



## COUNTRY OVERVIEW - ITALY

APRIL 2024

### Ending child sexual abuse and exploitation: state-of-play in light of the Lanzarote Convention

#### 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 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 Overview on Italy is the third one to be prepared and presented. These joint [Country Overviews](#) bring together the information submitted by Parties to the Lanzarote Convention through the [General Overview Questionnaire](#), the recommendations adopted by the Lanzarote Committee in its [monitoring rounds](#), and additional desk-based research aimed to bring the information up to date. This report aims to provide an effective tool for advocacy, awareness raising and thus advancing the fight against child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in countries.

#### Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

##### What is 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 Italy's comprehensive laws criminalising child sexual abuse and exploitation, children remain vulnerable, even within their circle of trust**

Italy, with an estimated population of 58 million, is home to diverse communities, including a significant number of migrants and refugees. Among them are children, both accompanied and unaccompanied, who face unique challenges due to their migrant status. Exposed to situations of poverty, social exclusion, and unemployment, these children are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, including trafficking and forced labour.

Recent data from helplines and hotlines in 2022 paints a troubling picture of child sexual abuse, uncovering that while a significant portion of offenders are strangers, approximately 40% of cases involve abuse within the child's circle of trust, in particular by the child's own parents.

### **Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation in Italy**

The criminal legislation of Italy comprehensively criminalises the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, in line with the principles enshrined in the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. However, official statistics from the Italian Ministry of Interior for the year 2021 reveal concerning figures: out of 2,285 reported crimes committed against children, 681 cases involved sexual violence, 624 cases were related to solicitation of children, 589 cases were classified as aggravated sexual violence, and 391 cases involved sexual acts with children.

In November 2022, the Observatory for the Fight against Paedophilia and Child Pornography published the second National Plan for Preventing and Combating Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation which foresees activities for the promotion and implementation of protection mechanisms, actions, policies and strategies to involve and protect young citizens with respect to access to new technologies.

### **The Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children Facilitated by Technology**

Internet usage in Italy is widespread, with nearly 98% of children having access to the Internet, and 93% using it daily. However, this widespread connectivity comes with inherent risks, as the distinction between online and in-person realms becomes increasingly blurred. In 2022, Italy's 1.96.96 helpline received reports of 27 online abuse cases affecting 29 children, while the 114 emergency hotline handled 64 cases of online sexual abuse, with children comprising 90% of the victims.

### **The Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Boys**

While the number of boy victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation in Italy in 2020 stood at 495 compared to 2,202 girl victims, the significance of addressing this issue cannot be understated. Estimating the full extent and impact of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys remains challenging, highlighting the importance of robust prevention and intervention measures.

Recent years have seen increased research and initiatives focused on masculinity and sexual violence against boys. Notably, projects like Boys\* & Culture of Care have emerged, yielding valuable resources such as a manual developed for frontline workers engaged in supporting boys affected by sexual abuse and exploitation.

### **Child Participation**

Despite Italy implementing child participation mechanisms enabling children to influence decisions and drive change, there remains a crucial need to broaden their involvement in key decision-making processes at the institutional level. The "girls' and boys' Council" established by the Authority for Children and Adolescents in 2018 in Rome signifies a step forward, yet its limited territorial scope as a trial impedes widespread impact. Encouragingly, plans are underway to extend this initiative across the country, promising expanded opportunities for child participation in programmes aimed at preventing and protecting children against sexual abuse and exploitation.

## Access to Justice for Children

### *Legislative Frameworks*

The Italian legislative framework on access to justice offers fair protection to child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation involved in criminal proceedings. However, certain provisions have the potential to hinder this.

Following the ratification of the Lanzarote Convention, Italy has doubled the statute of limitation periods for offences of child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, a drawback of this provision is that the limitation period continues during trial proceedings, potentially impeding access to justice for child victims, particularly considering the often protracted nature of Italian criminal trials. Delayed disclosure of abuse further complicates matters, as statutes of limitation may restrict ability to seek justice. ECPAT advocates for the elimination of statutes of limitation for child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes. In doing so, victims would be empowered to report offences when ready, ensuring justice regardless of time passed.

### *Reporting Mechanisms*

Numerous channels exist for reporting child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes, including government and non-governmental helplines and hotlines. Despite the existence of these reporting mechanisms, there are concerns that children, particularly non-Italian children, are not fully informed about their availability. Additionally, operators may not consistently provide 24/7 accessibility to these helplines, as reported by a number of civil society organisations.

The surge in reports made through helplines and hotlines for both online and offline instances of child sexual abuse and exploitation, coupled with the growing influx of migrants and refugees (including accompanied and unaccompanied children), present serious challenges in data collection and the identification of victims and their vulnerabilities.

**The Country Overview outlines key actions forward that the Government of Italy could undertake to improve the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse, namely:**

- Verify that **specific regular training about child sexual abuse in the circle of trust is provided to professionals** working within the police, prosecution, child protection and health services.
- **Train and raise awareness of those in contact with children affected by the refugee crisis** on the detection, reporting and referral of signs of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children. Such training should include modules addressing the contextual specificities of these children's experiences.
- Include a **specific focus on children affected by the refugee crisis** in its data collection mechanism to assess 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.

[Read the full Country Overview](#)