



# UNICEF's Action Against Child Trafficking

Strengthening systems to prevent child trafficking,  
protect children, and enable recovery and reintegration of survivors

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This photo is taken at Capeds, a state-owned transit center in Gabon which supports child victims of trafficking. UNICEF provides multidisciplinary support, including psychosocial support, legal assistance in court, social and family reintegration, and capacity building for social workers and specialized educators.

## Executive Summary

Despite sustained international efforts, child trafficking remains a growing concern, with children increasingly overrepresented among detected victims of trafficking in several regions. Long-standing vulnerabilities and enablers of child trafficking, including poverty, lack of access to services and weak child protection systems, harmful social norms, gender-based discrimination, and armed conflict, have been exacerbated by emerging risks. These include technology-facilitated exploitation and abuse, the expansion of transnational organized crime networks, and the impact of climate change. Child mobility has also increased in several regions, while the availability

of safe and legal pathways for children to migrate or seek protection has not kept pace, increasing the risks of exploitation and trafficking. UNICEF, leveraging its global presence and mandate, is combating child trafficking through prevention, protection, response and reintegration initiatives. Partnerships with governments, UN agencies and international organizations, civil society, survivors, and the private sector are central to these efforts. The 25th anniversary of the Palermo Protocol offers not only a moment to reflect on progress and continued gaps, but also an opportunity to renew political commitment and strengthen collective action to end child trafficking.



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# Introduction

2025 marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Palermo Protocol*, formally known as the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. Adopted as a supplement to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, the significance of the Palermo Protocol lies in establishing a common understanding of human trafficking, the first time this had been done through an international instrument. Importantly, the Protocol outlines specific provisions to address the vulnerabilities of women and children, acknowledges trafficked persons as victims of a crime, and mandates States to take actions across three priority areas: prevention, protection, and prosecution. While the Protocol

strengthened international collaboration to prevent and address child trafficking and catalyzed the development of national anti-trafficking laws and initiatives, significant numbers of children continue to fall victim to trafficking.

As part of its mission to ensure all children grow up in safe and nurturing environments and free from violence and exploitation, action against child trafficking is central to UNICEF's child protection agenda. This white paper assesses the scale of child trafficking, sets out UNICEF's unique value proposition in this space, shares concrete examples of UNICEF's programmatic footprint, and outlines strategic priorities for stronger global action.

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## Understanding the Scale of Child Trafficking and the Urgency to Act

Child trafficking is a serious violation of children's rights and a global crime that affects children's lives, their families, and entire communities. According to global data from UNODC's 2024 [Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#), between 2020 and 2023, national crime authorities detected 202,478 trafficking victims, 38 per cent of whom were children.<sup>1</sup> The report further highlights a 31 per cent increase of detected child victims between 2019 and 2022, higher than the overall increase detected during the same period for all age groups (25 per cent).

**Child trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. According to international law, consent is irrelevant where a child is concerned. (*Palermo Protocol*)**

The percentage of trafficked girls alone who were identified during the same period rose by 38 per cent. The report also points to gendered dynamics of child trafficking: girls were predominantly trafficked for sexual exploitation, boys for forced labor, and child victims faced nearly twice

the rate of extreme violence compared to adults.<sup>2</sup> These numbers likely present only a fraction of actual trafficking victims, as many victims remain undetected due to a combination of factors that hinder their identification. This includes limited training and awareness of frontline responders who may fail to identify victims of child trafficking; limited self-identification of child victims, owing to, for example, mistrust in authorities, stigmatization, the effects of mental health and psychosocial distress, fear of their traffickers, and weak legal, institutional, and child protection frameworks. Identification is further complicated by hidden forms of trafficking, such as domestic and familial trafficking, and evolving forms of trafficking such as online-facilitated trafficking, which remains inadequately addressed due to limited regulations, safeguards, and enforcement mechanisms to prevent, investigate, and respond to exploitation.

Accurate reporting of the scale of child trafficking remains particularly limited in contexts where government institutions are weakened or disrupted, including in situations of armed conflict, large-scale displacement, and humanitarian emergencies. Yet recent data highlights the diverse and evolving forms of exploitation that children may be subjected to through trafficking, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage and other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), recruitment into

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1 UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024* (United Nations publication, Sales no.: E.24.XI.11).

2 Ibid.

armed groups and forced criminal activities.<sup>3</sup> Oftentimes victims of child trafficking are exposed to multiple forms of exploitation at once.

**Beyond confirmed trafficking cases, children are subjected to a broader spectrum of exploitative practices.** These contexts may not always meet the legal definition of trafficking but reflect environments where trafficking can thrive, remain undetected or underreported:

- According to 2022 global estimates by the ILO, 12 per cent, or 3,3 million out of the more than 27,6 million people trapped in forced labour globally are children. More than half of these children are in commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>4</sup>
- At the end of 2023, over 473 million children—more than one in six globally—lived in areas affected by armed conflict.<sup>5</sup> Between 2005 and 2022, over 105,000 children were verified as recruited and used in armed conflict.<sup>6</sup>
- As of mid-2024, global displacement has reached record levels, with over 122 million people forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations.<sup>7</sup> Children are disproportionately affected: although they represent only 30 per cent of the global population, they account for 40 per cent of all forcibly displaced persons.
- Around 650 million (or 1 in 5) women and girls alive today, and between 410 and 530 million (or around 1 in 7) men and boys have been subject to sexual violence in childhood,<sup>8</sup> yet the proportion that constitutes sexual exploitation is not known.
- Digital technologies increasingly enable child exploitation, including sexual extortion and online grooming: in two thirds of the 12 countries analysed through the [Disrupting Harm research project](#), between 9 and 20 per cent of children reported that they had experienced at least one instance of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed. Notably, online grooming can serve as a precursor to offline harm, with perpetrators using digital platforms to build trust and then escalate to in-person abuse.

- Residential care institutions for children often lack adequate safeguarding mechanisms and appropriately trained staff, which create conditions that increase the risk of exploitation.<sup>9</sup> An estimated one in three children in institutions are children with disabilities,<sup>10</sup> and they face even higher risks of harm and exploitation in these settings, for example due to communication barriers and discriminatory beliefs about their capacities.<sup>11</sup>



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3 The exploitation of surrogacy and illegal adoptions as forms of trafficking in human beings has been captured in recent frameworks, such as the revised [EU-Anti-Trafficking Directive](#), yet issues related to illegal adoptions and surrogacy as forms of trafficking are beyond the scope of this paper.

4 ILO, 'Data and research on forced labour', < <https://www.ilo.org/topics/forced-labour-modern-slavery-and-trafficking-persons/data-and-research-forced-labour>>, accessed 3 July 2025.

5 Save the Children International, *Stop the War on Children: Pathways to peace*, 2024.

6 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups'; <[www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces?utm=](http://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces?utm=)>, accessed 2 June 2025.

7 UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, < <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>>, accessed 02 June 2025.

8 United Nations Children's Fund, *When Numbers Demand Action: Confronting the global scale of sexual violence against children*, UNICEF, New York, 2024.

9 Rosenthal, Eric, and Laurie Ahern, 'Segregation and Abuse in Institutions', in *The State of the World's Children 2013: Children with disabilities*, United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2013, p. 46.

10 United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, 2019.

11 Human Rights Watch, 'Children with disabilities: Deprivation of liberty in the name of care and treatment', *Protecting Children Against Torture in Detention: Global Solutions*, New York, 7 March 2017.

**Domestic trafficking:** Contrary to common perceptions, a significant proportion of child trafficking occurs within national borders. More than half of child victims of trafficking are trafficked within their own countries.<sup>12</sup> Variations exist when it comes to the purpose of trafficking: children trafficked for forced labour were more likely to be trafficked domestically, while children trafficked for sexual exploitation were more commonly trafficked internationally.<sup>13</sup> The prevailing focus on international trafficking has implications for how trafficking is understood, how root causes are addressed, and the ways victims and survivors

are supported. As a result, child trafficking risks within communities are often underestimated, resources for anti-trafficking efforts are disproportionately allocated to activities such as border enforcement, and domestic trafficking cases are underreported. Domestic trafficking can be less visible and normalized within communities, and oftentimes, involves family members as perpetrators. While reintegration of child victims of trafficking is always complex, challenges can be particularly acute when families or communities are complicit in the trafficking, either through direct involvement, neglect, or social pressure.

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## Vulnerabilities to Child Trafficking

**Child trafficking occurs in a wide range of contexts and is driven by a complex interplay of social, economic, and institutional factors.** Certain conditions significantly heighten the risk of trafficking and include structural inequalities, harmful social norms, and vulnerabilities associated with conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises. Poverty and economic hardship can limit families' access to basic needs and drive decisions to send children away for work or marriage,<sup>14</sup> placing them at risk of exploitation. In some cases, this may involve children crossing borders, often through irregular migration, further increasing their vulnerability. Limited access to quality education and vocational training deprives children of safe environments and future opportunities, leaving them more susceptible to traffickers who offer false promises. These risks are exacerbated in contexts with weak child protection systems and inadequate access to social services and law enforcement mechanisms to identify, prevent, and respond to trafficking cases.

**Children on the move<sup>15</sup> remain among the most vulnerable to exploitation, including trafficking.** Many displaced children spend their entire childhoods in protracted displacement, often without access to education, legal protection, or safe livelihoods for their families. These conditions, combined with family separation, lack of

documentation, and limited access to essential services, create situations of heightened vulnerability that traffickers exploit. In the absence of safe and regular pathways, many children are also pushed to take irregular migration routes and may be forced to rely on smugglers. The distinction between smuggling and trafficking is often blurred in practice: children may begin their journeys being smuggled, but fall victim to trafficking later, for example when they run out of money, are separated from caregivers, or are deceived by someone offering help.<sup>16</sup> Unaccompanied children are particularly at risk as they often remain invisible and outside of the protection system. UNICEF regional data from Latin America and the Caribbean highlights how irregular migration increases children's vulnerability to trafficking, reinforcing the need for safe, legal pathways and stronger child protection interventions along migration routes.<sup>17</sup>

**Harmful practices, discrimination, and deep-rooted gender norms increase trafficking risks.** Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation disproportionately affects women and girls, driven by entrenched gender inequality, discriminatory norms, and the demand for exploitative sexual services. Child marriage is another manifestation of these inequalities, disproportionately affecting girls. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one sixth that among girls.<sup>18</sup> Where child

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12 Digidiki, V., J. Bhabha, K. Connors, H. Cook, C. Galez-Davis, C. Hansen, M. Lane, S. Laursen, and L. Wong, 2023. From Evidence to Action: Twenty years of IOM child trafficking data to inform policy and programming. FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University, Boston and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.

13 *ibid*

14 The Issue Brief [Addressing trafficking in persons through the lens of child marriage and forced marriage](#) developed by ICAT explains under which circumstances child marriage constitutes trafficking in persons and provides recommendations to address this interlinkage.

15 The term 'children on the move' describes children who have been directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country. See: International Data Alliance for Children on the Move, *Children on the Move: Key terms, definitions and concepts*, United Nations Children's Fund, New York, 2023.

16 UNICEF and IOM, *Harrowing Journeys, Children and youth on the move across the Mediterranean Sea, at risk of trafficking and exploitation* September 2017.

17 United Nations Children's Fund, *UNICEF Child Alert: The Changing Face of Child Migration in Latin America and the Caribbean*, September 2023.

18 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Child Marriage', <[www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage](http://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage)>, accessed 27 June 2025.

marriage and forced marriage intersect with trafficking this can include various forms, such as exploitation in the context of exploitative domestic work, forced labour, sexual exploitation or criminal activities.<sup>19</sup>

While data collection, disaggregation, and visibility of the intersection between human trafficking and disability remains highly limited, emerging publications underline how **vulnerabilities to trafficking can manifest in different ways for persons with disabilities**. They can experience increased risks of trafficking, including where their disability increases other risk factors for trafficking such as poverty or social isolation. Traffickers may also make disability a feature of a person's exploitation, for example forcing a person with visible impairments to engage in forced begging. Trafficking can also create new or exacerbate existing impairments, because of the physical and psychological harm sustained in the trafficking process or resulting exploitation. Persons with disabilities who are victims of trafficking are also likely to face barriers to accessing protection, justice or reintegration support,<sup>20</sup> such as lack of accessible and inclusive services, stigma and discrimination in the community or by service providers. They may also face barriers to accessing information about their rights and risks related to trafficking, and to reporting channels.

## Emerging trends:

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New phenomena have amplified the threat of child trafficking in recent years. The expansion of digital platforms has enabled traffickers to groom, recruit and exploit children with an alarming reach, often transcending borders. Between 2019 and 2022, the US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported an 87 per cent increase in the number of reports of child sexual abuse materials received from across the globe, totaling 32 million reports in 2022 alone.<sup>21</sup> Emerging evidence confirms that online violence is deeply gendered, with girls disproportionately targeted for grooming, sextortion, trafficking, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Globally, 38 per cent of women have experienced online violence,<sup>22</sup> a figure that rises among adolescent girls.

Online spaces are not only used to initiate contact with potential victims, but also to facilitate the trafficking process itself, including the production, dissemination, and monetization of sexual abuse materials.<sup>23</sup>

### Spotlight: The Climate Change–Human Trafficking Nexus

The impacts of climate change are increasingly recognized as exacerbating vulnerabilities to child trafficking. Evidence underlines that sudden and slow-onset climate-induced disasters and environmental degradation can lead to forced displacement, a loss in livelihoods, increased food insecurity and poverty, and push people into high-risk migration, increasing their risk of exploitation.<sup>24</sup> Recent UNICEF evidence from the East Asia and Pacific region outlines the connection between climate-related disasters and displacement and protection risks, including child trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the rise of technology, organized crime networks have increasingly been involved in child trafficking, from sexual exploitation, forced labour, to forced criminality. According to UNODC's 2024 GLOTIP report, 74 per cent of the traffickers convicted in court cases globally operated in organized crime groups. These groups are found to operate at a much larger scale, exploit victims for longer periods and with greater violence.<sup>26</sup> Evidence from contexts such as Mexico highlights how organized crime groups prey on migrants traveling along migration routes, with unaccompanied children and girls particularly vulnerable to trafficking risks.<sup>27</sup>

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19 The ICAT Issue Brief and UNICEF Discourse Analysis on the Relationship between Child Labour and Child Marriage provide additional background.

20 OSCE, Invisible victims: The nexus between disabilities and trafficking in human beings, March 2024.

21 WeProtect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2023.

22 O'Brien, Megan, 'Online violence: real life impacts on women and girls in humanitarian settings', 4 January 2024, <blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2024/01/04/online-violence-real-life-impacts-women-girls-humanitarian-settings/>, accessed 10 July 2025.

23 United Nations, Successful strategies for addressing the use of technology to facilitate trafficking in persons and to prevent and investigate trafficking in persons, Background Paper submitted to the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 23 July 2021

24 Migrant Protection Platform, 'Human Trafficking and Climate Mobility: Key Takeaways from COP29', <migrantprotection.iom.int/en/spotlight/articles/event/human-trafficking-and-climate-mobility-key-takeaways-cop29?utm\_source>, accessed 2 June 2024.

25 UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Violence Against Children – The Forgotten Impact of Climate Change: Why child protection must be central to climate resilience and adaptation in East Asia and Pacific, UNICEF, Bangkok, 2025.

26 UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024 (United Nations publication, Sales no.: E.24.XI.11).

27 Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs Policy Research Project Report Number 198, Organized Crime and Central American Migration in Mexico, June 2018.

# UNICEF's Role in Preventing and Responding to Child Trafficking

UNICEF's work is grounded in global standards addressing child trafficking, such as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Palermo Protocol*, and the *Global Compacts for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and on Refugees*. These standards are translated into internal frameworks, including UNICEF's [Child Protection Strategy](#) which lays out UNICEF's work to ensure that all children are free from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and harmful practices, as well as UNICEF's upcoming *Global Programme Framework for Children on the Move*. UNICEF applies a **child-centred, inclusive systems-strengthening approach**, ensuring trafficking prevention and response are embedded in broader child protection, education, justice, and social protection systems. Programming can be organized along three key areas: **prevention, protection, response and reintegration**, recognizing the interconnected nature of these areas.

## Prevention: Reducing Vulnerabilities to Trafficking

UNICEF's prevention efforts **address the root causes and risk factors** of child trafficking through a multi-sectoral approach that strengthens both systems and community resilience. This includes protecting children and their families from poverty and strengthening families' access to inclusive, shock-responsive social protection services, which can in turn enable continued access to education and other services. UNICEF works with governments to improve the reach and inclusiveness of child protection systems, particularly for marginalized communities, and builds the capacity of social service providers and frontline responders, including border officials, to detect, prevent and respond to trafficking risks.

UNICEF also collaborates with communities to **shift harmful norms and practices** that enable child trafficking, while implementing child- and caregiver-focused awareness initiatives that build practical knowledge and skills to recognize and avoid trafficking risks. In humanitarian contexts, UNICEF has supported community-wide trafficking prevention campaigns, such as after the 2015 Nepal earthquake,<sup>28</sup> or the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, where UNICEF complemented awareness raising activities on family reunification and reintegration

for children and their families with support to scale up the social service workforce and address the practice of children being separated from their families.<sup>29</sup>

Strengthening access to **universal birth registration** is another critical component of UNICEF's prevention approach. Without legal identity, children are at greater risk of exclusion from essential services and can more easily fall through the cracks of protection systems, whereas birth and civil registration lay the foundation for access to protection and other basic services. UNICEF also draws on its expertise in GBV risk mitigation to inform trafficking prevention strategies, particularly in humanitarian and fragile settings. This includes applying and adapting existing tools such as the [Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Quality \(AAAQ\) framework](#).



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28 UNICEF UK, 'Safe from Nepal's Child Traffickers', <[www.unicef.org.uk/protecting-children-from-trafficking-nepal-earthquakes/](http://www.unicef.org.uk/protecting-children-from-trafficking-nepal-earthquakes/)>, accessed 4 July 2025.  
29 United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF Haiti Situation Report April 2010.

In **Albania**, UNICEF works closely with youth at risk in communities to strengthen their digital literacy and life skills development to prevent trafficking,<sup>30</sup> while also generating critical evidence on trafficking risks. The study *Trafficked by Someone I Know*, deepens understanding of the oftentimes close relationships between trafficking victims and perpetrators, including family and community members.

In **Thailand**, 150,000 children are considered stateless, many of whom are born to undocumented migrant workers, unregistered ethnic minority populations or refugees.<sup>31</sup> UNICEF supports the government to expand access to universal birth registration through advocacy for legislative changes and inclusive policies, awareness raising

campaigns,<sup>32</sup> mobile civil registration units, and capacity building for local officials and organizations.<sup>33</sup>

The Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) programme for Refugees in **Türkiye** aims to alleviate financial difficulties which prevent the participation of refugee children in education. The CCTE for Refugees provides regular and predictable cash assistance, coupled with child protection services through specialist outreach teams who target children who are missing school, including those involved in child labour. As part of this outreach, a risk assessment is carried out by case workers and, if needed, children and their families are referred to relevant services.<sup>34</sup>

## Spotlight: Investing in inclusive social protection

Access to inclusive social protection is central to mitigating socio-economic vulnerabilities that underpin child exploitation. Evidence suggests that the inclusion of displaced children and their families in social protection programmes can address the specific risks faced by displaced children and youth and strengthen access to food, education, health and nutrition services, improving the wellbeing and mental health of both children themselves and their parents, and reducing the need to resort to negative coping mechanisms. For example, multipurpose cash assistance for Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon contributed to reductions in the poverty rate among refugees and the prevention of negative coping strategies.<sup>35</sup>

## Protection: Strengthening National Child Protection Systems to Address Trafficking-related Risks

UNICEF's approach prioritizes strengthening national child protection systems to more effectively identify and respond to the needs of child victims of trafficking or children at risk of trafficking, rather than creating parallel structures for victims. Through this **child protection systems strengthening approach**, UNICEF supports governments to ensure that the core elements of their child protection system, such as legal and policy frameworks, workforce capacity, referral pathways, and case management systems, are fit for purpose and inclusive of all children.

This includes efforts to **strengthen the capacity of frontline responders**, such as social workers, border and

immigration officers, frontline police officials, and others, to identify potential child victims of trafficking and refer them to appropriate services. In the context of large-scale displacement from Ukraine, for example, UNICEF developed a [practical guide](#) on identification of victims and persons at risk of trafficking, which provides simple guidelines on screening and identification, and child-friendly communication, and is applicable beyond the Ukraine response.

UNICEF also supports **integrated case management and referrals to multi-sectoral services**, including psychosocial support, family tracing and reunification, legal assistance, and access to safe shelter. By engaging sectors such as health and education, UNICEF expands the number of potential entry points where trafficking risks can be detected and addressed, recognizing that children may first disclose exploitation in non-traditional protection spaces such as schools or health clinics.

30 UNICEF, Programme Brief TRANSFORMING NATIONAL RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN AND FROM ALBANIA, October 2023.

31 United Nations Children's Fund, Fulfilling the Commitment to Child Protection in Thailand, UNICEF, New York, 2025.

32 United Nations Children's Fund, Breaking the Silence on Statelessness, <[www.unicef.org/thailand/endstatelessness?utm\\_source](http://www.unicef.org/thailand/endstatelessness?utm_source)>, accessed on 2 June 2025.

33 United Nations Children's Fund, 'UNICEF Commends the Royal Thai Government's Resolution to Accelerate Nationality for Stateless People', 4 November 2024, <[www.unicef.org/thailand/press-releases/unicef-commends-royal-thai-governments-resolution-accelerate-nationality-stateless?utm\\_](http://www.unicef.org/thailand/press-releases/unicef-commends-royal-thai-governments-resolution-accelerate-nationality-stateless?utm_)>, accessed 4 June 2025.

34 UNICEF, The Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) Programme, <[www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/conditional-cash-transfer-education-ccte-programme](http://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/conditional-cash-transfer-education-ccte-programme)>, accessed 18 May 2025.

35 Holmes, R. and Lowe, C. (2023) Strengthening inclusive social protection systems for displaced children and their families. London: ODI and New York: UNICEF.

The child protection systems strengthening model has enabled UNICEF and partners, such as UNHCR and IOM, to advance the systematic inclusion of children on the move in national systems and increasingly integrate GBV prevention and response into child protection systems, recognizing the strong intersections between trafficking and GBV. This includes promoting survivor-centred case management, incorporating safety planning, and ensuring that child protection actors are equipped to respond to the specific needs of girls and other high-risk groups, including those subjected to sexual exploitation or forced marriage.

In response to the transnational nature of child trafficking, UNICEF focuses on **strengthening cross-border child protection mechanisms** in collaboration with national protection, asylum and migration authorities. This entails support to strengthen cross-border collaboration and case management, including through facilitating the development of cross-border protocols and SOPs. UNICEF also supports strengthened coordination and case management across internal administrative borders and different stakeholders. One example is UNICEF's support to Operation Welcome in Brazil in response to the large-scale arrival of Venezuelan migrants and refugees.<sup>36</sup>

To strengthen the **protection of children from technology-facilitated exploitation** and abuse, UNICEF works with governments to ensure domestic legislation and regulations are aligned with international law, including children's rights law, and fit-for-purpose in the digital age. In 2022, UNICEF released a global guide<sup>37</sup> on improving legislative frameworks to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse and is supporting governments to strengthen their laws. UNICEF is also supporting the broader capacities required to implement such laws, including procedures for the investigation, storage and preservation of electronic evidence; investment in specialist police and prosecutorial units; and training of prosecutors, judiciary and other relevant professionals and practitioners to deal with new challenges in technology-facilitated exploitation and abuse.

**Technology is not only part of the problem, but also part of the solution:** UNICEF strengthens service delivery and child protection systems through tools like Primero, which supports child protection actors and the social

service workforce to manage protection-related data, with tools that facilitate child protection and GBV case management, incident monitoring, as well as family tracing and reunification, and collect information on children with disabilities. Survivor-centred virtual platforms like Laaha,<sup>38</sup> developed through participatory research in conflict-affected settings, offer girls critical, localized support to recognize red flags, access services, and reclaim digital spaces.

*In **Zambia**, the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 strengthens access to protection for children on the move and has been catalytic in strengthening protection of children in other legislation, such as the Anti-Human Trafficking (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2022. UNICEF supports national authorities in Zambia and Namibia to strengthen cross-border case management for children on the move, including through capacity strengthening for frontline officials. The National Referral Mechanisms for vulnerable migrants in Zambia supports identification, profiling, assessment, case planning and conferencing.*

*In **Ghana**, UNICEF works with the Government to review the legal framework and propose online child protection-related amendments to deter online crime, punish offenders and ensure the protection of child victims. This includes support to establish the first child protection digital forensics lab for the Ghana Police Service and support to law enforcement officers and social workers to increase their understanding of online exploitation and response strategies. UNICEF further works closely with the National Cybersecurity Crime Centre to integrate online child protection into the country's national cybersecurity strategy.<sup>39</sup>*

*In **Cambodia**, UNICEF works closely with government partners to strengthen the capacity of social welfare, immigration, and border authorities to implement Standard Operating Procedures for the case management of child victims of trafficking. These efforts aim to ensure that repatriation and reintegration processes are child-sensitive, rights-based, and well-coordinated across agencies. This included the development of a comprehensive repatriation flowchart, outlining step-by-step procedures for cross-border case handling and providing greater clarity on roles, timelines, and inter-agency coordination in the identification, protection, and reintegration of trafficked children.*

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36 UNICEF Country Office Annual Report Brazil, 2022.

37 United Nations Children's Fund (2022) 'Legislating for the digital age: Global guide on improving legislative frameworks to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse' UNICEF, New York.

38 The Humanitarian Innovation Programme, 'Laaha - A digital safe space for women and girls', <[hip.innovationnorway.com/article/innovation-projects](http://hip.innovationnorway.com/article/innovation-projects)>, accessed 11 July 2025.

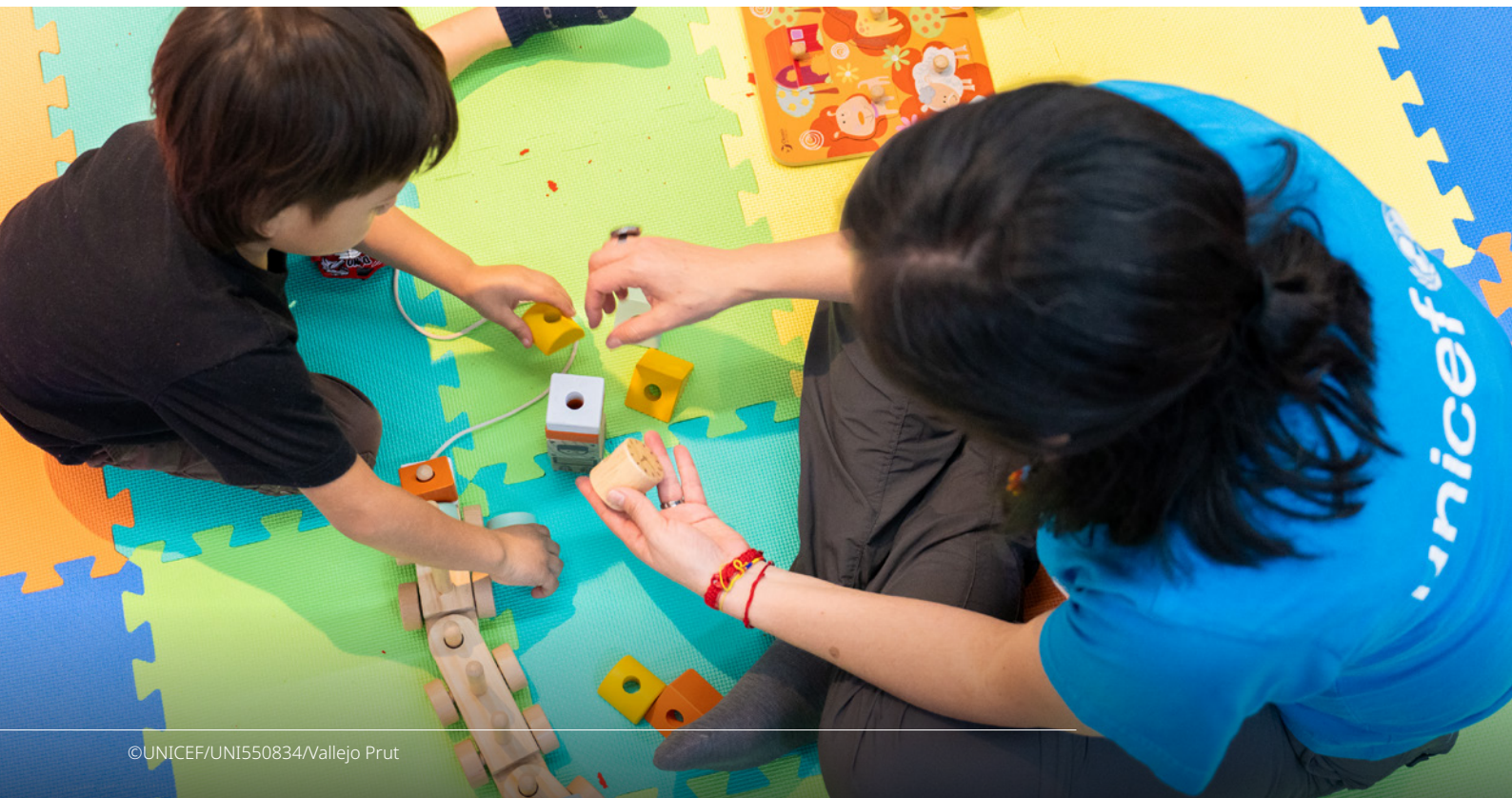
39 Safe online, UNICEF Ghana Protecting children from online CSEA in Ghana, <[safeonline.global/unicef-ghana/](https://safeonline.global/unicef-ghana/)>, accessed 3 June 2025

## Response and Reintegration: Strengthening Specialized Justice Systems, Supporting Child Victims and Survivors, and Ensuring their Long-Term Recovery

UNICEF's response and reintegration efforts focus on providing comprehensive, child-friendly care to victims and survivors of trafficking, helping them overcome stigma, recover, and reintegrate into society. This involves a multi-sectoral approach that ensures access to health care, mental health and psychosocial support, legal aid, legal empowerment, social protection services, disability-related services, and education. Targeted support to adolescent and youth victims and survivors of trafficking includes vocational training, oftentimes complemented with mental health and psychosocial support. Where appropriate and in the best interests of the child, UNICEF and partners prioritize family tracing and reunification as part of the reintegration process. This includes efforts to safely locate and reconnect children with their families, alongside follow-up services to ensure sustained protection and support.

Through **one stop centres and service models** UNICEF works with partners to provide victims and survivors of trafficking with holistic support in a single location, reducing the risk of repeated intake interviews that can deepen distress. In countries including Georgia,<sup>40</sup> Moldova, Armenia, and Ukraine,<sup>41</sup> UNICEF supports multidisciplinary, interagency service models to offer child-centred justice responses by delivering criminal investigations, protection assessments, and psychosocial support in a coordinated and accessible manner.

UNICEF's **Reimagine Justice for Children Agenda**<sup>42</sup> provides the overarching framework for advancing child-friendly and gender-responsive justice processes and procedures that respond effectively to violence, abuse, and exploitation. To operationalize this agenda, UNICEF works on two complementary areas: supporting governments to strengthen justice systems through legal reforms (including for example removing the statutes of limitations for sexual offences against children and establishing redress schemes for victims of child sexual violence, abuse and exploitation), and providing direct support to child victims of trafficking, focusing on their legal empowerment and



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40 UNICEF, 'Georgia embraces 'Barnahus' model for child abuse victims', 10 June 2024, <[www.unicef.org/georgia/stories/georgia-embraces-barnahus-model-child-abuse-victims-0](http://www.unicef.org/georgia/stories/georgia-embraces-barnahus-model-child-abuse-victims-0)>, accessed 11 July 2025.

41 UNICEF, 'Young victims of violence find safe space at Barnahus', 17 November 2022, <[www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/stories/safe-space-at-barnahus](http://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/stories/safe-space-at-barnahus)>, accessed 11 July 2025.

42 A number of technical briefs provide guidance based on the priority actions of the agenda and based on global evidence and lessons learned through UNICEF's programmes in countries around the world.

rights awareness. A critical component of this approach relates to promoting child-friendly legal aid to enable children's access to justice. This includes the development of [guidelines](#) for lawyers and other legal practitioners who provide legal aid to children in justice proceedings, and a related [training package](#) to equip them with the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills to deliver legal services that are in the best interests of the child. UNICEF also collaborates closely with police and border authorities to uphold the rights and protection of migrant and displaced children, ensuring that justice responses are accessible, protective, and aligned with children's best interests.

In humanitarian and conflict contexts, UNICEF works with partners to provide specialized **reintegration support to children formerly in armed groups or forces** to ensure their access to protection and multi-sectoral support. In 2023 alone, UNICEF and partners reached nearly 11,000 children who had exited armed groups or forces with protection or reintegration support, with the greatest number in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Iraq. Complementary to individualized support, UNICEF works with communities to prevent and combat stigmatization of children formerly associated with armed groups and forces.

*In **Haiti**, the recruitment and use of children by armed groups increased by 70 per cent in the second quarter of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023. UNICEF is working with the Government to prevent child recruitment and support the rehabilitation and social reintegration of children separated from armed groups, ensuring they are treated as victims, not criminals. Children separated from armed groups are placed under protection with immediate access to mental health and psychosocial, medical, and educational support, provided with education and vocational training, and ensured priority access to specialized protection and care services for girls.*<sup>43</sup>

*In **Venezuela**, UNICEF worked with the National Prosecutor's Office to develop criminal investigation guidelines for cases of human trafficking that incorporate child-friendly justice procedures, prevention of revictimization and a human rights-based approach. After the launch of the guidelines, a comprehensive training module was used to build the capacity of 150 prosecutors in three states that are incorporating the aforementioned guidelines on preventing sexual abuse, preventing human trafficking and understanding the roles and responsibilities of prosecutors.*<sup>44</sup>

*In **South Africa**, UNICEF has supported child-friendly court procedures, including the rollout of dedicated children's*

*courtrooms and child-friendly waiting rooms in selected jurisdictions, as well as promoting the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) and intermediaries to prevent children from facing their alleged abuser directly during trial.*

### Spotlight on innovative partnerships:

Global collaboration is essential to address the growing role of digital technologies in child exploitation. UNICEF is actively involved in key global initiatives, such as the WeProtect Global Alliance which brings together 103 governments, 82 companies, 126 civil society organizations, and 10 intergovernmental organisations to combat the online sexual exploitation of children.<sup>45</sup>



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43 UNICEF, UNICEF and the Haitian Government Prioritize the Prevention of Child Recruitment and Reintegration, 25 February 2025, <[www.unicef.org/haiti/en/press-releases/unicef-and-haitian-government-prioritize-prevention-child-recruitment-and](http://www.unicef.org/haiti/en/press-releases/unicef-and-haitian-government-prioritize-prevention-child-recruitment-and)>, accessed 2 June 2025.

44 UNICEF, Country Office Annual Report Venezuela, 2023.

45 WeProtect Global Alliance, <[www.weprotect.org/members](http://www.weprotect.org/members)>, accessed 4 June 2025.

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# Challenges and Gaps: What Hinders More Effective Action Against Child Trafficking

Addressing child trafficking requires tackling a range of interrelated challenges, from resource constraints, to limited coordination, weak systems, and others. This section is limited to highlighting three systemic gaps that continue to undermine effective prevention and response efforts.

**Gaps in data and data analysis:** Efforts to prevent and respond to child trafficking are hampered by data gaps and fragmented data analysis, owing to a lack of standardized data collection across stakeholders and regions, alongside challenges in harmonizing data from diverse sources at the national level. Limited coordination between key actors, such as law enforcement, immigration authorities, and social services, further undermines the quality and completeness of data. A lack of detection renders certain groups of children invisible in data collection efforts, including child victims of trafficking in residential care institutions who may be completely missing as these facilities are often not included in data collection efforts. Evidence from the European refugee and migration response highlights that girls may be mistakenly recorded as part of family units, masking their heightened exposure to sexual violence and trafficking within what may externally appear to be “*protective*” arrangements.<sup>46</sup>

**Recognize and respond to victims of trafficking as victims, not offenders:** Children who have been trafficked are too often treated as offenders. This is particularly evident in cases where children have been exploited in criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, theft, or online fraud - contexts in which the non-punishment principle is not consistently applied. Migration contexts introduce further complexity: child victims of trafficking with irregular migration status may not be identified as victims and instead be treated solely as migration cases,

which may lead to immigration detention or removal. At least 77 countries have laws and policies that allow children to be detained based on their legal or migratory status, and at least 330,000 children globally per year are deprived of their liberty based on their (or their parents’) legal or migratory status.<sup>47</sup> In the absence of child rights-based protocols for identifying child victims of trafficking, authorities may also incorrectly assume trafficking risks and separate children from family members or caregivers without proper assessment. These challenges play out against the backdrop of increased securitization approaches to migration, which often result in policy responses that prioritize border security and migration control over child protection.

**Fragmented anti-trafficking responses that are de-linked from child protection systems:** A key challenge is the fragmentation of responses, with anti-trafficking efforts often operating in silos, disconnected from national child protection systems. In many contexts, trafficking is treated primarily as a criminal justice or immigration issue, while social welfare systems remain under-resourced or sidelined. This results in parallel structures, with anti-trafficking task forces, shelters, or hotlines that are not integrated into the broader continuum of care for vulnerable children. Consequently, child victims of trafficking may fall through the cracks, facing delays in identification, limited access to case management, and long-term support. From a UNICEF perspective, integrating anti-trafficking measures into national child protection systems and investing in the training and resourcing of the social service workforce is essential to ensure continuity of care, avoid duplication and uphold every child’s right to protection.

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46 UNICEF, Making the Invisible Visible: the identification of unaccompanied and separated girls in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Serbia, March 2020.

47 United Nations Task Force on Children Deprived of Liberty, End Immigration Detention of Children, Advocacy Brief, February 2024.

# Priorities for Ending Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is a complex, pervasive issue that requires sustained, coordinated action across governments, civil society, international organizations, the private sector, and survivors of trafficking, who should be engaged and recognized as experts. The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) has emphasized this in its [Call to Action to End Child Trafficking](#), urging all stakeholders to prioritize child protection, accountability, and holistic support for victims and survivors. Key priorities for UNICEF include:

## **Uphold international obligations and protect every child as a rights holder:**

States must fully implement and enforce international human rights and humanitarian law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Palermo Protocol. Children exploited through trafficking must be recognized as victims first and foremost, not as offenders, and granted protection and specialized support. Legal and policy responses to trafficking must centre children's rights and be anchored in the principle of the best interests of the child.

## **Ensure ethical and meaningful engagement of survivors:**

Survivors of trafficking have critical insights

that can strengthen prevention, protection, and reintegration efforts. Ethical survivor engagement should be systematic, and safeguard the dignity, agency, and long-term well-being of survivors. A recent [ICAT Issue Brief and Call to Action](#) developed by survivors provides key recommendations in this area.

## **Strengthen and invest in national child protection systems and justice responses:**

Effective prevention and response to child trafficking require robust, coordinated, and adequately resourced child protection and justice systems.

Priorities include:

- Integrating anti-trafficking efforts into existing child protection systems, avoiding parallel, siloed structures
- Improving detection and identification mechanisms, including through systematic training for law enforcement, educators, social workers, and healthcare workers
- Increasing domestic investments in the social service workforce, including child protection and gender-based violence specialists, caseworkers, and mental health professionals



- Expanding GBV response services and capacity to ensure all child survivors can access age- and gender-responsive care
- Strengthening child-friendly and specialized justice systems with trained prosecutors, judges and police, as well as access to free legal aid
- Ensuring disability inclusive approaches, including for psychosocial disabilities.

**Tackle transnational trafficking through cross-border and regional cooperation:** to effectively prevent child trafficking in the context of cross-border migration, governments should strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation frameworks by establishing or enhancing child-sensitive, cross-border case management systems. This includes the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the identification, referral, protection, safe return, and reintegration of trafficked and vulnerable migrant children. Investing in regional platforms and intergovernmental processes further supports this process.<sup>48</sup>

**Reduce risks through multisectoral approaches:** child trafficking cannot be tackled in isolation from its underlying drivers. States should implement comprehensive, multisectoral strategies that address structural factors, including strengthening access to inclusive social protection, inclusive quality education, economic opportunities and targeted support for at-risk children and families. Efforts must also focus on building youth resilience through leadership development, vocational training, and empowerment programmes that enhance life skills and agency. Young people with lived experience should be meaningfully engaged in peer-led prevention initiatives.

**Ensure safe and regular pathways for migration and family reunification:** children on the move are at heightened risk of trafficking, particularly when safe and legal migration pathways are unavailable. States should expand access to safe, regular, and child-sensitive pathways for migration, including humanitarian visas and family reunification.



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<sup>48</sup> The IDB UNODC Regional Guideline for a Coordinated response on trafficking persons provides an example of a regional framework.

**Design responses fit to address technology-**

**facilitated exploitation:** responses should not only mitigate risks but also leverage technology as part of the solution. This includes developing and strengthening legal frameworks to address technology-facilitated trafficking, investing in digital tools and AI to detect patterns of exploitation online, and improving access to remote support services and referrals, while promoting children's digital literacy and safe online engagement. Digital platforms can be powerful tools for awareness-raising and outreach: during the Ukraine crisis, platforms like Telegram and Meta have proven effective in providing vulnerable children with life-saving information on protection risks, local services, and where to seek help in real time.

**Elevate private sector accountability:** businesses must be held accountable through legally binding human rights

and environmental due diligence frameworks that explicitly include children's rights and the UN CRC in their scope. Private sector actors should assess and adapt business models that may contribute to exploitation, including in high-risk sectors such as tourism and travel,<sup>49</sup> and collaborate with governments and civil society to eliminate child trafficking across their value chains.

**UNICEF remains steadfast in its mission to end child trafficking in all its forms by investing in prevention, protection and reintegration, and empowering children and communities. Together, we can build a world where every child can realize their rights.**

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49 ECPAT International, *Offenders on the Move: Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism*, May 2016.



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