessons learned from caring for child survivors to adapt its advocacy and training strategy for protection actors (a mix of approaches presented in turn).

In Cartagena

The publication of the results and findings found in the research process in Cartagena received initial **resistance** from part of the community. Boys in situations of sexual exploitation were a reality, but a reality that was perceived as a problem of boys from outside Cartagena who came to the city and performed informal street work linked to the tourism sector. Officials from the local child protection system also did not understand the vulnerability of boys to sexual exploitation, which translated into wrong attitudes toward them. Some local community members even accuse these boys of participating (facilitated) in the exploitation process and obtaining pleasure in acts of sexual abuse.

In the processes of prevention and awareness-raising with boys, Fundación Renacer face challenges linked to gender norms and roles. Boys who identify as heterosexual believe that the earlier they can have a sexual relationship, the more they will be able to affirm their masculinity and sexual orientation. Parents and other boys also support this vision. Talking about and sharing situations related to sexual abuse and exploitation is more difficult for boys, who may hold feelings of aggressiveness, self-pity, and shame. In these cases, it also tends to happen that boys talk about sexual abuse from the point of view of 'domination,' wanting to reinforce their male (active) role and express control over the situation.

“They don’t talk about what they’ve been through as victims, but more in terms of masculinity to reinforce the heterosexual stereotype.”

Boys have grown up believing in strength, aggressiveness, and other traditionally considered masculine behaviors, and they reflect these when participating in group activities. This attitude toward masculinity represents another challenge during workshops in communities and schools, where boys can make fun of or monopolize the floor and decide who can and cannot speak. There is a complete appropriation of their gender role (male=dominant) in these communities by the boys, which is a challenge to manage when it comes to increase their understanding on issues related to violence and sexuality.

In Riohacha

The challenges mentioned in the context of Cartagena are equally relevant in Riohacha. Gender norms and ideas of masculinity mean that boys also resort to masculine behaviors to face sexual abuse and exploitation and are not regarded as potential victims of sexual violence. For example, boys may deny the pain or exacerbate the image of strength and self-control. In addition, the specific context of the La Guajira has required Fundación Renacer to adapt its intervention model to the particular trajectories of boys in situations of migration and displacement.

In this sense, existing gender stereotypes in the region are mixed with those of the Venezuelan migrant and displaced population. One can also find elements of the macho culture that make it more difficult for boys to share their experiences of sexual violence and emotions.

To meet these challenges, Fundación Renacer took the following steps:

- Hired consultancies to analyze and learn about each community, their customs, gender norms, principles, and values, thus understanding their form of community social organization based on clans (extended family lines). Fundación Renacer considered the power dynamics that emerged from the contact between the local community and the migrant population. On the one hand, the migrants suffered social discrimination (rejection, stigma, xenophobia); on the other hand, they perceived themselves as people without rights;
- Adapted communication messages and awareness-raising activities to integrate endogenous child protection mechanisms. Fundación Renacer also collaborated with United Nations humanitarian agencies with experience in migration and displacement contexts to organize social laboratories with the displaced Venezuelan population and understand their needs and perceptions;
- Used the risks associated with tourism for children in Wayúu communities as a gateway to address issues of sexual exploitation within the communities. With the arrival of more tourists, there was an increase in the number of children involved in activities related to selling products and services to tourists. The awareness of Fundación Renacer of the risks associated with children’s contact with tourists enabled it to advance the conversation on the dangers of sexual abuse and child protection within the **Wayúu** communities. This began a process of internal reflection on community norms and dynamics that could be harmful to children as well;

- Initiated an internal training process on the refuge, migration, and asylum issues and laws to provide correct and adequate information to the migrant population as well as practical support;
- A methodology to understand and work with the migratory grief with which children and their families arrived was developed. Fundación Renacer launched the so-called “emotional backpack” methodology, which allowed children and caregivers to work on the experiences lived during the migratory process. In the case of boys and men, this methodology allowed them to connect with their emotions, usually repressed for being male. Allowing men and boys to ‘feel’ was the key to success, drawing the attention of more boys, teens, and men⁴.

4 Please see the framework on the opportunity to work with boys and young men offered by the humanitarian emergency response.

The child care process as an opportunity for gender role transformation

Fundación Renacer, in its care process for child survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, adopts a differential intervention approach, adjusted to the specific trajectories of the children, to the unique impacts of the experiences of violence and sexual exploitation and takes into account the role played by gender and community norms in the process.

The work - **often at night** - begins with a preliminary process of **approaching children at-risk and in street situations**. The aim is to obtain a way to contact them so there is an opportunity for a follow-up. Fundación Renacer use strategies such as distributing condoms to start an informal conversation with the children to understand their actions and overall life situation better. The approach is person-centered and is based on empathy.

- It is considered from the beginning that the work of approaching boys takes longer and that the generation of a bond of trust requires several meetings and actions. Before the boy realizes that he needs help, it is necessary to stimulate a work of internal reflection on his own life and the areas of it that need attention;
- This first conversation is essential for all the work that can be implemented later. If the boy feels judged or stigmatized, it will not be possible to work with him;
- The male or female team member doing the intervention in the street has to be personable and show respect and sensitivity during their approaches;
- Approaching boys need time and patience. It does not consist of an interview but rather an interaction based on a genuine interest in his life situation, needs and concerns;
- Identifying and addressing their basic needs is vital in this process. When the teams at Fundación Renacer can solve the basic needs and concerns of the child, they can begin to generate a bond of trust and change the vision they have of adults (from being a source of danger to one of support);
- Understanding the context and places where contact with boys takes place is essential. Although many boys may be going through the same problems and have the same need for protection, it is necessary to consider the specificities of the dynamics in each region.

The correct reading of the context is possible thanks to previous research⁵ work that includes the integration of a gender and ethnic approach. In Cartagena, some boys are part of indigenous ethnic groups or come from rural contexts where the patterns differ. The preparation and training of teams help to adapt the materials and their communication style with these boys – always providing concrete solutions to basic needs.

In the context of Riohacha, it was fundamental to analyze the community norms and ideas of masculinity present in the **Wayúu** and migrant communities. The training for Fundación Renacer and partners then began to integrate elements on the specific barriers faced by boys from indigenous and migrant communities, how their reactions and behaviors could change according to their customs and upbringing, and how to identify specific vulnerabilities in alone and unaccompanied boys. These different training opportunities aimed to delve deeper into the notions of masculinity and male role models within **Wayúu** communities, understanding those facilitated addressing issues of gender, sex, and sexuality within this framework.

Moreover, Fundación Renacer has **specialized care homes**⁶ for children survivors of abuse and sexual exploitation in Cartagena and Riohacha, including those with different sexual orientations or gender identities that were either observed during fieldwork or referred to by other protection actors in the territories.

Sheltering of boys and girls and populations with diverse sexual and gender orientations, survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in the same care home represents an innovative approach that allows for some benefits, according to Fundación Renacer. Its application, however, demands transparent and solid safeguard policies to avoid peer abuse and violence. Likewise, it requires specific training for all staff involved in Fundación Renacer on dealing with sexuality with adolescents who have suffered various forms of sexual violence. Work done with mixed groups⁷ allows girls and boys to see the evolution of their thoughts and reflections on gender roles and relations. Their daily routine is very close to that of many other children. They may also want to interact with each other and explore their sexuality. In these cases, the social workers and the psychological care team work on respect, consent, and affectivity in the individual care processes and understand the functions of healthy sexual exploration⁸ avoiding having a prohibitive attitude. This format allows conversations around sex and sexuality to be normalized and supports adolescents with positive knowledge that respects themselves and other people and prevents risks related to the sphere of sexual and reproductive health. Studies carried out within the framework of the **Global Boys Initiative** confirm that when boys know about sex and sexuality, they can also prevent situations of risk and abuse.⁹

Concerning boys specifically, their reception in the homes is characterized by an adaptation and induction phase in which primary attention is provided to them so they can feel safe and comfortable in the space. To begin with, the social worker asks for and resolves their basic needs to have a friendly and calm conversation about their state of mind, expectations, and preferences at a later stage. With children and populations with different sexual orientations and gender identities, it is good to understand what materials the caregivers could best furnish them with; for example, what kind of clothes and accessories the child wants to have is a crucial element in this regard.

5 Consultancies were hired to adapt the working approach of Fundación Renacer to ethnic and indigenous dynamics;

6 The children can be in the care homes for up to 12 months, according to the legal criteria of the administrative authority (usually a Family Ombudsman or Commissioner) who places the children in the program and coordinates the Administrative Process of Restoration of Rights.

7 More information on group work is available in this document.

8 Understanding the processes of exploration and self-recognition of sexuality does not imply permission to establish sexual relationships among young people.

9 <https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>

The boy then needs to feel that the home can provide a safe and secure environment that allows him to be whoever he wants. Children already present in these spaces can help integrate the newcomer fostering the perception of tranquility and respect. In parallel, Fundación Renacer promotes inclusive language and a welcoming attitude among the children who are already there for a while. This way of engaging with boys on arrival and during the provision of materials offers them a solid base for emotional stability and self-esteem.

Other key elements of the introduction to life in the care center include:

- The presentation of the complete care team working in the center. This presentation explains the role of each person, their experience, outlining the support they can provide to build trust;
- It is important to be able to reduce the apprehensions that children may potentially have towards adults through a clear explanation of the care process and the adoption of positive language, including non-verbal language;
- If the staff notices resistance in the boy, they will take note of his reactions¹⁰ (which could be a warning sign). In these cases, the boy is referred internally to the specialized psychological care team.

Reflective processes are initiated similarly in the care provided to boys and girls. Girls tend to reflect more quickly on their situation, and the resignification process feeds off much more spontaneously. One of the main reasons behind this ease is that girls tend to understand that they are in a situation of sexual exploitation since they have learned to assume the stereotype that associates prostitution with the female gender. In contrast, boys, especially those exploited by women, want to show the situation as a source of pride and confirmation of their dominant role as men.

“They didn’t use me; I used them.”

Fundación Renacer provides individual care and understanding of the gender pressure that the boy suffers. The caregivers understand that there is also a situation of violence behind it and they know how to mitigate its negative consequences. In addition, the teams internalized, thanks to their experience, that the reactions of boys sexually exploited by women and men have different ramifications.

A boy sexually exploited by men often suffers from sorrow and shame, and acknowledging the negative impacts of the experience of exploitation is often more complex. Being identified as homosexual is one of the main concerns of boys in this regard, which the teams at Fundación Renacer know how to manage by creating safe spaces and using non-discriminatory language.

“After building trust and assuring his sexual orientation, the boy started to share more about sexual exploitation.”

¹⁰ The teams are trained to identify potential reasons for alertness and manage aggressive reactions or resistance on the part of the children.

Heterosexual boys exploited by women play an active role in the exploitation dynamics, further reinforcing their masculinity. That, at the therapeutic level, translates into a more protracted process for the child to realize what it means to have been a victim. In any case, boys do not usually problematize the situation of sexual exploitation since a man cannot show himself to be weak. Because of the pressure he has from society to explore and affirm his sexuality. These ideas reflect too at the level of the communities and protection providers. Homosexual boys, as previously seen, can be perceived by society as more sexualized. This perception affects how they understand themselves and their relationships; thus, the border between the exploration of sexuality and sexual exploitation blurs.

An interdisciplinary team provides specialized care for boys. This team works with a holistic plan for sheltering, re-signification, skills development, emancipation, and follow-up. In this instance, Fundación Renacer addresses five **critical areas**:

- 1) Self-esteem;
- 2) Sexuality;
- 3) Sociability;
- 4) Self-realization; and
- 5) Identity.

Fundación Renacer identified these areas as the most affected by sexual violence, **with sexuality representing the most critical challenge in the cases of boys**. It is so because the abuse and exploitation the boy has gone through changes the boy's perception of his own body. It diminishes his understanding of his sexual capacities and creates confusion and questions about sexual orientation issues.

Here it is essential to highlight that the stereotypes of what it means 'to be a man' have a significant impact, which is even more noticeable in Afro-Colombian children. The study on the different ethnic patterns carried out by Fundación Renacer revealed precisely how masculinity stereotypes within the Afro-Colombian communities increased the feeling of stigma and shame in these boys during their recovery.

After situations of sexual abuse and exploitation, stereotypes aggravate, and boys begin to perceive themselves as sexual beings, leading to the fear of becoming sexual offenders themselves¹¹. The experience of abuse affects how they understand the body of others as well as their own. Many boys also arrive with the belief that because they have been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, they can become homosexual, and this fear translates into aggressive (reactive) behaviors, which seek to reinforce their perception of masculinity. Pain and anxiety manifest through aggressive behavior and anger.

Recovering the boy's history is essential to strengthen each child's resilience and resources. Fundación Renacer explores resources such as generating protective behaviors within the family and community and physical and mental well-being to improve quality of life and strengthen the knowledge and skills the child already has. The psychological support specialists at Renacer then sets in motion a process **to re-signify the situation of abuse and exploitation**. The phase of re-signification is particularly delicate - especially for boys who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation at a low age - because it can generate crises by reliving traumatic events. Teams are then trained on what to do in these situations and how to provide psychological first aid. These events are then continued to be discussed from a more analytical, more reflective and accepting, self-understanding and coping perspective.

It is important to highlight that many boys, when entering the homes, are involved in situations of alcohol and drug consumption to cope with their problems. Fundación Renacer, in the first place, processes these situations before beginning the care work tied to sexual violence. Sometimes these boys are referred to specialized addiction treatment programs. In other cases, they receive technical assistance from the health system (psychiatry) in parallel with care for having suffered sexual exploitation (without leaving the center). Many boys cope with fear and guilt by dangerously using their bodies to desensitize themselves. Behaviors such as self-harm, self-mutilation, and suicidal attempts may occur as part of this process.

The individualized therapeutic care plan also allows for work on feelings and gender norms. By allowing the boy to feel and validate his emotions, the team member guides him through a reflection process (a personal moment of crisis) essential in the therapeutic process, in which the boy questions his stereotypes.

“It didn't happen to me because I don't want to feel, because it causes me pain.”

Fundación Renacer uses a practical work approach with boys oriented around:

- 1.** Active listening to the boy, patiently and without pressure to obtain detailed information. Taking into account the unique challenges of boys in being able to disclose the situation of sexual abuse and exploitation is the first step in preparing the type of assistance provided;
- 2.** Using vocabulary that confirms to the child that his story is real and that his emotions are valid and shared by more boys. Concerning boys with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, the teams take into account possible situations of rejection that the boy is facing, using even more affirmative language in terms of non-discrimination, confidentiality, and safety;

¹¹ It is essential to consider this challenge, as some children may later be involved in situations of sexual aggression. Fundación Renacer does parallel advocacy work with the State and the authorities so that these dynamics are understood, and boys are considered victims first and foremost.

3. Boys who have fears related to their sexuality need communication that confirms that sharing emotions does not affect their masculinity and that assures them that because they have suffered sexual abuse, they will not become homosexuals. Likewise, the teams make the boy understand that if that is the case, it would also be okay and that no one would judge or discriminate against him;
4. Understanding non-verbal expressions. Boys face more difficulties when sharing their situation and may not be able to express facts and their emotions in words. Faced with silences, caregivers usually adopt an attitude of calm and patience, reaffirming the support that Fundación Renacer can provide to them and allowing the possibility of having a later listening space when the child feels ready to share more. Phrases like, “if something has happened to you, we are here,” are essential so the child can understand that there is support, but they can also decide the times and modalities to share their problems. Non-verbal techniques such as projective drawing, writing, or theater are alternatives used in these cases.

In addition, individualized attention is accompanied by group attention, with activities in which boys and girls and children with different sexual or gender orientations participate together. This process involves educational, recreational, and life-skills activities geared towards psychosocial support and transforming gender norms and roles. Routine activities, such as cleaning and home care, are equally distributed between girls and boys, challenging the gender roles constructed in this regard. These daily tasks also allow opportunities to observe children’s behaviors and emotional states. While girls, in general, are more easily able to express their emotions and concerns through verbal or non-verbal language, boys, for their part, tend to do so kinesthetically when performing their tasks or interacting with other children in the space.

It is equally important to let the boy be in occupational spaces designed to develop specific activities related to psychomotor skills and sensitivity. This setting allows them to feel free and not singled out without fitting into a particular gender role while strengthening their self-confidence and self-esteem. This process then goes hand in hand with individual therapy work.

Conducting group activities under the mixed care approach for boys, girls, and children with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, is favorable because:

- It reflects the reality of life outside the care home and allows children to maintain contact with the social reality to which they will necessarily return, thus contributing to boys’ abilities to relate to other children respectfully and inclusively;
- Some boys building or defining their gender identity or diverse sexual orientation need to affirm their masculinity and then try to win over several girls in the home. The teams reflect with the girls on how to react to these situations inside and outside the home. In this sense, the house represents a social laboratory that allows working with the boy on his perception of gender roles and challenging his need to affirm his masculinity. This type of behavior also allows the teams to understand where it is necessary to strengthen the work on sexuality and identity on an individual level with the boy and how to manage the internal conflict that he may be having at that time;
- It makes it possible to provide a model of society without violence and to transform gender relations into bases of mutual respect;

- Some heterosexual boys, due to the abuse suffered, may further sexualize their behavior and relationship with girls. This attitude represents a challenge for the teams, knowing that the girls in the homes also suffered from sexual abuse and exploitation. At the same time, it is an opportunity to work on achieving a healthy and respectful experience of sexuality. The safeguard policies developed by Fundación Renacer make it possible to mitigate the risk of sexual violence within the home; likewise, it prepares the teams to support adolescents in their exploration of sexuality, preventing potentially dangerous situations for girls and boys;
- It also allows working on the sexualized behaviors of some girls. The team works with the girls on the notions of feeling and desire and encourages a reflection process with both boys and girls to analyze emotions and reactions to behaviors and situations on both sides;
- Traditionally, boys are not involved in awareness-raising activities on sexual and reproductive health issues. Group activities then allow for dealing with matters more inclusively and sharing protection and care responsibilities between boys and girls;
- Boys with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities also set up peer support mechanisms and formed positive friendships with girls;
- The mixed home allows everyone to return to being girls and boys in the community and at school¹², and has the side effect of teaching girls that boys can also be victims of sexual abuse and exploitation.

The individual care process of Fundación Renacer includes legal assistance and judicial representation of victims. For many boys, it is difficult to report the crime because of the fear of stigmatization by society and the judicial institution itself. The recognition of having been a victim is a complex process for the boys. Often, sexual exploitation generates damage in the construction of their sexuality and leads the boys to fuel further their fear of initiating a process of redress at the level of justice. Several actors involved in the justice process are not aware of issues of sexual violence¹³ against boys and may have erroneous behaviors and attitudes towards them. The legal team at Fundación Renacer works closely with the social workers and the psychologists. Communication between teams allows for a holistic view of the reactions and difficulties of each boy in sharing information about their situation. In this sense, boys and girls are trained in the knowledge and recognition of human and children's rights and the mechanisms to demand justice and reparation as victims of trafficking, violence, and sexual exploitation. This training is part of the process of empowerment as social and political subjects.

¹² All children at the care home can continue attending regular school and receiving formal education.

¹³ all, in recognizing the impacts of sexual violence, the signs and symptoms expressed by the victims. Likewise, in acknowledging the social and legal implications of the conception of children as "subjects with rights" and the obligations of public servants derived from this social and legal recognition.

Benefits of care work in communities and society

The direct care services offered by Fundación Renacer in Colombia have two main benefits at the community and societal levels:

- 1.** The therapeutic process with the boy survivor makes it possible to obtain a change in the dynamics and gender roles at a family level and to raise awareness of the communities about the existence of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys;
- 2.** The continuous learning process of the care teams allows the definition of appropriate prevention and capacity-building strategies in line with the fundamental protection concerns of boys.

The work with families and communities also represents a critical stage in the resilience and reintegration of boys. Raising the awareness of fathers, mothers, and caregivers, as well as other boys and girls present in the homes, prevents recidivism, mitigates the psychological consequences in boys, and prepares their reintegration into families. In this sense, the boys involved in the documentation process shared that working with families is essential. Working only with boys without involving their families can generate frustration and tension. Fundación Renacer then holds meetings with the families every two weeks to work on gender roles and norms, child participation, and support for the boy's life projects. Families are also sensitized to the internal factors that generate violence and the rights of children in order to strengthen the protective role of parents.

During these meetings, it is possible to find reticence from the families, especially from the men, in which the teams try to do individual work of reflection on gender norms and childcare. Many men and women involved in these gatherings may have also suffered from problems of violence in their lives, needing specialized attention for their emotions to be processed.

In cases where the families could not modify their violent dynamics despite their efforts, it has been essential to strengthen individual work with the boys, especially those with diverse orientations and gender identities. This work is vital in developing practical training and employment opportunities that allow them to sustain themselves. In this sense, the team of caregivers works on the factors of independence and resilience. It reflects too on supporting communities outside their natural family, further validating their autonomy and identity and promoting a safe space without discrimination.

The experience and knowledge gained through direct care to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation also allow the definition of awareness-rising messages and training modules adapted for the authorities and public instances. These messages focus on understanding the signs, symptoms, behaviors, and reactions of boys and girls to generate an ethical commitment beyond fulfilling certain functions.

The Venezuelan migration crisis as an opportunity for innovation in work with boys and young men.

The response to the humanitarian emergency and the crisis of migrants and displaced Venezuelans that affected La Guajira represented an opportunity for Fundación Renacer to strengthen its inclusive work approach and launch innovative assistance interventions.

Given the humanitarian assistance framework, Fundación Renacer created spaces so that boys and young men could also share their emotions and feelings in the face of the crisis. In particular, the teams implemented community mobilization and psychosocial support activities with them. This shift was particularly relevant as this activity usually aimed at girls and women, leaving boys and men aside.

Through traditional Venezuelan games and activities¹⁴, the team created spaces to address issues concerning sexuality, violence and mental health. The boys' attention span was short, and the active part of the space was a success with the boys because it allowed them to get their attention and then integrate talks around the issue of protection. In addition, these spaces made it possible to create bonds of trust with Fundación Renacer. The psychosocial support activities were welcomed as safe and confidential moments where they could share their stories and concerns, even detecting potential problems of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys and male adults.

“It is we (the teams) who are reaching their context. They feel that people are coming to support them and help protect these spaces. It is there where they comment on what they know, what has happened to them”.

¹⁴ They were identified through consultancies to understand the culture and customs of the displaced population.

Human and technical resources required

The implementation of the care and prevention work with boys done by Fundación Renacer requires a series of human, technical, and material resources. When wanting to maintain a trust-based relationship with both the boys and the communities intervened, it is essential to have the team members frequently present. It is crucial to have a referent figure aware of the evolution of the dynamics and the concerns of all the actors involved.

Regarding human resources, it is vital to ensure that teams have the necessary knowledge and skills to operate with a gender and culturally-sensitive approach to children. The mixed care teams of men and women have profiles ranging from social educators, social workers, and psychologists to lawyers. The team members are trained internally regularly in child-friendly communication attitudes, gender, ethnic approach, and sensitive communication with members of the Wayuú, Afro-Colombian, and Venezuelan migrant communities, as well as a focus on creating spaces of trust. This training consists of a mixture of theoretical technical knowledge and practical teaching. In this sense, the team's new members always have by their side older members of Fundación Renacer during field work, which constitutes an actual mentor. This approach allows newly hired staff to feel supported and have a safety net around them. To the extent possible, it is ideal to offer the boy the option of being assisted by a male or female staff member, but this is not always possible. In these cases, the boy can choose at least the educator they want to have as a reference. The implementation of solid codes of conduct guarantees the absolute confidentiality of information about girls and boys, respect, and non-discrimination. The entire team must comply with this code of conduct.

The personnel selection process represents a critical stage in the work of Fundación Renacer. Assessing potential biases around gender and homosexuality issues is essential in assisting and caring for boys and children with different sexual orientations or gender identities. The search for other profiles specialized in managing boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation is based on evaluating capacities and technical training. But also on an evaluation of the internalized prejudices of the candidates on topics related to gender, sexual violence, ethnic and racial differences, homosexuality, and xenophobia. These evaluations include a series of hypothetical questions and situations that involve moral dilemmas. These are carried out during the recruitment interviews to understand the level of constructions and negative prejudices that could affect the work of caring for boys and the population with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities.

Then, the training provided internally to the teams includes modules on gender and the specific trajectories of boys in topics related to sexuality, violence, and gender identity. This training not only consolidates the teams' knowledge on these issues but also contributes to challenging the gender norms and ideas that everyone has internalized and could unintentionally affect the care work with boys. Establishing precise gender equality and protection policies, such as when hiring staff, was also essential from the beginning. Two points must be highlighted in this regard:

1. The training courses are offered to all of the teams at Fundación Renacer, including the cleaning and maintenance staff at the workplace;
2. Monthly meetings are equally inclusive and allow information to flow confidentially among the teams. These are an opportunity to share observations about children's behaviors and dynamics.

Generally speaking, the perception of the bond of trust of boys with a man or a woman may change depending on their specific case and individual experience with abuse and exploitation. The fact that Fundación Renacer has both male and female teams is also essential for the work with boys. Specifically, the teams were able to make the following observations:

- Boys may prefer to be cared for by female gender teams because they feel more confident and secure in sharing emotions and situations of abuse and unconsciously associating women's role with the mother-caregiver figure. In addition, the lack of positive male figures in the lives of many boys often leads to a need to reconstruct the idea of men and their role;
- The deconstruction of the male figure is also vital for those boys who may be afraid of men because they identify them with their aggressors and may not know how to manage their relationships with other men. Gender and assistance activities done by Fundación Renacer, therefore, focus on this process of deconstruction, in which male staff shows their role as caregivers, changing the image that men associate with the aggressor towards a picture of care and trustworthiness;
- The attitude of the educators and the rest of the male staff is essential to change this image. Specifically, positive, non-discriminatory, and empathetic language is necessary, just like providing a positive example as an educator and creating safe spaces by sharing emotions and feelings. In this sense, the sharing of stories and personal experiences by male educators concerning the exploration of sexuality immensely helped boys to trust educators and see them as people who could truly understand their situation.

The social work of Fundación Renacer involves collaboration with different authorities and service providers at the local level. This collaboration implies the organization of a series of training and support activities. This need arises from the fact that internalized gender prejudices also affect the actors in the child protection system and the perception these actors may have of the vulnerability of boys in the face of sexual exploitation.

The presence of a lawyer in the team helped greatly in the sensitization of different actors since it confirmed the credibility of the legal arguments in the reparation processes of boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. The internal training modules proposed by Fundación Renacer served too to sensitize different actors of the protection system (health, justice, police, etc.) and to neutralize imaginaries about sexual violence against boys and ideas built around the involvement of boys in sexual exploitation dynamics.

This process takes place in parallel with preparing boys for meetings with protection service providers. The social work and legal teams at Fundación Renacer spend time training with the boys so they are mentally prepared to face comments and erroneous attitudes from some public servants. For instance, boys know that some actors can ask for information to learn the boy's story. The teams prepare the boys by confirming their story and accompanying them in accessing the different instances to mitigate the risk that these situations arise and provide immediate support when they occur.

Conclusion and possibilities of capitalization in working with boys

The work approach of Fundación Renacer is based on an operational model that capitalizes on the experiences gained in the care process to define prevention and advocacy strategies. In the work of direct attention to boy survivors of abuse and sexual exploitation in the communities of Cartagena and Riohacha, it has been fundamental to structure the intervention around three main axes:

- 1.** The importance of having multidisciplinary mixed teams selected according to an approach of evaluating their ideas and attitudes so that their work is truly sensitive to gender and cultural differences;
- 2.** Continuous and evolving training of teams and work partners to redefine gender and culture-related prejudices to create safe spaces and bonds with boys;
- 3.** The gender transformative approach sees mixed participation of girls, boys, and children with diverse sexual orientations or gender identities in group care and recovery activities in the care homes. It is essential to highlight that this approach needs to understand the context in which it takes place. It must have an essential component of child participation and come with safe and clear child safeguarding procedures, selecting and training the caregivers, and monitoring and supervising activities.

In a cross-cutting and progressive manner, learning and adapting to change were crucial elements for the success of the work of Fundación Renacer. An important guideline is to conduct prior research and observations to understand how different communities understand gender roles and norms, sexuality in boys, and the issues of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Over the years, Fundación Renacer has been able to confirm the relevance and quality of its approach. It also has a solid reputation towards children, communities, and local government instances, allowing it to impact the changes for better protection of boys and girls against sexual abuse and exploitation.

Its learning, its capacity for change and its reputation place the Foundation in a privileged position to capitalize on its intervention with boys and, in particular:

- The bond of trust established with boy survivors who benefited from the services provided by Fundación Renacer and the success in transforming their perceptions of masculinity allows these same boys to be significantly involved in the definition of mobilization strategies for the children in the intervention communities;

- Assistance to the population with diverse gender identities can represent a challenge during the reception stage in the mixed care center. Fundación Renacer learned important lessons such as the possibility of delivering clothes and materials that correspond to each person's wishes as much as possible. The use of spaces in homes, such as bedrooms and sanitary services, is complex to address and can entail several risks and have negative psychological consequences for these children. Thanks to the collaboration with entities of the LGTBQIA+ collective in the country and the support of experts on these issues, Fundación Renacer has the possibility of further adapting its care processes, generating even more innovative and inclusive ones;
- The experience of implementing recreational activities with migrant children from Venezuela allows Fundación Renacer to imagine the construction of similar structured activities in more communities to generate a bond of trust with boys, thus being able to detect situations of risk and sexual abuse and exploitation quickly;
- The implementation of novel practices such as the '**emotional backpack**' has a broad potential for replicability and for converting men in families and communities into positive male role models who support boys in the exploration of their sexuality and can seek help in cases where there is a lack of protection;
- The consolidated presence of Fundación Renacer and the trust of the communities in the two territories towards its teams allows for greater involvement of men as allies in the early detection of boys in at-risk and street situations.

To delve deeper into this

- To learn more about the work of Fundación Renacer in Colombia and to find out more about their approach to intervening with boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation: <https://www.fundacionrenacer.org/>
- To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation of boys what the ECPAT International network is doing on this issue globally: <https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>
- To learn more about ECPAT International's work: <https://ecpat.org/>



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