

CASE STUDY

LIFELINE/CHILDLINE NAMIBIA

How to integrate a gender-sensitive approach in working with boys at risk and survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.



SEXUAL
EXPLOITATION OF
BOYS



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The illustrations on the cover of this report depict environments and situations relevant to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys in Namibia.

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CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION

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 Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with boys, vulnerability and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies. With the completion of the Initiative's first phase of research, we can now speak with confidence on a number of pressing issues related to the sexual exploitation of boys, successfully consolidating what we know to influence and frame the agenda for programming, advocacy and new research. We know that the sexual exploitation of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation.

In July 2022, we began a process of mobilising ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalise on members and partners' experiences in working with boys.

In discussions with ECPAT member in Namibia Lifeline/ChildLine, several points of learning were identified as relevant to the success of the GBI nationally and globally. These included the documentation of the work with boy and male survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as with boys and men in awareness raising activities on issues of sexual and gender-based violence.

To this end, the aim was to document the working practices of direct assistance to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in Namibia in order to capitalise on these experiences, to encourage learning from other organisations in other countries around the world, and to feed into GBI's practical knowledge – thus contributing to answering the global question: **“how can we work with male children at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a gender-sensitive approach?”**

INTRODUCTION

LifeLine/ChildLine is the ECPAT member in Namibia and is an organisation established in 1980 that provides counselling, social behavioural change interventions, and capacity-building in systemic preventive and responsive ways for improved well-being of children, families and communities in the country. The vision of LifeLine/ChildLine is to have safe, healthier and more resilient children, families and communities. The services provided by the organisation include face to face counselling, telephonic counselling through the toll-free 116 and 106 helplines. As well as referrals. These helplines are accessible 24/7, countrywide. The organisation also provides case management support, school and community-based child protection programmes focusing on changing harmful gender norms and providing parenting support. In addition, the organisation manages a radio programme service¹ for children, recorded by the children. The organisation has the particularity of counting with a Gender Department, which ensured that gender considerations and the specific trajectories of boys and girls in issues related to violence could be considered across programmes. The projects implemented by the department, focusing on gender-based violence, masculinities and sexual and reproductive health, constitute important entry points for the organisation to conduct outreach and engagement activities with boys.

The presence of LifeLine/ChildLine in communities across the country, as well as the reputation gained through the assistance provided to children and families, allowed its staff to gather a great amount of learning in the work with boy survivors and in adjusting its programmes in a flexible manner as to better respond to their specific and evolving needs.

¹ Uitani ChildLine Radio: Facebook: https://business.facebook.com/latest/home?asset_id=436695833182042&nav_ref=comment_notif Instagram : https://www.instagram.com/lifeline_childline_nam/ Twitter: https://twitter.com/LLCL_NAM

METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE

The documentation of this case study was realised with the use of an assessment and learning tool developed by ECPAT International's Research and GBI's teams. The assessment and learning questionnaire was used to guide the interview with the counselling service team, the case management team, the gender team, as well as men from the gender champion's programme and male youth groups. The questions included in the questionnaire aimed at collecting information on what practices seem effective according to the organisation in providing counselling and case management assistance to boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation and what key elements need to be considered in addressing the complex and unique challenges that boys face in accessing support. The methodology was applied during a visit to the office of the organisation and its services, in which direct observations could be conducted on the physical space and resources.

The research conducted in the framework of the GBI tells us that boys struggle to disclose situation of sexual exploitation and abuse and when they can, they are often dismissed or not believed. The experience gathered by the teams of LifeLine/ChildLine offer important learnings on **how to create rapport and trust with boy survivors through the different phases of assistance, and how to understand and adjust to their reactions in the provision of support services**. This case study focuses therefore on how to communicate with boy survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation through community and counselling services and how to provide gender-sensitive emotional support. This case study also looks into opportunities and promising practices for the implementation of larger structured activities for boys in different communities.

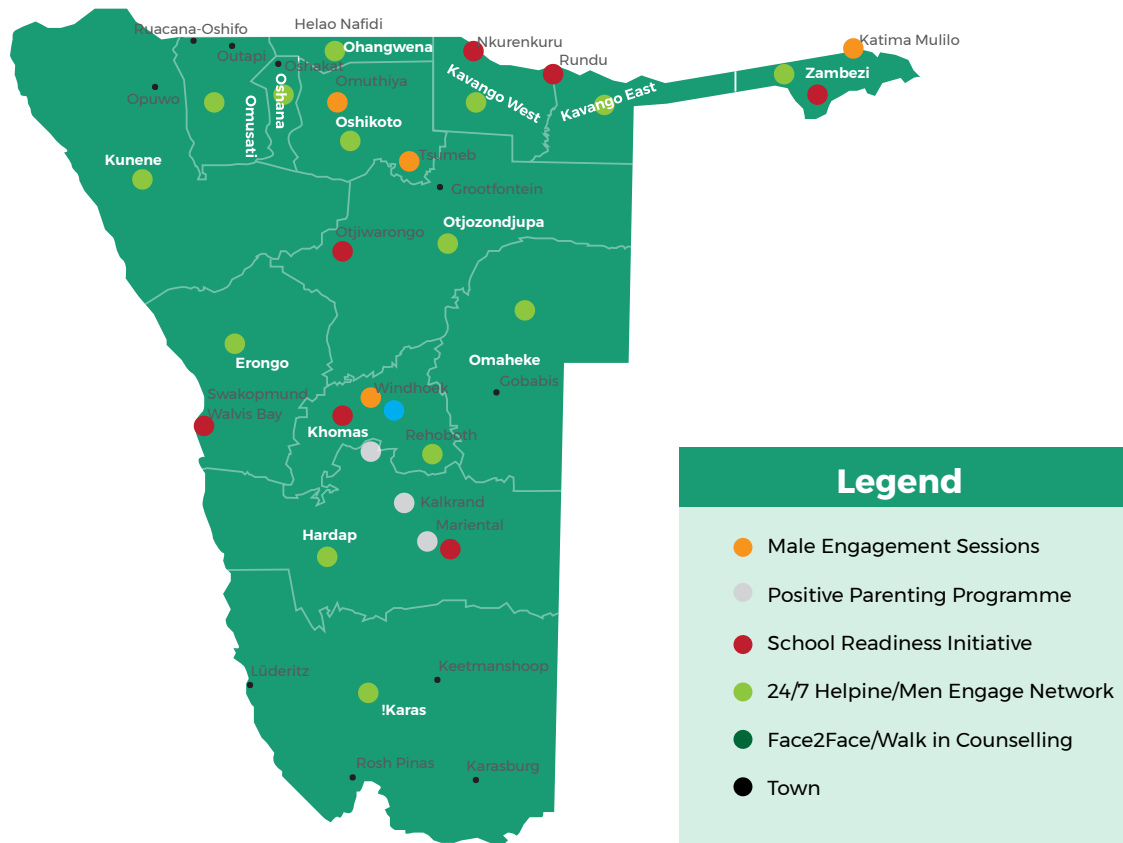
“We had to learn how to deal with the shame aspect, allowing them to have a space that is safe”.

From the beginning of the work of the organisation, the toll free national helpline meant to assist all children and adults in need of support, by providing remote and face-to-face counselling options. Women and girls used to receive more attention on issues of sexual violence, as the visibility of the issue on boys was still considerably low in those years. However, in 2021 more attention was brought to the issues of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys, following growing reports by the education personnel of the school system on boys' sexually abusing and exploiting each other. These concerns sparked the conversation in the country in the media and communities, and in the child protection community, as well as internally at LifeLine/ChildLine. This increased attention on boys did not require the organisation to undergo a huge transition in terms of its working methods and resources. It did, however, require more internal training and an adaptation of modules and messages used for case management work, and for the awareness-raising and sensitisation activities in schools and communities. The Gender team of the organisation ensured that all staff was trained on dealing with the abuse on boys, how its manifestations could differ from girls, their specific possible reactions, as well as the right language and communication to adopt.

Community based activities and strategies for the engagement of boys

Counselling to boys can happen at many different levels, and it is provided by the organisation through community mobilisation activities or through telephone calls, or in person sessions, that survivors – and their families – might use directly. Counsellors play an essential role in the assistance work as they represent the first entry point of contact for boys and families in distress, showing up with high levels of fear and shame. The initial contact developed between the counsellor and each survivor is fundamental for the success of the whole overall assistance process. The success in the approach adopted by the counselling team can be found in a mix of solid internal training, adapted and tailored language and communication techniques, and in clarity and efficiency of the internal data management and coordination system. The internal coordination system involves the formal counselling team, the case management team, as well as the staff who is involved in conducting activities with children, parents and communities. Indeed, the organisation runs community-based activities such as the parenting programme and the male engagement programme that represent important opportunities for the construction of rapport with boys and to conduct early identification of cases of risk and concern in terms of sexual abuse and exploitation of all children, including boys.

LCLL PROJECTS GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION



In the framework of the **parenting programme**, the team organises structured sessions with families around positive parenting practices, dealing with stress and emotions, and adopting positive communication with children, inter alia. These sessions do not cover directly issues of sexual abuse and exploitation, but allow for the construction of a trust link with communities and to open the discussion on topics related to childhood and child protection. Boys who participate in the parallel sessions tend to be in the age frame of 12 to 16 years old, and generally face more challenges in communicating, sharing their feelings and asking for help. Boys also tend to be excluded from conversations around protection and safety within families, and often times are left without any supervision. This confirms the findings of the research conducted by the GBI, telling us that boys are not perceived as vulnerable when it comes to issues of sexual abuse and exploitation and this idea can leave them without supervision, paradoxically exposing them even more to situations of risk and danger.

Discussing the issue of safety of boys with families can be quite challenging, as ideas of masculinity might lead to perceive them as not being vulnerable. On the other hand, the pressure that boys face – especially adolescent boys – to be and become the breadwinner of the family can also expose them to dangerous situations. According to the team interviewed, many boys are involved in dynamics of sexual exploitation within families and communities², but these situations are purposely hidden as they provide families with survival means. Many families in remote regions of the country also lack a father figure, and the rest of the family members would not think that it is necessary to have communication with the boy child in general. Boys approaching puberty, for instance, are not taught about sex and sexuality, or boundaries. This has consequences in which boys can end up in situation of sexual abuse and start to normalise it as part of their path of sexual exploration. This in turn affects the way that boys also think that they can behave with other people's bodies, normalising touching and abuse with girls and boys as well. In those cases where boys are taught about sex, it is often done from a perspective of avoiding pregnancy. In some communities, these boys might engage in activities of sexual abuse and exploitation of other boys, based on the general idea that boys will not get pregnant.

In these realities, the lack of a father figure makes many boys seek for a male figure amongst friends and communities, which can be sometimes involved in illicit and dangerous activities. Some boys might be exposed to drugs and alcohol, and some might get involved in sexual exploitation dynamics to earn money.

“Many of these community members [men] they look out for them in a sense and [boys] feel that this is the way to be a man and to confirm their masculinity”.

Considering that a great amount of sensitization and participation activities in communities are not designed and meant for boys, boys struggle to understand that what is happening to them might be wrong and fail thus to report.

“Boys are taught to not speak up about any issue that might make them look weak”.

² Boys might be involved in sexual exploitation dynamics with other family members and communities that provide money in exchange, whether directly to the boy or to the family.

All of these considerations have to be kept in mind when approaching boys and families and conducting identification and counselling activities, and have helped the teams in designing tailored strategies for boys and to encourage them to seek help. The organisation of structured activities for boys and men in communities helps in generating a sense of belonging and in reducing the feeling of isolation and abandonment that boys might feel in several occasions. When youth groups who previously participated in the organisation's community programmes were asked about group activities for boys, they mentioned that it is important to use these activities to break down the façade of what it is expected from a male in terms of behaviours and attitudes. The capacity of the facilitators to break this down by creating a safe space where no one needs to act particularly "strong" or "aggressive" helps massively – according to all the boys³.

The group activities have also the benefit of providing boys with a safe space where to see how other boys might be facing struggles and challenges in their lives. If boys are able to see other boys going through the same issues, it helps them in opening up, which remains harder to do at the individual level. To create this safe space, the role of the facilitator is critical. The learnings gathered by the organisation tell us that:

- If the facilitator is a young man, this helps the boys in joining the group activities as boys might fill the gap of a male figure in their life, without creating a sense of formality related to traditional attitudes of respect and authority vis-à-vis older men;
- The activities with boys can be organised around play, sports or discussing a specific issues that boys in the community might be interested in. Sessions can be organised to be short and fun and the end of the sessions represent an opportunity to share positive examples and messages, restoring a sense of hope and connection amongst boys. When possible, it is beneficial to involve older men from the community at the end of the session to share these messages and show how they can represent positive male figure that boys can look at in their communities;
- The group discussions need to be spaces for boys where they are not called out, or asked to provide individual examples, at least at the beginning of the intervention. Because boys do not want to be seen as weak, it is important to avoid the individual approach. Rather, using group examples or experiences from the life of the facilitator can help in kicking off the conversation and start building trust;
- Some boys might recur to male expected behaviours such as aggressiveness, or by interrupting others and activities. Facilitators understand that these attitudes come from ideas of masculinity and that these spaces might oftentimes to be the only spaces where boys are allowed to be and let out feelings of anger and frustration. As these attitudes affect the roll out of the session, facilitators use an approach that leaves the boy feel that he can be in control, and use the opportunity to start the discussion on feelings and their root causes. "*What is this behaviour causing to me and others?*", "*what am I angry about*", are some of the questions that facilitators use to start the conversation in this respect and are able to put words that boys might not necessarily have at their disposal to discuss their emotions;
- Boys will only be able to share about their problems when they feel comfortable enough and have a certain level of trust in the facilitator. The end of the sessions are also good occasions in which to share information on counselling options and how to seek out help in case of need (providing contacts, etc.), reinforcing language that takes away emotions of shame and stigma.

3 Eight male youth from the LifeLine/ChildLine programmes were interviewed in the documentation process.

When boys reach the point where they feel that they can trust the facilitator to share a concern or a situation of abuse, they would normally share with few words and might not be able to speak up directly about the abuse or exploitation. They could rather indicate places where they do not feel safe, or members of their families or communities who they prefer to avoid. In these circumstances, facilitators apply active listening as a first step, not looking for details or more information. Showing a listening adult, who is not putting names on issues and reactions, and who is able to handle the silence, make boys feel heard and safe. The actual request for support or information might come later onto the process, according to each individual boys' trajectory and personality.

“We are giving them a platform to be free to be who they are, and know that they have support”.

In the framework of the [Men Engage Namibia Network programme](#) of LifeLine/ChildLine, male champions, programme coordinators and members of the network organisations, gathered additional learnings on what strategies and approaches seem to work in reaching out to boys and conduct identification of cases. The programme involves working with children and men on gender norms and issues related to sexual and reproductive health, as to ensure that boys and men are part of the fight against gender-based violence and take an active role in this respect. The sessions are facilitated by the “male champions” (facilitators), programme staff and network organisation members. As per above, these activities are also deemed important by boys, who consider these spaces as the only platforms where they are asked to participate and can learn about questions of sex and sexuality and how to deal with these questions daily. The fact of having these activities in itself is important as it shows them that someone cares for them and their safety. Many boys go through difficult circumstances in many communities and live under a great amount of pressure to be the breadwinners for their families. Boys are asked to be brave and do not cry, even when facing several challenges. Yet, these spaces can be platforms in which to:

- Provide information on the specific services of the toll-free helplines and counselling, and explore issues and problems that might be affecting the lives of boys in their communities;
- Create a connection between raising awareness on sexual health and the prevention and care of sexually transmitted infections and potential situations of abuse or exploitation. One of the unintended outcomes of these sessions is that the facilitators can detect that some boys might have been sexually abused or exploited while discussing matters related to their sexual health and life. Boys are able to see the links between the two topics and that helps them in obtaining more insight on their own situation;
- When boys report a concern or disclose a situation of abuse, they do so by engaging directly and individually with the facilitator following the session (this can mean immediately after the session or days to weeks later). Facilitators listen to the concern reported and act in accordance to the referral policy of the organisation;
- Reinforce the principle of confidentiality. While doing that, boys are reassured that they can share about their personal situations with people who seem to be concerned about their health and well-being.

In situations where boys seek out help and inform the facilitators about a concern or an issue of abuse and exploitation, it is essential to safeguard the trust that boy has offered by adopting a confidential, transparent and honest approach. In this sense, facilitators inform the boys about what kind of support they can and cannot provide, how referrals to counselling and other services function, and ensure that boys can understand the different options and can feel that they have a choice over the possibilities of assistance. To be able to do this properly, facilitators are trained on how to deal with potential child protection cases and on how to activate referral mechanisms in a safe and confidential manner. As honesty and transparency are really important in these moments, facilitators know the mapping of options available and what accessing might entail for the boys and their families. When referrals are difficult to activate after just one or few encounters, facilitators ensure that the rapport is kept informal and that the conversations with the boys include his participation in looking for temporary solutions and risk mitigation strategies. Developing an action plan that is realistic, based on the boys' current resources and that does not create false expectations becomes essential.

“You really need to take the time to listen and be consistent. Keeping promises is fundamental in this sense”.

For many boys, having the courage to speak up and share information with a facilitator about their problems is an important action. Active listening is therefore important not only to understand the situation, but also to be able to show to the boy child that you have respect for their situation and the consequences that the act of disclosure might mean in their lives and families. Before entering communities for their interventions, the facilitators undergo preparation⁴ and training on the existing dynamics and beliefs that are specific to each community, also in terms of gender norms and ideas of masculinity.

“For many of them to share about being sexually exploited means social suicide”.

To be a male champion/facilitator and be able to facilitate the sessions with boys it is fundamental to acquire a series of personal and professional abilities:

- As creating rapport is fundamental to be able to work with boys and gain their trust, facilitators need to have an open and patient communication and need to learn how to handle frustration. Many boys might shut down at the beginning of the process and the trust building process can be lengthy. In this case, it is essential that facilitators are able to be consistent with their commitment and engagement. This means that facilitators need to show patience and coherent behaviour and attitudes through the different sessions;
- As many boys lack a male role model, to act as an example is equally important in the process. When facilitators are able to share their stories and show some level of vulnerability, this in turn helps in creating a sense of connection and communality, and in taking away some of the shame and stigma that boys might be experiencing. For example, facilitators might share information on how they felt while growing up as boys, what boyhood meant to them and how they overcame related challenges in their lives;

⁴ Which includes reading of relevant documentation provided by the organisation.

Being able to show confidence over the subject matter of the issues discussed during the group activities. Facilitators need to have the confidence to discuss these subjects and be perceived as a guidance and reference in this sense;

- To ensure the creation of a trust link, the adoption of a non-judgemental approach is essential. This requires challenging a person's internalised and unconscious biases that are related to gender and to male's vulnerability in terms of sexual abuse;
- As the activities with boys can imply high levels of frustration and pressure, facilitators are asked to conduct work on their feelings and triggers, and to have debriefing sessions where to share and work them through. Understanding and managing emotions are therefore key questions on which facilitators are trained systematically.

“Giving a good example as a male role model is fundamental in the way you engage and behave with others and the community. The boys observe, more than they talk and ask”.

Counselling and case management services for boy survivors

Boys who access counselling services are generally referred by other institutions, by the community-based programmes of the organisation or call in directly themselves, or with their families. Counselling can happen over the phone and in person, in the Windhoek and regional offices of LifeLine/ChildLine. The organisation provides both counselling and case management services, and those cases requiring the activation of a case management process are internally referred by counsellors to social workers. Counsellors conduct the initial assessment and intake of cases and provide first psychological aid and information on the services provided by the organisation. Social workers provide case management services that include individual and group support sessions and coordination with service providers. In any case, boys come in with high level of shame and fear and the counselling services had to develop expertise in how to deal with their cases and consider these feelings in their approach. The first step is to provide information on the overall process and services and ensure that the boys feel confident in his understanding of the different steps and implications.

Boys do not want to be identified as weak or in need of support, and this fear constitutes the main obstacle in engaging with boys during the counselling and the further psychosocial support sessions. The complexity of the issues pertaining to boys, influenced by cultural, traditional and social norms require collaboration with other stakeholders and service providers. As counsellors are on the frontline as they receive the first call or referral, they had to adjust the way they communicate and interact with the boys.

“Interviewing and assessing a boy is different. You really need to understand the gender make up and the element of shame”.

The first assessment sessions are normally prepared by the counselling staff, which comes in knowing that they will have to suggest several activities that they could conduct with boys, to allow them to feel safe and open up. As many boys struggle to verbalise the issue and put words on their specific situation, staff prepares activities such as drawing, journaling⁵ or playing to be able to set up a safe space as a priority. As a first action, counsellors reinforce the language they use to ensure that it insists on questions of confidentiality, that normalises what might have happened to the boy and take the stigma away. Along with questions of gender, counsellors prepare for the sessions by taking into account age and demographics too. This means that counsellors are aware of the community beliefs and traditions of where the boy comes from and how these impact the way that he might want to engage in the sessions. Counsellors prepare for sessions by reading relevant documentation and by participating in internal trainings on these questions. The adaptation is therefore done by counsellors principally in terms of the

⁵ Children can write their thoughts on their days and lives on journals.

language that they might use during the sessions, or by showing to the boys that they have some level of knowledge of where they come from. For instance, they might refer to words used to describe situations and relationships that are specific to the community where the child is from.

Language also plays an important role in this regard, as language can be quite intimidating for some boys in these settings. The availability of a counsellor who is able to express in the native language of the boys helps massively, according to the team observations. Other staff members might use key words – if they are not native in the language of the boy. Learning key words and expressions is done during internal trainings and during the preparation of session, thanks to exchanges amongst different colleagues. This takes away the perception of power imbalance that the boy might have, and helps in providing exact and accessible information to ensure participation in the decision making process. Interestingly, the perception of boys during the counselling and case management process of the person who is trying to assist them can be influenced by other factors too. Not only language is deemed important, but also the way that the counsellor or the social worker presents, in terms of clothing and body language. Boys come in for the sessions having an already fixed perception of what the workers represent and could feel intimidated by them.

A strong preparation to the sessions with boys is one of the key learnings gathered by the counselling and case management teams, which now systematically integrate this action and time before meeting with a boy child:

- Preparing the physical space where to meet the child is important, and staff needs to “come down to their level” as in ensuring that the barrier of formality and respect is broken down. The space is made child-friendly (according to age) and staff make the spaces comfortable and welcoming, by also preparing different materials that can be used for activities if direct conversation is not possible;
- Manage the staff own internalised biases on gender and sexuality. This work needs to be done constantly. Staff needs to be aware of the gender dynamics and stereotypes of the community from which the boy comes from. This work also involves adapting the language that the staff uses to challenge those stereotypes and to avoid sensitive issues that might make the boy feel uncomfortable;
- Prepare questions that allow the case worker to map out and understand what resources and strength factors the boys can have at their disposal to prepare an action plan that empowers them. The information gathered through the assessment by counsellors is recorded and transmitted to case workers. This helps case workers in preparing key questions on strength factors and avoids asking again for information that the boy already provided;
- As many boys are not used to participate in decisions affecting them, it is difficult at the beginning of the encounters to ask for their opinion on choices that might make during the process. Staff prepares in reinforcing language that makes the boys feel empowered, showing that their opinion will be heard and valued – especially when it comes to issues of risk related to the involvement of their family.

Here too, active listening plays an important role in ensuring that the boy enters and remains in the process. Staff has increased their capacity not only in actively listening to what boys say during the sessions, but also to what they do not say or might express through other reactions. As not everything will be disclosed or shared during the meetings, it is important to take away the pressure in getting all the information and handle the frustration along the process.

“There is a natural instinct to be protective, [you] need to externalise from that and just listen. It is not about how you feel and what you should be responding, but actually listen”.

With adolescent boy survivors, there are further challenges that the team takes into account when preparing and conducting a session. In the planning phase, it is considered useful by the staff to learn about the current slang and language that adolescents use in different communities. Adolescent boys specifically join the sessions with a preconceived idea of what a social worker looks like and of their role. Adolescent boys appreciate when a social worker is able to take the formality away, be real and use a language that takes away the power relationship.

“There are cases in which the boy might have a lot of resistance and will shut down completely. We changed our approach and started to do some small talk to create a feeling of ease”.

Younger children do not constantly think about the reasons why they are there, but adolescents are aware of the reasons behind their presence there, as they are also aware of the expectations that society places on them and their gender role and reactions. In terms of development, adolescents are able to understand what has happened to them and the severity that some consequences might have on their lives. This naturally affects the roll out of the sessions. Their reactions and language might change to defend their role and the expectations that they feel they need to comply with in terms of gender:

- Several boys do not want to show any sign of weakness because they want to comply with their gender role and impress the case workers, especially when these are female. They might recur to language or share information on their lives that could make them be perceived as “masculine”, “strong” and “attractive” to the staff. This can also occur through use of strong language or with using a flirting attitude and approach. Female social workers have learnt how to prepare for these sessions and how to conduct them in a way that puts some distance for their own protection (dressing down as to be more modest, controlling verbal and body language, inter alia);
- Adolescent boys who have been abused or exploited by men, might be confused and this creates a different dynamic in which the boys might alternate male-expected aggressive behaviours with more vulnerable reactions. Boys who have been abused or exploited by women might have different reactions as to take some control back. These boys might, for example, reinforce the idea that they were in power, that they decided to agree to the situation;
- Children with a different sexual orientation or gender identity and expression (SOGIE children) often times try to hide their sexuality and identity as much as possible, out of fear of stigma and discrimination. The information shared by these children might thus differ from reality as a way of protecting themselves. To make boys and SOGIE children⁶ feel safe in this regard, staff reiterates from the beginning principles of confidentiality and safety, and also reassure them that in those spaces it is completely safe to be who they are and to be attracted by whoever they want;

6 Attitudes towards SOGIE children in Namibia remain generally discriminatory, especially in rural and traditional communities.

- It is important to ask about the adolescent's interpretation of facts and behaviours. Staff asks adolescents what their understanding of what happened to them is, how they would define it – as words might not always match the kind of crime that the boy might have suffered;
- In terms of sustainability, it is important to have the available option of continuing the therapeutic process through group and peer-to-peer support sessions. For many boys, the individual sessions can be sometimes perceived as spaces where you are vulnerable and weak – and this feeling can grow to be disturbing in some occasions. The group setting and the sharing of experiences takes this away to a certain extent and reaffirm a sense of commonality and solidarity amongst boys.

“Some survivors do not know what to expect from the process, and they come to LifeLine/ ChildLine because they cannot put a name on what happened to them”.

Finally, preparing the boy survivors to meet with authorities and other service providers in the framework of the case management process also requires preparation, time and resources from the staff's side. Considering the challenges that boys already face to open up with the organisation's social workers, it is even more difficult for them to share again their experience and make themselves vulnerable with external actors. The social workers therefore prepare the boy emotionally in meeting with other service providers and explain to them the relevance of these meetings for their specific case. Conducting a participatory risk assessment with the boy in this sense is paramount, as well as being physically present with them during the meetings. In this sense, it has been observed that the physical presence of social workers might mitigate some of the stress of these encounters and apply some level of control over the language and attitude of service providers towards the survivors.

The human and technical resources necessary for the implementation

To conduct its work, the organisation counts with teams that include community-based activities facilitators and male champions, counselling and case management staff, a gender department and management and administration personnel. The personnel and volunteers of the organisation are made of both male and female workers. Male workers mostly conduct community-based programmes with boys and men, while the counselling and case management services are principally carried out by female staff. The link that the organisation has established between these different programmatic areas is based on a regular and systematic exchange and flow of information, data and learning. The internal referral mechanism is fed by a strong data management system that analyses data on child protection cases and identifies trends and categories of cases. This helps in internally assigning cases, in understanding under which category and by which staff cases can be better supported, and in assessing the personnel needs for update, training and strengthening:

The organisation records every call, intake and referrals that it receives;⁷

Information received during the call (such as the preferred language of the boy child) is captured to ensure that the boy is matched with the right counsellor to the extent possible. This also helps in avoiding the boy having to repeat the same information, as the counsellor will already have the necessary data at her or his disposal;

Data is pulled out on a monthly basis to internally provide information on the volume of cases referred and dealt with, allowing equal and convenient distribution of the workload;

This allows the team to adjust the work plan, and to tailor the communication and prevention messages that are used in awareness-raising activities in communities, schools, radios, etc.

⁷ It is important to note that high numbers of cases of sexual exploitation of boys are not reported by authorities, families or boys themselves. Issues of safety, fear and preserving the family and community's image constitute some of the barriers to reporting to the services of LifeLine/ChildLine. In addition, reports of sexual violence against boys and men are often dismissed by police services or traditional authorities and do not come – or only at a later stage – to the attention of the organisation.

As seen, the staff of the organisation had to increase and enhance its skills to be able to work with boy survivors, across the different programmes. In this sense, initial and refreshment internal trainings have been fundamental. The existence of a Gender Department within the organisation played an important role in this respect and ensured the presence of accessible internal learning and expertise options. The training conducted by this department included topics such as:

- Psychological first aid taking into account trauma and ideas of masculinity;
- Overcoming personal biases over issues of gender and sexuality, including on how to work with SOGIE children (children with different sexual orientation and gender identity or expression), and challenging gender and traditional beliefs. The training on internalised biases is done in a systematic manner;
- The cultural and traditional beliefs of different communities around issues of masculinity, sexuality and gender stereotypes. Drawing from the personal and professional knowledge of staff members can be useful in this respect;
- Interview techniques and methods, including alternative activities for engaging with boys who might be more resistant or shut down during the sessions;
- Understanding child development and boys reactions to traumatic events and experiences. In this framework, the personnel is trained on understanding the difference between girls' and boys' trajectories and reactions on matters related to sexual exploitation and abuse;
- Boys' development and exploration of sexuality and gender identity, and the use of appropriate language that takes away stigma and shame.

Along with the trainings, another key to the success of the intervention is the availability of internal supervision and mentoring channels. LifeLine/ChildLine has a case management supervisor who is in charge of assigning the cases from the counsellors to the social worker and providing guidance and advice on how to deal with more complex cases and issues. The assignment of the case to each staff is crucial, and it is done based on the individual strengths and level of experience gathered by the social worker in working with cases involving sexual abuse and exploitation against boys. Social workers also know that they can refer to the guidance of the supervisor when in need of support and exploring alternative approaches to deal with some cases. For instance, the supervisor can make decisions on transferring a specific case to another social worker, organise case conferencing actions, or suggest shifting the individual sessions with the survivor to group and peer support sessions⁸.

⁸ It has been noted that in some cases, boys might be more comfortable opening up and go through counselling sessions when in group settings – where they can see that other boys have been through the same issues;

Conclusion and possibilities for expansion of work

The experience accumulated by the team of LifeLine/ChildLine in working with boy survivors provides important learnings and insights on how to deal with the unique challenges of boy survivors and the reactions they might have in the care process. The adjustments and internal learning that the organisation had developed throughout the years can be found around the questions of trust, language and communication with boys during the different steps of the case management process.

At the community level⁹, the organisation draws from a long-standing experience working on issues related to gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health. This work, coupled with the offer of free and accessible assistance services, allowed it to gain an excellent reputation and anchorage at the community level – as well as with institutional stakeholders. Through their engagement and outreach activities with boys it has been noted a clear will, and need, from the boys to participate in even more regular and tailored activities. Boys appreciate the activities as they are a sign that some adults care about their lives and they provide them with a sense of ownership that sees the value in their contribution to society. When boys know that there are regular activities for them, it helps them in obtaining a sense of routine and reduce their involvement in street-connected and illicit activities and groups.

“In many communities there are only activities for girls, creating a dynamic that tells to boys that you are not interested in them. You make them feel less important, less significant. In a way, you are blaming the patriarchy on young boys as well”.

The trust that LifeLine/ChildLine consolidated with communities puts it in a privileged position to upgrade the activities with boys and use these safe spaces as platform to raise awareness on issues of sexual exploitation and abuse. These platforms could also represent an important place where to work with boys on masculinities and emotions, encouraging them to speak up and challenge the harmful idea that associates strength with the lack of sharing. In turn, when boys are informed about issues of violence and are able to speak up, they are more educated and empowered to make decisions over issues of sex and sexuality as well, removing the whole responsibility from the girls.

⁹ Communities of work in different regions include male engagement sessions, positive parenting sessions, school and community outreaches, radio programmes, awareness raising (including IEC materials distribution).

Moreover, the recent public reports of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys in school settings across communities in Namibia allowed making the issue more visible. LifeLine/ChildLine has experience of engaging with child protection actors – including education personnel – in training and capacity-strengthening interventions and is well positioned to increase their involvement in early detection and reporting of cases. The experience of the organisation confirms that when these actors are equipped with more knowledge and skills, referrals of cases improve in terms of quantity and quality.

Finally, the long experience of the organisation in conducting campaigns on sexual reproductive health and gender-based violence could be used to define messages that challenge gender stereotypes and ideas of masculinity and that spark the conversation on issues of sexual violence against boys in the country. The active involvement of male youth associations in the activities of the organisation is highly beneficial in this respect. The recommendations to improve work with boys shared by the male youth association “Real DC”¹⁰, based in the capital, Windhoek, include:

- Developing activities (play, sport, creative, etc.) for boys that create a safe space, where boys can come together and have informal information sessions at the end of the activities. This allows boys to build trust to organisations and gets them listening to what they have to say;
- The activities should be facilitated by young men from their communities, who are able to relate to their situations and issues and provide a positive role model – preventing them from finding that elsewhere;
- Peer-to-peer support groups can be very impactful and allow to develop feelings of empathy and solidarity amongst boys and young men;
- Parents, caregivers and families need to be sensitised on these issues in a parallel process. Parents need to receive training on parenting skills to ensure that their boys are safe and not left without any supervision. The public debate on cases of sexual exploitation of boys in schools provide for an opportunity for engagement and discussion with parents;
- Parents need to be further trained on how to communicate with the boy child, but also on how to provide support to SOGIE children;
- Boys in Namibia benefitted from nation-wide and media campaigns¹¹ on sexual health issues – including HIV/AIDS – and would appreciate similar campaigning activities on gender norms and stereotypes of masculinity;
- The involvement of community and traditional leaders, as well as young public figures that children look out to, could help in promoting positive ideas of masculinity.

¹⁰ Youth established and community-based organisation. The organisation involves boys from local communities in designing activities for boys and raising awareness on their issues, including questions of sexual abuse and exploitation.

¹¹ Campaigns ran by LifeLine/ChildLine, the Namibian government and other national and international civil society organisations and agencies.

To know more

- **To know more about the work of LifeLine/ChildLine in Namibia and obtain more detail on their approach and services, please visit:**
<https://www.lifelinechildline.org.na/>
- **To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the work of ECPAT International on this at the global level, please visit:**
<https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>
- **To know more about the work of ECPAT International:**
<https://ecpat.org/>



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