



COUNTRY OVERVIEW FINLAND

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Ending Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: State-of-play in light of the Lanzarote Convention

Executive Summary

This article is a summary of a joint report between the Council of Europe and ECPAT International Secretariat. The Country Overviews were prepared in close collaboration with the national authorities represented in the Committee of Parties to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the [Lanzarote Committee](#)). The Country Overviews bring in one document the information submitted by Parties to the Lanzarote Convention through the [General Overview Questionnaire](#), the recommendations adopted by the in its [monitoring](#) rounds and additional desk-based research. This overview aims to provide an effective tool for advocacy and advancing the fight against child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in countries.

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Article 18 of the Lanzarote Convention defines **sexual abuse** as *a) the engagement in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities; and b) engaging in sexual activities with a child where: – use is made of coercion, force or threats; or – abuse is made of a recognised position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family; or – abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child, notably because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence.*

Despite Finland's above-average standards for protecting children against violence and guaranteeing their well-being, some gaps still prevail

Finland is considered a highly industrialised country and in 2018 reported the lowest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the European Union. However, the Finnish economy, like the rest of the world, was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in a recession, mass layoffs and rising unemployment.

“Poverty, in general, can be a significant determinant in not only perpetuating sexual exploitation of children but also in reinforcing its demand for the sexual exploitation of children”

According to the information provided by the Finnish authorities, a total of 2,660 and 3,210 child victims of sexual crimes were reported to the police in 2020 and 2021 respectively. This includes sexual abuse, aggravated sexual abuse and aggravated rape. Children in Finland are also increasingly suffering from sexual harassment. Recent and specific research on the scale and form of **sexual abuse**

of children in Finland is also limited, despite the Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020-2025 addressing all forms of violence against children.

The sexual exploitation of children in prostitution and trafficking - Limited data and research

Research indicates that exploitation of children through prostitution - in particular in the context of transactional sex - is a reality in Finland. Finland is also a destination country for trafficked persons, with the majority of presumed victims having been exploited abroad before arriving or during their journey to Finland. Both adult and child victims are often asylum seekers or from a minority group. Since 2010, the number of migrants and refugees, including minors, arriving in Finland is rising, but the assistance to child victims is often delayed.

The identification of sexual exploitation through trafficking also differs amongst professionals and across the country and there are concerns over the limited availability of mechanisms for data collection on child sexual abuse and exploitation have been expressed by the United Nations Committee for the Rights of the Child as well as by the Lanzarote Committee to all its State Parties including Finland.

Although questions on violence against children have been included in survey-based research since 2017, official information from the government, for example on the profile of offenders or place of offence is still largely insufficient.

The Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children facilitated by Technology

Internet usage in Finland is strong and widespread with most children having access to the Internet and tech devices. Crimes committed online are ever evolving and to fully protect children, it is vital that the legislation keeps pace with new ways in which offenders seek to exploit children. Recent research indicates that children in Finland experience **sexual abuse and exploitation facilitated by technology**. For example, with regards to grooming, 62% of 1,762 survey respondents aged 11-17 indicated that they had been contacted either by a known person or by an adult; which included contacts that are clearly sexual in nature.

The Finnish Criminal Code contains several offences that protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation in the online environment and through the use of technology. This is also reflected in the new legislation.

The Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys

Although there is a significant lack of research focusing on **the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys** in Finland, few studies and surveys have been carried out in the country providing indication that boys are sexually abused/exploited online through grooming and also sexually harassed in sport contexts.

Finland's response to sexual abuse and exploitation of children

In 2022, the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Lanzarote Convention was also adopted. The measures discussed in this action plan are categorised under the themes of prevention of violence, protection from violence and promotion of national and international collaboration to combat sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. The various actions presented cover areas such as raising awareness on sexual violence against children, strengthening sexuality education, supporting research on treatment programmes, and organising various support groups. What remains unclear is whether legislation will be changed, or how children, who are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation, will be targeted by these measures. Most importantly, no separate funding will be allocated for the implementation of this action plan, which jeopardises its efforts to reduce violence against children.

Finland has initiated actions for raising awareness on sexual abuse and exploitation. In addition, sexuality education or what is also known as “safety education” in Finland, is usually well established in the school curriculum and covers content related to biology, reproduction and puberty. However, up-to-date information and comprehensive teaching of safety skills education differs across municipalities, and apart from qualitative surveys, little research is available on the impact this education has on children, parents and on the prevention of violence.

Child Sensitive Justice

The framework of child-friendly justice is comprehensive in Finland but it can still progress in regard to the correct use of terminology to correctly identify victims and the improvement of the investigative model within the child-friendly legal response model of the Barnahus. Within the Barnahus-units, implemented in university hospitals, professionals are brought together to cooperate in the child’s best interests and work in direct contact with the child victim or suspected victim. Professionals interacting with children should be specifically trained and, while the Non-violent Childhood Action Plan 2020-2025 foresees that, little information is provided on the number of training sessions to be organised, their timeframe and expected results.

Additional vulnerabilities

Despite the lack of statistics on sexual abuse and exploitation of particularly vulnerable children, the wealth of qualitative studies conducted in Finland identifies some main trends on the topic. **Self-reporting School Health Promotion** surveys that include violence-related questions are regularly sent to a number of schools, which show that Finnish children and young people in vulnerable situations, experience significantly more violence than their peers. **Children in vulnerable situations** can include **children with disabilities**, children of foreign origin, children belonging to sexual or gender minority groups, and/or children placed outside the home. A recent 2020 study demonstrated that in Finland, children with disabilities were 3.53 times more likely to suffer from serious violence, including sexual violence, than their peers. **Children and young people belonging to gender and sexual minorities** also have increased risk of experiencing sexual violence.

The report outlines key ways forward. Finland's government should:

- **Standardise the definitions of child sexual abuse** and separate the related data to better design evidence-based policies aimed at addressing the needs of child victims, particularly those with disabilities or from a minority group.
- **Ensure that all staff responsible for interviewing child victims have undergone suitable qualifying training** (Lanzarote Committee, 1st monitoring report, Recommendation 42) and ensure that interviews of the child victim are conducted in a child-friendly setting separate from the usual premises where investigations and interviews are conducted (such as police, hospital, or court premises). (Lanzarote Committee, 1st monitoring report, Recommendation 41).
- **Legislate and criminalise online child sexual abuse and exploitation**, to ensure better protection for children. For example, live streaming of child sexual abuse is not explicitly criminalised under the Finnish legal framework.
- **Introduce a national referral mechanism which defines the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders** and promotes a multi-agency approach to victim identification by involving a range of frontline professionals and entities, including non-governmental organisations, labour inspectors, social workers, health-care staff, municipal staff.
- Take the necessary legislative or other measures to **set up or designate mechanisms** for data collection or focal points at national or local level and in collaboration with civil society, for the purpose of observing and evaluating in terms of quantitative data collection the phenomenon of the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children in general and child sexual abuse committed in the circle of trust, in particular (Lanzarote Committee, 1st monitoring report, Recommendation 13).
- **Put in place effective mechanisms for data collection** with a specific focus on children affected by the refugee crisis who are victims or presumed victims of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and review the possible removal of obstacles to the collection of such data, in particular, where they exist, legal restrictions to do so, with due respect for the requirements of personal data protection (Lanzarote Committee, Special report, Recommendation 7).

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