



Exploitation of children in Guatemala

Insights from a gender equality, disability and social inclusion analysis

Carmen Leon-Himmelstine, Rachel Marcus and Anushka Sisodia

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Key messages

The key forms of child exploitation in Guatemala are sexual and labour exploitation, and exploitation by organised criminal groups. Begging and irregular adoption are also of concern. Most of the victims-survivors are children and female.

The key drivers of the exploitation of children are poverty, low levels of education, migration, and deep economic and social inequalities intertwined with norms in which women and children are seen as economic resources whose vulnerability can be exploited.

Digital technologies and media are used by networks engaging in trafficking and exploitation to recruit potential victims, and to access, produce and disseminate pornographic and/or erotic material for economic gain.

Some initiatives implemented by civil society organisations and the government aim to raise awareness about online sexual exploitation and support online crime reporting.

Effective initiatives are those that are implemented in partnership with multiple stakeholders, provide holistic support to victims in parallel to legal advocacy, strengthen the institutional capacity and skills of duty-bearers, work with communities, and address poverty and underlying causes.



About the authors

Carmen León-Himmelstine is a Research Fellow in ODI Global's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) programme.

Anushka Sisodia is a Research Officer in ODI Global's Politics and Governance (POGO) programme.

Rachel Marcus is a Senior Research Fellow in ODI Global's GESI programme.

About this publication

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) has awarded ODI Global a regional project to conduct a gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) analysis to inform FCDO's ambition to support women, girls and other minority groups in the Latin American region. This brief is part of the project which focuses on Uruguay, Chile, Guatemala and Panama, providing high-quality and updated evidence on issues such as gender-based violence, women in politics, women's economic empowerment, feminist foreign policy, LGBTQ+ rights, children in alternative care, online violence, and bioeconomy. For each country, the analysis provides:

- an overview of up-to-date data on gender equality, disability and social inclusion issues
- 'deep dives' analysis into two/three topics of national relevance
- recommendations for relevant stakeholders at different levels to support action at national level and potential collaborations with international partners.

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Front cover image: Folk dancers in indigenous costume perform in San Juan del Obispo, Guatemala © Lucy.Brown | Shutterstock ID: 1157017480

Introduction

This brief analyses child exploitation in Guatemala. It highlights key statistics, initiatives that work to prevent and address child exploitation, and the role of digital technologies. It is part of a broader analysis of gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) in Guatemala. The analysis draws on existing literature, government reports and 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders working on this topic.

Key statistics

GEDSI in Guatemala

- Guatemala is a multiethnic country, composed of Indigenous (Maya, Xinka and Garífuna), Ladino/Mestizo and Afro-descendent peoples. In 2023, Indigenous people accounted for 38.8% of the population (most of whom are Maya, 37.5% of the total population), while Ladino/Mestizo people accounted for 60.3% (INE, 2023a).
- Around 56% of the population lives in poverty, with similar rates for men (56.5%) and women (55.5%). Extreme poverty is concentrated among Indigenous groups (29.8%) and in rural areas (24.4%) (INE, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).
- While more girls than boys are in school, Guatemala lags behind other countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region in relation to education: lower-secondary completion stands at only 51% for girls and 48% for boys, and Indigenous peoples remain underrepresented in higher education (INE, 2023b; World Bank, 2025a).
- Gender gaps persist in employment, as only 52.3% of women participate in the labour force, compared to 87.3% of men (World Bank, 2025b). Women undertake the majority of unpaid care and domestic work (41.9 hours per week compared with only 8.3 hours for men) (ECLAC, 2025).
- While the homicide rate has been declining in the country since 2010, it was still high in 2023, at 16.1 per 100,000 people (HRW, 2025). Guatemala's criminality score – a measure of overall levels of organised crime in the country – is 6.60, which is 9th in the Americas and 26th in the world (OC Index, 2023).

Exploitation of children in Guatemala

- In 2024, the most common forms of exploitation detected among victim-survivors receiving support in shelters were: sexual exploitation (50%) and labour exploitation (33%), recruitment of minors by organised criminal groups (9%), and sexual and labour exploitation (4%) (SVET, 2025).
- Most of the victim-survivors of exploitation in 2024 were adolescents aged 13-17 years (66%), children aged 0-12 years (24%), female (73%) and from the Ladino/Mestizo population (76%) (ibid.).
- Data from the first quarter of 2025 shows that most potential cases of exploitation of rescued children and adolescents were related to child labour (51%), sexual exploitation (21%), begging (12%) and irregular adoption (12%) (ibid.).
- The departments of Guatemala and Quiché reported the highest number of rescued children (15 each), followed by Quetzaltenango (13), Escuintla (6), Alta Verapaz (3), Baja Verapaz and Retalhuleu (2 each) and Zacapa (1) (ibid.).

Main findings

Key forms of exploitation and drivers

Commercial sexual exploitation: It was found that victims were often deceived and coerced into commercial sex work after being offered work in bars, hotels etc. Deceptive recruitment is common (Medinilla, 2023). However, some reports indicate girls being sold into commercial sexual exploitation by parents and caregivers for economic compensation (UNICEF, 2016). Research also reports the sexual exploitation of Guatemalan women and children in settlements on either side of the Mexican-Guatemalan border, largely in prostitution and pornography (Salinas, 2023).

Child labour: Key hazardous sectors in which children are working are agriculture (both on family farms and as contracted labour); industry, including gravel crushing and manufacture of fireworks; and services, including street vending, begging, shoe-shining and commercial sexual exploitation (USDOL, 2023). Girls work as paid employees at private houses as domestic workers, as cleaners, at food stalls and at *tortillerias* (small business where freshly made tortillas are produced and sold) (KII). Boys are found working in agriculture, street begging, in the fireworks industry and selling fried chicken from carts. Children usually work in exploitative conditions (more than 12 hours a day) with low salaries, and are exposed to abuse, sexual violence, slavery and total deprivation of liberty (KII).

Exploitation by organised criminal groups: Criminal groups recruit children and young people as gang members, offering them a degree of protection and some economic benefits in return for their activities. Criminal groups also coerce children to carry out activities for them (for example, from acting as lookouts and selling drugs to killing and having sexual relationships with gang members). Children usually carry out these activities because they fear lethal violence against themselves or family members. Because they are coerced, rather than gang members, they may receive no support or economic benefits in return (Boerman and Golob, 2021).

The factors contributing to the patterns of exploitation of children are:

- **Poverty**, with some traffickers in both rural and urban areas offering parents money in exchange for their children (ODHAG, 2019).
- **Low levels of participation in education**, which drives child labour, in particular (FAO, 2022; KIIs).
- **Migration**, including children in households that are economically precarious, despite members having migrated (Heidbrink et al., 2021), and returnee children who return to face difficult economic conditions and stigma (KII).
- **Deep economic and social inequalities** by geographical location, gender and ethnicity, which contribute to precarity. Intertwined with structural economic inequalities are norms among some sub-groups (for example, criminal organisations and parents/caregivers without alternative options) in which women and children are seen as economic resources whose vulnerability can be exploited (UNICEF, 2016; ODHAG, 2019).

The role of digital technologies and media in exploitation of children

The social media platforms most used by networks engaging in exploitation are Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, OnlyFans and Snapchat. Digital technologies and media are used by trafficking and exploitation networks in the following ways.

Recruitment of potential victims: Social media, local radio stations or advertisements in the press are used to invite girls and young women to work in hotels, night clubs, spas and other fake jobs and they are then forced into prostitution (UNICEF, 2016; Asmann, 2022). Young boys can be targeted by criminal organisations who use social media to advertise fake jobs in private security companies (Aquino, 2024).

Access to sexual content: Trafficking and exploitation networks can use digital technologies and the media to access sexual content (images, videos) from adolescents via ‘sexting’ once they gain adolescents’ trust, usually through the use of ‘groomers’ (Cruz Lorente, 2024).

Production of sexual content: Criminal organisations or adolescents working for them use simple digital tools to produce child pornography. Through these channels, children can be accessed almost without any risk to the perpetrator (Cruz Lorente, 2024). More recently, new artificial intelligence technologies are being used by adolescents or trafficking and exploitation networks to create explicit images and videos of children (EFE, 2024, Kang, 2025).

Distribution of sexual content: Criminal organisations disseminate pornographic photography and films of boys, girls and young women through email, meeting rooms or chat rooms, virtual communities, and websites. Content is distributed for various purposes such as profiting from the sale of pornographic material, cyberbullying, attracting clients to venues (for example, bars, spas) where children are working illegally, or for sale abroad (UNICEF, 2016; Cruz Lorente, 2024).

Policy and programme responses to address child exploitation

According to practitioners' perspectives on what is working, and occasionally project data, the following factors lead to successful initiatives.

Work in partnership with multiple stakeholders: Interventions that work with multiple stakeholders (for example, parents/caregivers, health and education staff, local authorities, legal prosecutors, religious leaders) are more likely to address child exploitation. This approach can be effective when addressing the normalisation of gender norms that perpetuate violence towards children (KIIs).

Provision of holistic support to victims in parallel to legal advocacy: Initiatives that provide victims with holistic support (shelter, protection, mental health and legal support) are more likely to address their needs. This work should be accompanied by legal advocacy to make sure victims receive legal justice and the restoration of their rights (KII).

Strengthening the institutional capacity and skills of duty-bearers: Strong institutions and skilled staff are critical to respond to child exploitation (KIIs). Regional evidence shows that strengthening institutional capacity can improve the identification of suspected trafficking situations, the provision of survivor-centred care and the prosecution of offences (USAID, 2020).

Working with communities while adopting their perspectives: Interventions that work with community members are more likely to address child exploitation (KIIs). Initiatives of this type have established 'protective spaces' (at schools, churches, health clinics, etc.) to raise awareness on child exploitation and encourage reporting of cases (KII) or provide training for local leaders to prevent human trafficking in their communities (PADF, 2024).

Approaches that address poverty and underlying causes: Although there is an evidence gap on these initiatives, they can support Guatemalan youth by raising their self-esteem and sense of hope. In some cases, they may help them develop viable livelihoods and reduce their interest in migration – a risk factor for child exploitation (MercyCorps, 2019).

Programmes to address risks of child exploitation related to technology

Initiatives to address online child exploitation aim to create awareness about the risks of digital technologies, support online crime reporting, and strengthen the capacities and knowledge of duty bearers. Examples include:

- **Modo Digital:** This is an information and awareness-raising initiative targeting children and their parents/carers or teachers to help them identify and prevent online sexual exploitation.
- The **‘Puedes verme’ campaign:** This includes videos and infographics shared on social networks to raise awareness, inform and encourage the population to report human trafficking.
- The **Online Child Protection System of the Anti-Trafficking Attorney’s Office** (Sistema de Protección Infantil en línea de la Fiscalía contra la Trata de Personas). Created in 2018, this initiative deals with any reports of online sexual abuse crimes and continuously monitors social media to detect content that is disseminating child pornography.
- **Crime Stoppers Guatemala** (also known as tupista.gt): This initiative facilitates anonymous, reliable and secure citizen participation to report online sexual and labour exploitation, and to share information with the National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil).

Challenges and gaps

Interviewees and the literature identified the following challenges faced by interventions that aim to address child exploitation.

Not reaching key marginalised groups: Existing campaigns to address child exploitation (even those that use digital technologies to reach wider audiences) tend not to reach key marginalised groups such as children out of school, LGBTQI+ or migrant children (KIIs).

Limited budgets: Interviewees stressed the need for continued advocacy to secure budget finance from the government or international organisations. Civil society interviewees stressed the existing financial pressure that their organisations are facing upon the cancellation of funding from international partners.

Limited capacity from duty bearers: Lack of skilled staff hinders the detection of criminal acts, proper identification of victims and criminal investigations (ODHAG, 2019). Similarly, service providers (such as mental health professionals in the justice sector) can lack capacity to provide adequate support to victims of human trafficking (Calel Tzunux, 2023).

Few initiatives focusing on preventing child exploitation target adults: Most initiatives target children predominantly (those at school and their teachers) instead of holding adults accountable for child exploitation (KII). Targeting adults on issues of child protection and the human rights of children becomes more important in a context where violence is normalised (KII).

Impact data is rarely collected: This gap prevents an understanding of the impact of campaigns and interventions, whether they have met their objectives or if they are successful at preventing or reducing child exploitation (KIIs).

Knowledge gaps

- There is a lack of disaggregated and intersectional data on patterns of exploitation of children.
- There needs to be further research on the specific ways that networks engaging in exploitation use digital technologies to communicate, recruit and exploit children.
- There is a lack of impact evaluations that provide evidence on what works to prevent and address child exploitation.
- There is limited evidence on the factors that lead to exploitation of children (for example, return migration; the gender and social norms/values that underpin exploitation; environmental hazards) to support the design of better programming and interventions to address existing structural factors.

Recommendations

- **Enhance shelter capacity and adequate support for children from vulnerable groups** in need of tailored support according to their needs – such as adolescent mothers, migrants, returnees or LGBTQI+ children.
- **Provide technical support and support training initiatives to duty bearers**, particularly those implementing the new law to criminalise the sexual exploitation of girls by incarcerated criminals (Decree 3-2025).
- **Support positive initiatives led by community members** to prevent and support victim-survivors of child exploitation. Roundtables with civil society organisations can be supported to exchange perspectives, learning and an action plan. Potential partners for this work include ECPAT, the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF).
- **Support the dissemination of prevention and relevant information through co-developed messages** (with community leaders, children, local authorities, civil society, etc.) via local communication channels (for example, community radio, local TV) and local leaders who are respected by the population and speak local languages.
- **Facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration between Guatemala and international partners** to address online child exploitation and abuse. Potential exchanges could take place between the UK’s [National Crime Agency’s Child Exploitation and Online Protection \(NCA – CEOP\)](#) and its equivalent in Guatemala (for example, the [Cybercrime Prosecutor’s Office of the Attorney’s General Office or Fiscalía de Delitos Cibernéticos del Ministerio Público](#)). Exchanges can also be facilitated with the Internet Watch Foundation, members of the [Global Taskforce on Child Sexual Abuse Online](#) (by the ‘WeProtect’ Global Alliance) and/or the [National Center for Missing & Exploited Children \(NCMEC\)](#).
- **Support the enactment of laws that tackle the threat of child sexual abuse images generated by artificial intelligence (AI)** by making it illegal to possess, create or distribute AI tools designed to create such material.
- **Support parents/caregivers and other relevant adults (for example, school authorities) in better protecting children** from the risks they face when using digital technologies, including the creation of safe practices to prevent online exploitation.

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4 Millbank
London SW1P 3JA
United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

odi.org
Linkedin: www.linkedin.com/company/odi/
BlueSky: [@odi.global](https://bsky.app/profile/odi.global)