

Systematic review of social norms linked to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents

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WHAT IS THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS (SECA)?

SECA is a form of sexual abuse affecting the health and wellbeing of millions of young people worldwide.¹ It occurs when an adult coerces, manipulates or deceives a person under age 19 into sexual activity for material or non-material benefit.² Sexual exploitation is distinguished from other forms of sexual abuse by the element of sexual exchange; for example, sex in return for money, gifts, or status.³ SECA can have severe, long-term health consequences for those who experience it, including trauma, depression, suicidal tendencies, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual risk taking, HIV and early pregnancy.⁴ SECA is widely underreported, and accurate prevalence figures remain unknown.⁴

WHY SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms play a key role in how groups of people understand childhood and interact with children and adolescents, and therefore should be critically addressed in combatting SECA.⁵ Social norms are informal rules that define appropriate behaviours in a group, and can be categorised into descriptive norms and injunctive norms, which are underpinned by personal attitudes and factual beliefs (Figure 1).^{6,7}

In the global child protection field, interest in social norms has grown over the past 15 years, especially among groups aiming to reduce harmful practices such as female genital cutting and child marriage.^{8,9} Researchers and practitioners are increasingly exploring the role that norms might play in promoting violence against children and SECA.^{10,11,12}

Figure 1: Social norms definitions

<p>DESCRIPTIVE NORMS</p>	<p>INJUNCTIVE NORMS</p>
<p>People's beliefs about what others in their setting do. <i>Example: People in my social group send their children to school.</i></p>	<p>People's beliefs about the extent to which others in their setting approve of a given behaviour. <i>Example: People in my social group disapprove of those who do not send their children to school.</i></p>
<p>ATTITUDES</p>	<p>FACTUAL BELIEFS</p>
<p>People's personal preferences, judgments, or evaluations about something. <i>Example: I'd rather send my children to school than not send them to school.</i></p>	<p>An acceptance that something is true about the world. <i>Example: Children who go to school are generally more successful than those that don't.</i></p>

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This brief presents key findings from a systematic review that summarises the existing evidence on harmful social norms linked to SECA worldwide, and identifies gaps in the literature.

We searched 5 databases, and identified 55 eligible papers, representing 49 studies, from 37 countries around the world, that provided evidence of social norms linked to SECA. The most frequent study sites were the USA (12 studies), Thailand (5 studies), and South Africa (4 studies) (Table 1). The majority of studies used qualitative methods and purposive or convenience sampling.

While little research exists on descriptive norms linked to SECA, we identified six injunctive norms:

1. Owning goods as a marker of social status
2. Being sexually active
3. Exchanging sex for favours
4. Contributing financially to the household
5. Stigma and discrimination against young people who experienced SECA
6. Lack of social sanctions for SECA perpetrators

We also identified three attitudes and three factual beliefs underpinning some of the identified injunctive norms.

Our findings suggest that effective interventions will address harmful norms, promote protective norms, and consider how individual, social and structural factors interrelate to perpetuate SECA. Social norms interventions should consider both global, and locally specific norms driving SECA.

KEY FINDINGS: SOCIAL NORMS LINKED TO SECA

DESCRIPTIVE NORMS

Notably, few studies explored people’s beliefs about how common SECA is, and in those that did there were dramatic differences between respondents and settings. For example, in Brazil between 15% and 38% of survey respondents (depending on their sex and setting) thought that buying sex from girls under 18 was common.¹³

INJUNCTIVE NORMS

1 Material items allow young people to gain status among their peers

Material goods were associated with social mobility and status, and a desire for status among peers led some young people to exchange sex for these goods.

2 Young people face pressure from community members to be sexually active

Young people faced social pressure from their peers, potential sexual partners, and the media to be sexually active or to have many sexual partners, which was seen as “modern” and “fashionable”.

3 Community members expect the exchange of sex for favours

Providing gifts or money as a retribution for sex was perceived as normal, and at times an expression of love. Community members believed that girls should recognise that accepting gifts or money from men indicated that they were sexually available.

“ [S]he shouldn’t accept gifts and things from him. She should know he will expect her to have sex if she takes money and gifts from him.”

ADULT WOMAN, TANZANIA¹⁴

4 Young people are expected by their communities to contribute financially to their families

Young people were expected to contribute financially to their families, and this could lead them to exchange sex for money. These expectations were most often described in the context of poverty, and it was not typically clear to what extent they were underpinned by material need.

“ In families that range from 7 to 11 members and have an unstable monthly income of \$75-150 a month, daughters view this type of relationship as an opportunity to sacrifice for the family and help them financially.”

STUDY ON SHORT-TERM MARRIAGES, EGYPT¹⁵

• Attitude: Acceptance of SECA to provide for oneself or one’s family

While SECA was generally disapproved of, some participants – including some young people who sold sex – accepted SECA as a way to meet individual and household needs.

Table 1: Injunctive norms

Key findings	Injunctive norms, and underpinning attitudes and factual beliefs					
	Key findings					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Countries						
Brazil					●	■
Dominican Republic				●	●	■
USA	●	●	●	○	●	■
Estonia	●					□
Spain						□
UK				○	●	□
Multi-country study Europe*					○	
Botswana	●		●			□
Côte d’Ivoire				●		
Egypt				●		□
Ethiopia					○	
Ghana		●	●			□
Liberia	●	●	●		●	□
Niger				○	●	
Nigeria	●	●	●	●	●	□
Rwanda	●					
South Africa	●	●	●		●	□
Tanzania		●	●	●	●	■
Uganda	●	●	●	○	●	■
Bangladesh					●	●
China	●				○	
South Korea	●	●			●	
Thailand	●	●		●	●	
Multi-country study South East Asia**	●	●			●	□
South East Asia Regional Report***						●
Australia				○	●	
Papua New Guinea				○	●	

*Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Poland & Ukraine

**Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand & Vietnam

***Nepal, Philippines, Thailand

5 Sexually exploited young people are stigmatised by their communities

Sexually exploited young people experienced internalised stigma – feeling isolated, guilty, dirty, or shameful – and discrimination, violence, and other abuses. Stigma acted as a barrier to seeking help, returning to school, and accessing healthcare services.

• Attitude: Disapproval of commercial SECA

Community members, tourists, and young people who had sold sex themselves shared pervasive negative attitudes against commercial SECA.

6 Perpetrators of SECA are socially tolerated by their communities

Blame for SECA was sometimes placed on the sexually exploited young people, or on their parents, but there was no evidence of blame being placed on perpetrators.

“People spit at us but at night their father, uncle, brothers come to sleep with us... there is no punishment for them.”

GIRL WHO SOLD SEX, BANGLADESH¹⁶

• Attitude: Acceptance of SECA when it occurs with older or more physically developed young people

There was greater community acceptance of SECA when the child or adolescent was older or more physically developed.

■ Factual belief: Children and adolescents’ readiness for sex is determined solely by age of physical development

Age and physical changes such as menstruation and breast development were viewed as signs of sexual maturity.

“You got ten-year-olds and eleven-year-olds out there... Like right after a girl receives her period, she can be sent out [by a pimp for sex work].”

14-18-YEAR-OLD IN-SCHOOL GIRL, USA¹⁷

■ Factual belief: Men have powerful sexual urges that are hard for them to resist

Promiscuity, sexual conquest, and sexual prowess were seen as important features of masculinity, and were linked to beliefs about men’s strong sexual needs.

“Participants indicated that boys were, or should be, persistently and in all circumstances driven by a desire for sex.”

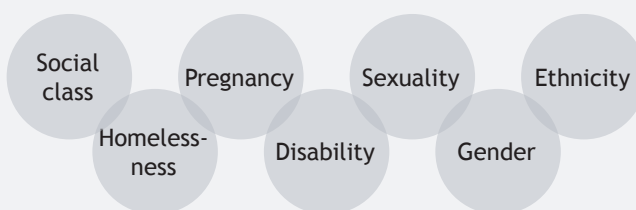
STUDY ON SEXUAL EXCHANGE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE, NIGERIA¹⁸

■ Factual belief: Intergenerational relationships can be beneficial for both parties

Younger sexual partners were seen to be less likely to have HIV, and to offer greater sexual satisfaction and feelings of shared youthfulness. Young people were also believed to benefit from the maturity, wisdom, financial security, and sexual experience of older partners.

INTERSECTING MARGINALISATIONS

Although not an original aim of the review, findings emerged across all regions that young people marginalised due to the following conditions and identities have a greater vulnerability to SECA.



“I was raped and I got pregnant... My father instead of helping me he kicked me out of the house... I slept in the sidewalks and a woman who owned the bar... she picked me up and she sold me [forced her into sex work]...”

FEMALE SEX WORKER, MEXICO¹⁹

“People think that since you are Roma they can harass you or offer money to have sex with you.”

14-YEAR-OLD GIRL WORKING AND LIVING ON THE STREETS, ALBANIA²⁰

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Descriptive norms: More evidence is needed on context-specific descriptive norms of SECA and their connection to the behaviours of both young people and those who sexually exploit them. This information is crucial for developing interventions, as descriptive norms are closely associated to adolescent sexual behaviour.²¹

The sexual exploitation of boys: The social norms linked to the sexual exploitation of boys, and age-appropriate methods to help boys with recovery and reintegration should be prioritised in further research.

CONCLUSION

We found evidence across all regions that SECA perpetrators are socially tolerated, while sexually exploited young people experience stigma and discrimination. Norms around owning goods as a social status marker, and the expectation that young people contribute financially to their families, were most common in low- and middle-income countries; while community expectations of the exchange of sex for favours were primarily found in sub-Saharan Africa. Community pressure on young people to be sexually active was evident in both high-income and low- and middle- income countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings emphasise the need for the following strategies, implemented simultaneously at the individual, social, and structural levels, to prevent SECA and improve outcomes for those who have experienced it.

- **Individual-level** interventions should support young people in making informed sexual decisions that promote their health and well-being. For example, through critical reflection groups that focus on helping young people identify and achieve long-term life aspirations.²²
- **Social-level** interventions should address the multiple interrelated harmful norms, attitudes, and factual beliefs sustaining perpetration,²³ including those promoting male entitlement to sex. Interventions should also promote protective social norms, such as negative social sanctioning of perpetrators of SECA.
- **Structural-level** interventions should increase young people's access to resources, particularly in contexts where they face peer pressure to obtain status goods, and families expect young people to contribute financially.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

- **Engage men:** Men are the most common perpetrators of SECA, because of harmful societal expectations of men. Interventions should engage men to understand how they experience social norms linked to SECA, and promote protective norms around sex.
- **Incorporate local perspectives:** Interventions must engage the beneficiaries from the outset, from design to implementation and evaluation, including those from the most vulnerable, marginalised groups.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

- **Promote understanding among service providers:** Service providers must be sensitised about SECA to overcome barriers to care, including raising awareness that boys and disabled young people can also be sexually exploited.
- **Change service provider attitudes:** Interventions should target service providers' attitudes, promoting empathy by enforcing the message that young people are not to blame for their sexual exploitation.



LINEA (The Learning Initiative on Norms, Exploitation and Abuse) is an international, multi-pronged project testing how social norm theory can be used to reduce sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in regions across the world.

For more information see our website:
www.lshtm.ac.uk/linea

SOURCE REFERENCE

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