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### ARTICLE REVIEW

## The Vulnerable Child's Right to be Ethically Researched

Gabrielle, B. (2019). *Ethical research on sexual exploitation involving children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International. <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ECPAT-International-Issues-Paper-Ethical-Considerations-Sexual-Exploitation-Children.pdf>

Mark P. Capaldi<sup>1</sup>

*Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University*

*Email: mpcapaldi1502@gmail.com*

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This year is the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for ECPAT International, a global network of 118 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in 102 countries to eliminate the sexual exploitation of children. For ECPAT, and of course many other NGOs working with particularly vulnerable children, evidence-based research is needed to inform their strategies, and programmes which requires specific ethical standards and practical skills. Recognising that NGO research is often constrained by methodological weaknesses, in 2019, Dr. Gabrielle Berman (now the Senior Advisor for Ethics in Evidence Generation at UNICEF Innocenti) was commissioned to write a robust review of the literature and learning concerning the critical considerations for ethical research on sexual exploitation involving children.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark P. Capaldi, PhD, is a lecturer at Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University

The paper is important as much of the literature on ethical guidance relates to more general research involving children although it acknowledges that the growing body of research involving child victims of sexual violence or trafficking raises similar ethical issues. At the core of the paper is the discourse on child protection which shapes an ethical research framework built upon the universal principles of 'do no harm,' justice, respect and transparency and accountability. In relation to research on children, it additionally includes the specific principles of the 'best interest of the child' and the child's right to be heard and the right to access information. This is where the sensitivity of the issue of child sexual exploitation starts to become critical. Children involved in sexual exploitation, or any other form of abuse, face particular risks in research. For example, the ethical principle of non-maleficence/beneficence ('do no harm') has special salience for research with children due to concerns over their vulnerability, physical safety or psychological well-being. Informed consent is another difficult issue to handle when researching children in light of their age, competencies and maturity. Traditionally, consent is usually sourced from parents or guardians but they may be complicit in the abuse of the child. What about a child survivor accessing shelter care or welfare services who may feel obligated to participate in the research? All of these challenges are discussed in the ECPAT paper under the basic premise that they should not mean a flat avoidance of such research.

However, ethical standards and human rights principles are not always in agreement, especially around issues such as children's participation. Balancing the child's right to participate with their right to be protected is often at odds as the literature shows that child victims of abuse can take years in recovery processes. There are no easy or straightforward answers to these dilemmas and the paper does not delve into the philosophical differences in people's views and opinions around involving such vulnerable children in research. Avoiding the particularly deep moral issues involved in such sensitive research, however, does not do justice to the very children it is aiming to help.

Ethical challenges or methodological flaws in research are not the sole domain of NGOs as academia similarly struggles to ensure scientific rigor whilst also safeguarding respondents. Understandably, the ECPAT paper focused on NGO contexts; yet much could be learned from academia. Universities, for example, use detailed research protocols to assess risks and anticipated benefits and to identify appropriate research design and tools. Third party reviews through academic Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) adds a layer of independent scrutiny and accountability. There is considerable literature on the functioning and effectiveness of IRBs, including how NGOs perceive their relevance to their own sector, which expose a deficit in NGO/academic learning and collaboration.

The ECPAT paper concludes by calling for greater vigilance of the ethical considerations when researching sexual exploitation of children. By recognizing that the literature on the issue is still underdeveloped, it identifies the need for more specific ethical guidelines to be developed to navigate the unique ethical considerations in research on sexual exploitation involving children. Indeed, in 2020 ECPAT developed draft ethical guidelines which are currently being field tested. Important though this is, ethical guideline documents are but one part of an overall research ethics system. NGOs and academia alike would greatly benefit from more supportive engagement around ethical compliance. By combining expertise on guidelines, practice, and independent review, a more enabling and cooperative environment is possible so that the full scope of ethical rights for children can be realized.