# Briefing Paper

This briefing paper has been compiled using information included in the report *Child sexual exploitation and abuse online: Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova.*[1]

**WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE**

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online. The Alliance generates political commitment and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.

**ECPAT**

ECPAT International is a global network of 122 civil society organisations in 104 countries working towards the vision of ending the sexual exploitation of children. With over 30 years of experience in engaging with and managing multi-stakeholder processes and alliances across national, regional and global levels; ECPAT is considered to be at the helm of all issues and manifestations pertaining to the sexual exploitation of children.

**LA STRADA Moldova**

International Centre "La Strada" Moldova is a national civil society organisation that operates to ensure the respect of the rights and legal interests of women and children in the Republic of Moldova to stay free from violence, at all levels – individual, legislative and executive. La Strada has a five-pillar systemic approach focused on: prevention and early intervention, protection, safety and justice, capacity building, public policies, data and research.



# CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:

## Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

The Voices of Survivors research project aimed to explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in six countries, including Moldova.[2] Presenting the perspectives of young survivors within the research was paramount.
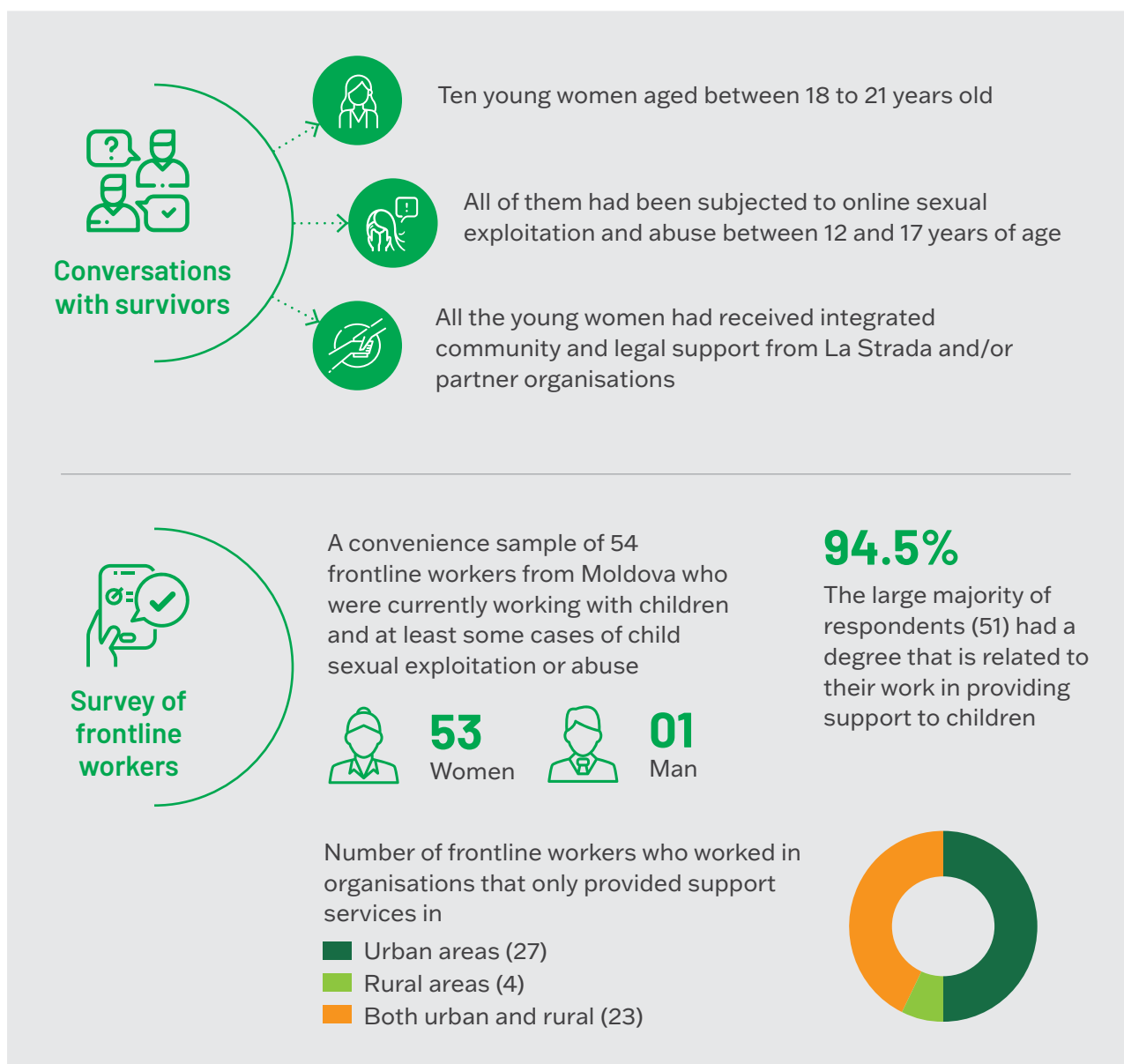
Two best-practice activities were undertaken:

Qualitative one-on-one 'conversations' with young people who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online

An online survey of frontline support workers who were working with child survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse

1. ECPAT International and La Strada Moldova. (2021). Child sexual exploitation and abuse online: Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova. WeProtect Global Alliance.
2. A total of six countries were involved in the Voices of Survivors project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru.

# Who participated in the project?

**Conversations with survivors**

Ten young women aged between 18 to 21 years old

All of them had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse between 12 and 17 years of age

All the young women had received integrated community and legal support from La Strada and/or partner organisations

**Survey of frontline workers**

A convenience sample of 54 frontline workers from Moldova who were currently working with children and at least some cases of child sexual exploitation or abuse

**53** Women    **01** Man

**94.5%**
The large majority of respondents (51) had a degree that is related to their work in providing support to children

Number of frontline workers who worked in organisations that only provided support services in

- Urban areas (27)
- Rural areas (4)
- Both urban and rural (23)

# Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

***Child sexual exploitation and abuse online*** refers to situations involving digital, Internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online includes an evolving range of practices including: *child sexual abuse material, grooming children online for sexual purposes, live streaming of child sexual abuse and other related behaviour*s such as sexual extortion, the non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children, unwanted exposure to sexualized content, among others.[3]

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3. ECPAT International. (2020). Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

# Main findings and recommendations

This research puts the voices of survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online at the forefront of the response to this problem. The findings and recommendations presented here are mostly based on their perspectives about existing reporting mechanisms and about support services, and must ultimately be translated into strategy, policy and action by duty-bearers, service providers and law enforcement.

## Reporting mechanisms

### 1. Raise the visibility of reporting mechanisms, including those available via social media platforms.

Conversations with young survivors generally illustrated little awareness of formal reporting mechanisms that are available in Moldova. Among the ten young women who engaged in the conversations, seven mentioned that they did not know about any reporting mechanisms at the time they were subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Two of them found out about these mechanisms from a teacher while one young woman found out about such mechanisms using Google. A fourth young woman shared that she used the Internet to search for an online safety website that she had heard about before during an IT lesson.

The young women who engaged in conversations believe that reporting mechanisms should be as visible as possible, with information written in plain, straightforward language.

> *"I often see the word violence used in various situations, but I don't think everyone understands what it is. It would be simpler to describe behaviour that is violent."*
>
> (VoS-MD-04)[4]

### 2. Simplify the tools for reporting child sexual exploitation and abuse online and ensure they are child-friendly.

The chat platform available on SigurOnline proved to be not only extremely useful as a reporting mechanism, but crucial in providing a sense of relief for a young woman who, as a child, experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse.

> *"[…] if it weren't for the psychologists at Siguronline, I was ready to end my days, because I couldn't see another solution."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

This young woman recalled being surprised by how quickly she was answered on the chat and particularly appreciated the fact that a psychologist contacted her within one hour after she first asked for help.

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4. Please note text in green boxes refers to quotes from the young survivors who took part in the conversations. Text in purple boxes refers to the qualitative input shared by frontline workers who completed the survey.

This is an encouraging experience, showing that tools for reporting abuse should be as simple as possible. Once a reporting platform is accessed, it should be clear where and how a survivor can write about what happened to them, without having to search for information.

Suggestions from young women on how these tools could be simplified included the addition of a 'report button' and the inclusion of stories from other children who had been helped by specialists in similar situations.

### 3. Commit financial resources to provide trainings for staff of reporting platforms on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The person receiving the reports, for instance in the chat, should be trained and know about online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. These professionals should know how to encourage the child to talk about what happened and to answer them immediately,

> *"not so that the child writes and they are answered in two-three days."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Surveyed frontline workers agreed that capacity building is necessary, recognising the

> *"insufficiency of the specialisation training of specialists, need for sexual education programmes for children."*

### 4. Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies.

Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies to ensure they promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material as well as to comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

According to one young woman,

> *"The online environment must be organised in such a safe way that in the future we avoid cases in which children are traumatised by online experiences."*
>
> (VoS-MD-04)

## Support services

### 5. Better promote the availability and ways to access a full range of support services for cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Such services should be available and accessible across the country, regardless of location.

The same lack of awareness amongst young people of reporting mechanisms was also evident when discussing survivors' prior knowledge of the support services that they could access. Any child who

goes through such an experience should know where to seek help and who are the specialists who can help them. These professionals should be specialised and know the specifics of these cases.

> *"It would be helpful for children to know about services that can help them in cases of online abuse. More promotion of these services needs to be done."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

> *"It would be good to have a centre that would deal only with cases of online sexual abuse."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

Such results could be achieved through the implementation of child advocacy centres (also known as Barnhaus model). This model reduces possible re-traumatisation of children in several ways, including by coordinating the relevant professionals around the child so they provide their testimony fewer times and in a safe and confidential space.

The young women also believe that if social workers were more present in the communities, they could discuss the risks particularly with the most vulnerable children.

> *"In villages, there are social workers who communicate with socially vulnerable people. Maybe if the parent does not have time to inform the child, at least a social worker could talk to children about the risks of online sexual exploitation."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

## 6. Provide educational programmes and support services to family members of children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Young women told us in the conversations that often parents do not know how to deal with such cases and may have aggressive reactions when learning about it, even blaming the children in some situations. Family members need to be informed about online forms of child sexual exploitation and how to better support children. If carers were offered support right from the first stage, they would perhaps understand that the child cannot be blamed in this situation.

> *"I think that when they are on the case, the psychologist should talk to the parents, somehow prepare them morally, so that they understand what will happen next and tell them how to talk with the child."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Indeed, a number of the surveyed frontline workers (20%, n=11) emphasised the negative impacts of unsupportive and dismissive parents and other family members.

> *"Children victims are afraid to talk about what happened, especially the reaction of their parents, which is why they often do not seek assistance. Sometimes children are not heard by adults or adults do not take seriously what happens to children. They lose confidence and stop asking for help."*

To enable these support services and education for parents, some young women recommended the involvement of teachers.

> *"To hold meetings with parents and teach them how to behave with the child."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

## 7. Efforts should be made to avoid re-victimisation by ensuring psychological support and confidentiality standards at all stages of the justice process and provision of support services.

The young women would prefer to talk only once about what happened to them, and later not to be involved in other procedural actions. One survivor even told how she imagines this process – in which the psychologist talks to the child in one room, and in another room are the officers who listen to the discussion and ask questions.

> *"Children should talk about their experience as in movies. That should happen in a specially designed room that has one wall with a mirror. In the room next to it, people could hear the declarations and ask questions."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

In order to avoid re-victimisation, young women also recommended that service providers should strictly follow the rules of confidentiality.

> *"The specialists should be careful with whom they talk about what happened to the child to avoid the situation where the entire village knows about the abuse."*
>
> (VoS-MD-11)

## 8. Children should be able to choose the service provider that will support them, including the gender of the professional.

A number of young women believe that the services would be more child-friendly if children could choose the service provider they will talk to, particularly on online platforms:

> *"A brief description of the counsellor, age, gender should be available. Thus, the child could choose the person they prefer. If they cannot make contact with a specialist, they can choose another counsellor until they find the person with whom they feel safe."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

This would make them feel more comfortable and able to talk more openly about what happened.

> *"Girls should talk to women and boys to men. I know that a woman may understand me, but men probably no."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

9. **Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity building opportunities to service providers on child sexual exploitation and abuse online.**

Both the young women who engaged in the conversations and the frontline workers who responded to the survey spoke about the need to improve the capacities of service providers. According to one young woman, this would make it more likely that they would help without blaming.

> *"Professionals should know about these cases and the online environment. Only in this way the specialist could help [the children]."*
>
> (VoS-MD-05)

One surveyed frontline worker pointed out their own personal need for capacity building:

> *"Personally, I need more training to provide quality psychological assistance to children who are sexually exploited and abused online."*

## Stigma, shame and blaming

The blame towards victims was a key issue mentioned by all survivors during conversations. They spoke about negative experiences involving school staff, police officers, family and community after experiencing child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

> *"When I came to the school, the principal took me to her office and started giving me moral lessons. She said that I don't need a phone, that if I ended up in such a situation, it means that I will get there again."*
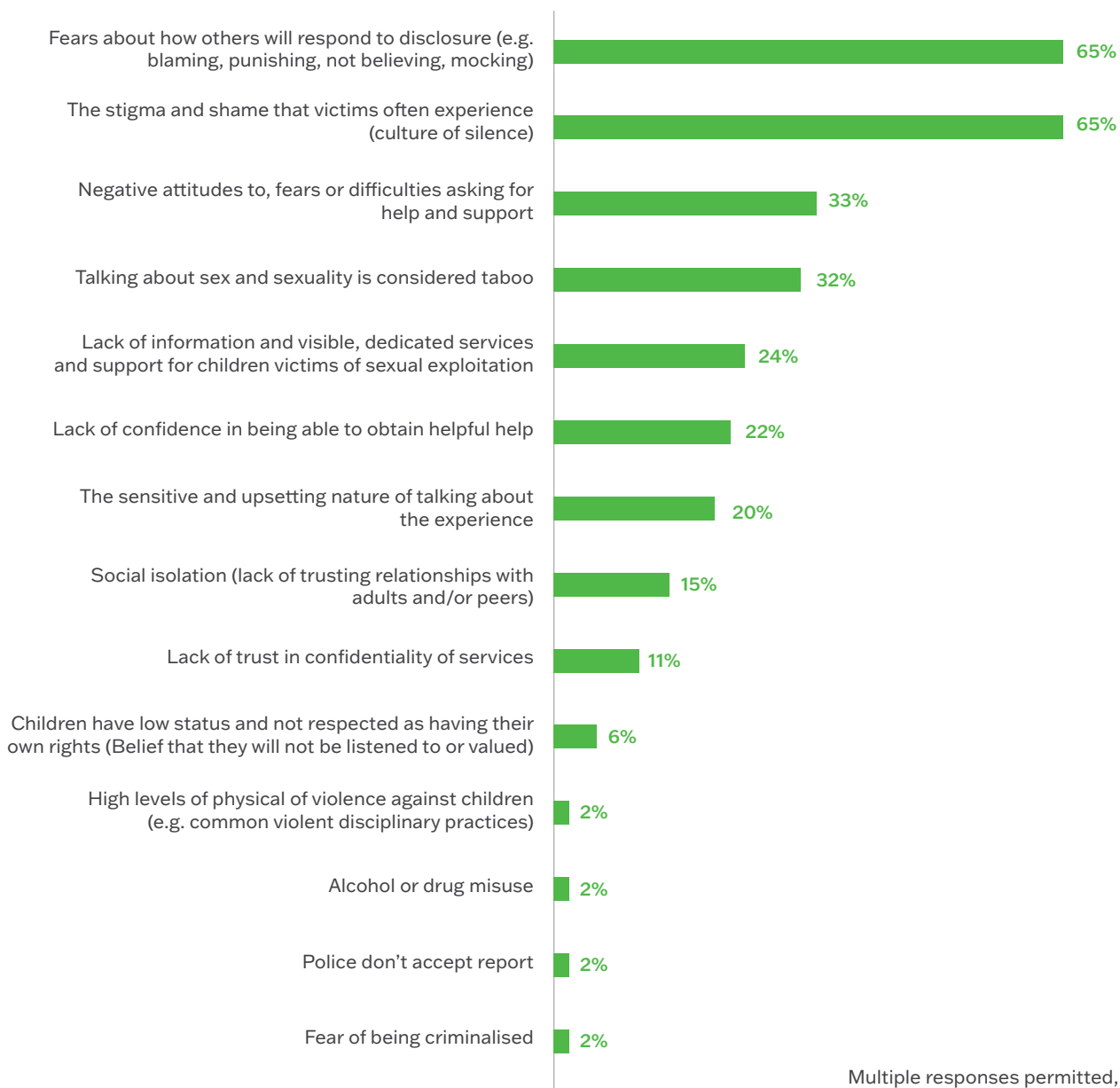>
> (VoS-MD-11)

> *"It didn't help that the policeman was a lady. She wasn't in the mood. She explained to me that she too was going through a bad time. She was very severe, asking too direct and embarrassing questions. It was like she was making me feel guilty."*
>
> (VoS-MD-05)

Stigma, shame and blaming were also mentioned by the surveyed frontline workers as a major issue. When presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children's disclosure of online sexual exploitation and abuse, the two most commonly selected barriers (both at 65% or n=35) to reporting were related to "fears about how others will respond to disclosure" and to a pervasive culture of silence ("the stigma and shame that victims often experience"). Closely related are the third and fourth most common barriers – difficulties in asking for help and the taboo around talking about sex and sexuality.

*Factors that potentially limit children's disclosure.*

| Factor | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Fears about how others will respond to disclosure (e.g. blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking) | 65% |
| The stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence) | 65% |
| Negative attitudes to, fears or difficulties asking for help and support | 33% |
| Talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo | 32% |
| Lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation | 24% |
| Lack of confidence in being able to obtain helpful help | 22% |
| The sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the experience | 20% |
| Social isolation (lack of trusting relationships with adults and/or peers) | 15% |
| Lack of trust in confidentiality of services | 11% |
| Children have low status and not respected as having their own rights (Belief that they will not be listened to or valued) | 6% |
| High levels of physical of violence against children (e.g. common violent disciplinary practices) | 2% |
| Alcohol or drug misuse | 2% |
| Police don't accept report | 2% |
| Fear of being criminalised | 2% |

Multiple responses permitted, null responses removed

These views reiterate the impact of shame faced by survivors, and how community attitudes can negatively impact them and their help seeking. One young woman mentioned that seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma surrounding the access to reporting mechanisms and support services:

> *"In the society in which we live, these facts are harshly judged. 'It's her fault', 'she's stupid', 'she needed to think'" […] for me, the most important thing was not to judge me."*
>
> **(VoS-MD-14)**

The fear of social marginalisation, coupled with shame and other emotional impacts, were also key problems raised by frontline workers. Providing qualitative inputs to the survey about the biggest problems faced by children, they commented:

> *"Blaming the child for what happened. The negative attitude of parents, parent's refusal to help their child. Loneliness, impossibility to talk about what happened to people that the child considers a resource."*

> *"Psycho-emotional difficulties; Mental trauma; Blaming and stigmatisation by those who know about abuse."*

There is an urgent need to dismantle problematic community attitudes and responses to survivors who are doing their best to cope with things that adult offenders subjected them to – through absolutely no fault of their own.