



Child sexual exploitation and abuse online: **Survivors' Perspectives**

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[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 International](#) is a global network of civil society organisations 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. With a Secretariat based in Bangkok (Thailand), driving strategic direction, producing key research and working on global advocacy; together with the on-the-ground efforts of 122 members in 104 countries, the network approach bridges local communities, governments and the private sector; offering a global approach combined with customised national actions.

The research components of the project were implemented at national level by the following six organisations, which are part of the ECPAT Network:

- [Capital Humano y Social Alternativo](#) in Peru
- [Child Rights Center Albania \(CRCA\)/ECPAT](#) Albania
- [Espacios de Desarrollo Integral, A.C. \(EDIAC\)/ECPAT](#) Mexico
- [Fundación Renacer](#) in Colombia
- [International Forum of Solidarity \(IFS\) Emmaus](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- [International Centre “La Strada”](#) Moldova

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Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

Child sexual abuse refers to various sexual activities perpetrated against children (persons under 18), regardless of whether the children are aware that what is happening to them is neither normal nor acceptable. It can be committed by adults or peers and usually involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power. It can be committed with or without explicit force, with offenders frequently using authority, power, manipulation, or deception.¹

Child sexual exploitation involves the same abusive actions. However, an additional element must also be present - exchange of something (e.g., money, shelter, material goods, immaterial things like protection or a relationship), or even the mere promise of such.²

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: The production, distribution, dissemination, importing, exporting, offering, selling, possession of, or knowingly obtaining access to child sexual abuse material online (even if the sexual abuse that is depicted in the material was carried out offline).



Grooming children online for sexual purposes: Identifying and/or preparing children via online technology with a view to exploiting them sexually (whether the acts that follow are then carried out online or offline or even not carried out at all).



Live streaming of child sexual abuse: Sexual exploitation which involves the coercion, threat or deception of a child into sexual activities that are transmitted ('streamed') live via the Internet for viewing by others remotely.



Other practices: Related concepts can include online sexual extortion, the non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children, unwanted exposure to sexualised content, among others.³

1. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International. 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 24.

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY









Photo by Priscilla Du Preez

Background

Over the last few years, research about child sexual exploitation and abuse online has received increased attention, particularly as our lives shifted further online during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the picture remains decidedly unclear – particularly in lower- and middle-income countries where research continues to be limited. Furthermore, opportunities for children to directly contribute to the dialogue on this issue are rare. There is little research directly conveying survivor experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse in all its forms, including when digital technology is involved. Yet growing numbers of children are being supported around the world for such experiences. It is essential that those with lived experience are given the opportunity to participate in the investigation into the response, in order to improve the prevention and disruption activities and support offered to children.

The increasing problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online requires detailed, extensive and sustained attention. Specific evidence about the availability, quality and effectiveness of support services will enable targeted responses in which governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector can cooperate to address this problem. Including the perspectives of survivors in the research bridges the conspicuous gaps in evidence usually present. With these issues in mind, this multi-country research project was undertaken through a partnership of the WeProtect Global Alliance, ECPAT International and six of its network member organisations. The research was conceived to centre the perspectives of survivors on the availability, quality and effectiveness of support services for survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Countries where the project took place

-  Albania
-  Bosnia and Herzegovina
-  Colombia
-  Mexico
-  Moldova
-  Peru

Specific objectives of this project



To directly engage survivors to ensure their perspectives on solutions are clearly represented in the global dialogue.



To survey frontline workers in order to provide a substantial and nuanced understanding of how child sexual exploitation and abuse online is presenting and being supported in current social support services.



To translate this data into concrete strategy, policy and action by policy makers, social support services, law enforcement and the technology industry.

Methods

Two distinct research activities were undertaken.



A total of 36 young women and 6 men between the ages of 18-23 participated in 'survivor conversations' - an ethical careful and participant-centred approach to talking about this sensitive topic.⁴



A total of 413 frontline social support workers were surveyed using a survey consisting of 108 multiple choice and open-answer questions.

The design for the survivor conversations was built on the principle that the participants had, and understood themselves to have, significant control over the process, including the decisions of what they did and did not share.

The 'survivor conversations' approach is a specific participant centred, ethically sound and trauma-informed approach to engage in dialogue on the sensitive topic of child sexual exploitation and abuse. It has been developed and refined by ECPAT International over recent years across a number of research projects. The conversations were facilitated by local professionals (in most cases psychologists) working for ECPAT International member organisations in each country. The local facilitators were supported by a project expert, with many years of experience working with survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse, over two months via online coordination sessions about the approach before they facilitated the conversations with survivors in person. The frontline support workers' survey was administered by ECPAT International member organisations in the six project countries. Participants were sought who were working directly on the frontline of child protection services, including supporting children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Finally, the preliminary findings from the survivors' conversations and frontline workers' survey were presented during a global experts' roundtable held virtually on 26th July 2021 with 19 global experts. The expert roundtable used the preliminary findings as a basis to provide both a global and expert perspective on this important topic.

4. Please note that the conversations took place in all countries but Bosnia and Herzegovina where identifying a sample in line with the strict methodological requirements for psychological safety was deemed not possible in the early stages of implementation.

Key findings

Frequency of child sexual exploitation and abuse online in caseloads

Across the types of issues that child protection workers were facing, forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse with an online element were indicated in 18% of their total caseloads. This means that one in five children they were supporting had related concerns. It is noted this was a convenience sample, and organisations supporting issues related to child abuse were targeted for participation in the survey, yet this is still a strong indication of the extent of this concern at the frontline. Under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as the under-identification of the role of technology and the Internet in cases, may also be an issue.

Gender

Girls were more frequently identified as being subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online, with about 54% of workers saying that online forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse were emerging in 'more than half' of their cases with girls.

Workers suggested that boys were less frequently affected. Most indicated that they saw this issue in less than a quarter of their cases with boys. Yet this is still a higher indication than what is generally expected.

"Most of the cases of victims of exploitation concern girls, but we should point out that the number of boys is also on the rise."

(Survey Respondent from Albania)

Offenders

Frontline workers indicated that offenders in the cases they encountered were overwhelmingly male, yet female offenders were indicated roughly 20% of the time. There were no statistically significant differences across the six countries in this regard. Qualitative data from the workers and young people suggested that the women involved may be facilitating abuse carried out by others – coercing, manipulating and grooming children into situations of abuse. However, emerging research, such as within ECPAT International's Global Boys Initiative,⁵ also indicates that the role of women as offenders may be under-recognised. While such findings need further exploration, a key insight is that interventions should focus on males as the predominant offenders, but should not forget to consider the roles women may play as facilitators and offenders.

Furthermore, offenders were overwhelmingly (86%) from the same country as victims. The most common relationships between offenders and victims were parents/step-parents, other relatives, and family friends. These common relationships indicate that while commonly held perceptions tend to frame sexual exploitation and abuse both online and offline in terms of 'stranger danger', in reality children face more frequent risk of harm from people within their circles of trust.

5. ECPAT International. (n.d.). [Global Boys Initiative](#).

“The perpetrators of the violence are mostly close relatives, fathers to daughters, stepfather to wife’s daughter, male authorities to girls.”

(Survey Respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

People in positions of power - such as teachers - were noted, particularly by the survivors, amongst the offenders and they sometimes demonstrated highly organised approaches to their abuse:

“A victim was captured in the fourth grade and one in sixth grade; in other words, there was always one per generation, being the victims more evident every two generations, so that while one was already in college, he would have someone from high school.”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Mexico)

Mechanisms of control

According to the surveyed frontline workers, money was exchanged in order to enable child sexual exploitation and abuse online in around half of instances. But there were also other frequent mechanisms; offenders used a range of strategies to coerce and control young people. For example, some of the survivors in Colombia explained that at first they did not realise they were experiencing exploitation or abuse, but later became aware that their supposed friend or partner was actually an adult offender exploiting them in exchange for gifts. In another example of control, according to the frontline workers, a common form of exchange for Peruvian boys subjected to sexual exploitation was the provision of shelter.

Silence as complicity

Another form of facilitation, albeit based on inaction and/or omission, was also evident in the data from frontline workers. Across the six countries, instances of ignoring child sexual exploitation and abuse despite being aware it was happening, were noted by participants as an enabling factor for abuse to occur.

“Adults who are aware of the abuse, but prefer to remain silent.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

Disclosures and formal reporting

Largely, young people indicated that before being subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse online, they had very little awareness of the formal reporting mechanisms⁶ that were available.

“There is no information on how to report. The girls and boys don’t report, it scares them, because of the process they are going to face because it involves ‘destroying the castle that you had built’”

(Conversations’ Participant 6, Colombia)

6. Throughout the report we use the phrase ‘formal reporting mechanisms’ to describe avenues for making formal reports of abuse or exploitation such as police, hotlines and child protection services. ‘Formally reporting’ is distinguished in the report from ‘disclosure’ which can include informally raising concerns with peers or caregivers.

The Colombian young people consistently noted that a major factor in enabling their comfort to disclose such intensely personal experiences was indications of genuine interest in their wellbeing from people they trusted – professionals, friends and relatives. They commonly expressed that this first factor of having at least one key supporter who believed and non-judgmentally cared for them enabled them to begin processes to escape exploitative situations and access protection and support services. In contrast, others who did not have a trusted adult explained that even if they did know about formal mechanisms to report, that without support, they were simply not ready to talk about it. Others said that some structures actively discourage reporting – for example adult support is frequently expected (both formally and informally) in order to file a legal complaint.

Another important issue that emerged was failure to secure anonymity, sometimes in dramatic ways. In Albania, the personal data and statements (city, street, initials, names of parents, the name of the school, interviews showing the face of parents, pictures of their houses) of five survivors had been published by the media. These kinds of incidents have major repercussions – with other survivors observing these circumstances losing any trust in institutions. It is both damaging to those impacted, and also likely leads to other victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse online withholding their disclosures.

“What kept me from going to the police was a case that became public a long time ago, in which the media published the name of the school, the city, the age, faces of family members, school teachers and lots of other details, and as a child I remember being distressed by this whole thing. This kept me from reporting it sooner, because I was afraid that maybe my case would be in the media as well. As a matter of fact, this fear came true because the same thing happened to me when I reported it!”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Albania)

A recurrent issue from the young survivors’ accounts of disclosure were the perceived shortcomings of the police who are entrusted with receiving their complaints:

“The girl who admitted me told me ‘Well, what are you reporting?’ I had so many things to say at the time, and she said ‘no, no, just tell me what crime are you reporting today’ and I was like ‘well, I don’t know what I am reporting’, that is when I realised that the service was not going to be what one would expect.”

(Conversations’ Participant 8, Mexico)

Some survivors generously noted this could be the result of the authorities themselves not being trained or skilled in such issues:

“Maybe he’s a good policeman, but he doesn’t know how to talk and differentiate between an interrogation with a criminal and a hearing with a child victim.”

(Conversations’ Participant 5, Moldova)

A common theme that arose from young people was that fear – in different manifestations - often prevented young people from telling anyone about their exploitation. For some, this fear referred to the shame of disclosing to family and acquaintances what they had experienced, while for others, they

feared being judged for what their community might perceive as their 'sexual conduct'. This is especially complicated with some online forms, like when children are manipulated into self-generating sexual content, or if content is passed on without their permission:

"And what are you going to say to the police, that you undressed yourself?"

(Conversations' Participant 2, Moldova)

One of the young men, who identified as gay, feared being stigmatised for his sexual orientation if he disclosed his abuse. This fear of disclosure because of stigma, shame and the perceptions of others aligned with findings in the frontline support worker survey, where by far the most commonly selected factors that workers considered barriers to disclosure were "the stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence)" (58%, n=241) and "fears about how others will respond to disclosure" (51%, n=210).

Support Services

Limited awareness of support services was quite common across the survivor participants in all countries.

"Only when everything had happened, did I learn that out there is a social worker who was supposed to take care of children and provide protection to them. No one had told me about the existence of this social worker, not even her!"

(Conversations' Participant 8, Albania)

In many cases young people were eventually referred to support services by police, prosecutor's offices etc. Schools were highlighted in the data as potentially protective environments and a first line for victim identification and referral to supports. However, for young people, schools were frequently criticised for their performance in this area. On the contrary, some young people may have been treated with prejudice and blamed by the teaching staff for the abuse that occurred against them.

However, some participants also acknowledged that perhaps these circumstances arise as teachers are not trained in the knowledge and skills needed to identify and intervene in risky situations.

"To be frank, not even our teachers, or the psychologist at my school, have any idea at all on how we can protect ourselves online, or how they can come to our defence. During open discussion classes, we did nothing but discuss fun stuff..."

(Conversations' Participant 6, Albania)

Conversations' Participant 1, Colombia, explained that given her experience, she felt that teachers simply had not been trained to identify indicators of abuse in children; and that they had no information about the dangers of sexual violence on social media.

Legal services did appear to be largely available and once engaged, represented a positive experience for most young people.

“The lawyer was like a guarantee certificate for my safety.”

(Conversations’ Participant 14, Moldova)

Though in some cases processes were not well explained to them and contact was sporadic. In some cases, young people even dropped their complaints after long periods of no contact.

“I withdrew it because of the answer I received...Let’s say it like this, I did not have any news from the authorities, I never had information about what the progress was, the only information I had was ‘we do not have access, Twitter denied us’ and at that moment I no longer wanted to go through with it.”

(Conversations’ Participant 8, Mexico)

While this may not represent a long time in institutional court processes - these are deeply difficult and troubling experiences that can consume survivors while they wait in limbo for action and – as in the case of the young Mexican woman we spoke to, can lead to a denial of a child victim’s right to access justice, legal remedies and support.

Psychological support was generally very much appreciated when available, but was often not consistently available for as long as the young people would have liked:

“It would have helped me to have ‘continuous’ psychological support, to fill ‘the gap’ and pain that the situation had left.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Peru)

Yet some survivors also reported community stigma associated with seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist, as these services are considered targeted only at those who are mentally ill. Work to dismantle these perceptions is essential as part of reducing barriers to accessing help.

“When I asked my parents to go to the psychologist because I realised that my relationships, especially with my boyfriend, were not good, they just told me that I was crazy, and that it was not necessary.”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Mexico)

A need for extensive opportunities for training and support to frontline support workers was clearly confirmed also by the expert roundtable. Furthermore, the experts noted a need to actually demystify the support survivors need. While there is ground for new learning regarding technology and the different ways it is misused to abuse children, at the end of the day, young people still need to be heard, believed and cared for – basic principles for all child protection work.

Prevention

Almost all the conversations with young people emphasised the strong need for better prevention activities regarding sexual exploitation and abuse – both in general and when technology is involved. When asked about the general level of awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the general community, the frontline workers across the six countries rated this as generally “poor” (71%, n=291). Only 10% of frontline workers (n=39) felt awareness was “good” or “excellent”.

Also emphasised was the critical role that schools could play in preventing sexual abuse and exploitation online, and how teachers and parents should not be averse to discussing sex and sexuality with young people. A young survivor from Colombia, for example, reflected on the importance of education and awareness-raising:

“Knowing about cybercrimes - that would have made me stop a bit and I would have realised that what was happening to me was that I was being the victim of a crime. For us as young people it is important to recognise the strategies that these people use to manipulate and deceive and thus achieve to identify and stop them, not knowing how they act gives them an advantage to be able to deceive us.”

(Conversations’ Participant 5, Colombia)

Survivors shared how in schools, sexual education is often understood as “avoiding getting pregnant”. Conversely, the young survivors believe that such classes should provide children with advice and guidance on what to do when encountering grooming and other risks of sexual exploitation and abuse online. Information about where to seek help, as well as making space to discuss issues like consent and navigating healthy relationships are essential.

Recommendations

Urgent action is needed from governments, civil society, communities and industry partners to better protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

This report ends with detailed recommendations for actions that are drawn from the data, and in many cases directly from the words of survivors. The recommendations generally fall into two categories; how to improve access and quality of reporting mechanisms, and how to better support children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The full recommendations can be found on [page 77](#) of the report.

INTRODUCTION



Background

Research about child sexual exploitation and abuse online has received increased recent attention – particularly as our lives shifted further online during responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet the picture is far from clear. Our online and offline lives are not mutually exclusive - blurred boundaries between the physical and digital world influence how we think about this problem. Sexual violence is taking place in different ways: sometimes completely via technology (i.e. child sexual abuse material or sexual extortion), and in other instances with combinations of online and in-person elements (i.e. grooming followed by offline sexual abuse).⁷ While research from the global north is more evident, much is still unknown and far less research yet exists in low- and middle-income countries.⁸

Furthermore, children’s voices about their experiences of these crimes continue to be rarely centralised in the dialogue - there is surprisingly little research directly conveying their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online nor the responses they receive. Much of the existing research has also focused on identifying potential risks to children rather than directly measuring the evidence of harm that some have faced.⁹ This is understandable, as it’s ethically more complex to conduct research with young people who have experienced harm. Yet fully understanding online harm is important in order to inform our preventions and responses. Of course, it must also be remembered that in reality, the vast majority of child sexual exploitation and abuse is unreported, making it difficult to truly determine the scope of this problem in an absolute sense.

Researchers have used qualitative methods like online surveys to examine survivor experiences of child sexual abuse material production.¹⁰ In one study, approximately half of those who responded felt that the images were associated with specific problems that were different to those caused by the associated in-person abuse. Nearly half of the respondents worried that people would think that they would be recognised or that people would think they were willing participants. Interestingly, in this study one-third refused to talk about the images and 22% denied that there were images. An additional study of 150 adult survivors whose child sexual abuse was recorded and/or distributed online showed that 70% of that sample also expressed anxieties about being recognised from the images – a clear key concern.¹¹

A further qualitative study of 20 children who were referred following suspected online sexual abuse found that only 12 were willing to talk about what had happened. The remainder denied that anything had taken place in spite of the fact that there was evidence of it in the form of digital images. The interviews with the 12 children prepared to talk indicated that they were very critical of themselves, and often had strong feelings of loyalty towards their abuser.¹²

The reluctance to accept what has happened, to disclose to others and attributions of self-blame have been evidenced in other research with children who have experienced child sexual exploitation and

7. ECPAT International. (2020). [Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Slavtcheva-Petkova, V., Nash, V., & Bulger, M. (2015). [Evidence on the extent of harms experienced by children as a result of online risks: Implications for policy and research](#). *Information, Communication & Society*, 18 (1), 48–62.

10. Gewirtz-Meydan, A. (2018). [The complex experience of child pornography survivors](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80, 238-248.

11. Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). [International Survivors' Survey](#).

12. Katz, C. (2013). [Internet-related child sexual abuse: What children tell us in their testimonies](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35 (9), 1536–42.

abuse online through production of child sexual abuse material or grooming.¹³ These are important lessons not only as they identify challenges in conducting research with these hard-to-reach populations, but also in relation to the recovery needs of these individuals. Breaking down these common phenomena - which may be heavily internalised - is clearly required.

These studies notwithstanding, qualitative research with children who have experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online is still relatively rare. Such children are difficult to both identify and recruit, which in part may reflect the ethical challenges of approaching children directly, and also because many professionals act as gatekeepers to children and are reluctant to approach them for research due to justifiable fears of further distress and traumatisation. Crucially of course, any such research must also be completed using ethically appropriate and safe techniques for engaging survivors.¹⁴

However, growing numbers of children are being supported by support services around the world for issues related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Seeking to understand and build on the strengths of such services and address their weaknesses is a priority. Amplifying the voices of young people who have had these experiences is vital to do that.

The increasing problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online requires detailed, extensive and sustained attention. Specific evidence about the quality and effectiveness of support services will enable targeted responses in which governments, non-government organisations and the private sector can cooperate to address this problem.

Ensuring that the voices of children who have had experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse online are part of the conversation was core to this project.

Project objectives

In late 2020, the WeProtect Global Alliance and ECPAT International entered into a partnership to conduct research that puts survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online squarely at the table for planning prevention and response to this problem. The project aimed to directly engage with survivors to ensure their perspectives on solutions are clearly represented in the global dialogue. The project used best-practice methods, established by ECPAT International, to engage with survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

These perspectives must ultimately also be translated into strategy, policy and action by policy makers, service providers and law enforcement. Thus, the project also engaged with frontline support workers to explore the current picture and identify opportunities for improvement.

To measure the quality and effectiveness of support services for survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, this project undertook two separate and distinct research activities. The activities were related, but involved their own approaches, tools and consent processes:

13. Quayle, E., Jonsson, L., & Lööf, L. (2012). [Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse: Interviews with affected young people](#). Stockholm: ROBERT.

14. ECPAT International. (2019). [Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.



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

The conversations with young survivors focused on their recommendations for improving prevention and support services for children (not on their abuse, as explained in the method section). The approach ensured that the research was informed directly by survivors who were drawing on their own experiences of harm from child sexual exploitation and abuse. Including their perspectives in the research bridges the conspicuous gaps noted above that sometimes persist regarding the sources of evidence in this sensitive area.

Surveying frontline support workers aimed to provide a substantial and nuanced understanding of how child sexual exploitation and abuse online is presenting in social support services. Data from these professionals indicates knowledge and perceptions of the problem amongst workers, caregivers and the general public; identifies key vulnerabilities for children; and assesses accessibility of care to support children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The project was implemented through partnership with members of the ECPAT International network in three countries in Latin America (Colombia, Mexico and Peru) and three in Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Moldova).

The initial findings were also presented to and explored by a panel of experts in the field at a global expert roundtable held online on 26th July 2021 (see participants' list in [Annex](#)).

METHODS

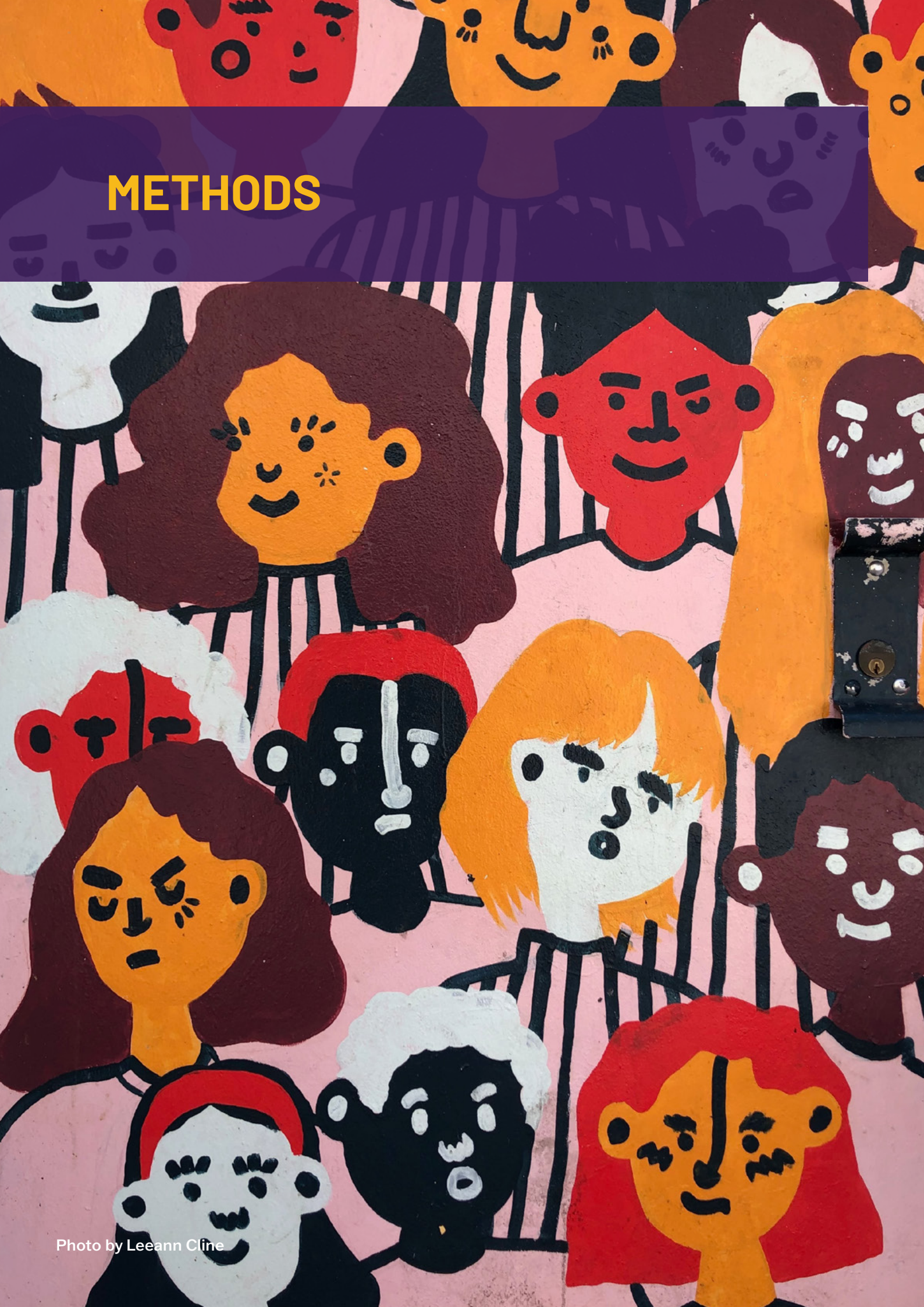


Photo by Leann Cline

Conversations with survivors

The conversations with young survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online are of foremost importance to this project. They were conducted with the intention to shed light on the conspicuous gaps that persist when survivors' perspectives are excluded from work to shape policy and legislation in this area. The conversations explored the survivors' perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of existing support services, and gathered recommendations for improvements.

Rationale

Engaging survivors of child sexual exploitation in research requires substantial care to accommodate a range of ethical considerations.¹⁵ Such research must place significant value on survivors having the right to safely, actively and meaningfully participate in discourse on issues that impact upon them. Therefore, the design for the survivors' conversations in this project was built on the principle that the participants had, and understood themselves to have, significant control over the process, including the decisions of what they shared (or didn't share). A range of measures were taken that reinforced their full control over the process and what they shared on their terms.

To ensure that the perspectives of young survivors were meaningfully included in this project, ECPAT International has developed a participant-centred, ethically sound, and trauma-informed approach to engaging them over the last few years. This approach was replicated and facilitated in this project with the support of an expert with many years working with survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The 'conversations' approach is thus a dialogue with young survivors on issues which matter to them, and which explore their experiences of the support that they received.

Participants were invited to speak freely about their personal experiences of support services through their recovery process and the facilitators used active listening to engage with the young persons and understand their story – exploring particular gaps in understanding and drawing out the detail needed to represent young people's perspectives of these issues. Probing questions eliciting narratives across their experiences were only used responsively and to prompt discussion. This was not a structured interview with set questions – which can feel like an interrogation. Participants were invited to tell only the parts of their story that they wanted to.

Although requirements for the local facilitators, working with the members of the ECPAT International network, already included relevant professional background and experience working with children, local facilitators still prepared over two months with the project expert during a number of coordination sessions focused on the trauma-informed participatory approach before they facilitated the conversations.

Sample

Conversations with young people who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online during childhood were conducted in all countries where this project was implemented besides Bosnia and

15. ECPAT International. (2019). [Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Herzegovina, due to considerations regarding the feasibility of identifying survivors who would meet the inclusion criteria for the project.

In Albania, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru, facilitators who worked for ECPAT International member organisations carefully identified up to 10 possible young people that could be invited to participate. In most cases, the participants were identified through services provided by their organisations, but in some cases, participants were identified from other services that the ECPAT International member organisations had a close working relationship with. Inclusion criteria included, inter alia, being aged between 18 to 24 years old, having had an experience of sexual exploitation and abuse online before turning 18 years of age as well as a need for participants to have current access to support structures, and for adequate time to have passed since the exploitation occurred.

Identifying participants proved to be challenging in some of the countries, further exacerbated by Covid-19 constraints. Ultimately, 42 survivors aged between 18-23 participated in the conversations across the five countries.¹⁶ Out of these, only six were young men (one in Mexico and five in Colombia). In general, the local facilitators in all countries except Colombia, experienced difficulties in identifying male participants for a variety of reasons. For example, in the case of Moldova, La Strada Moldova indicated that out of the total number of children they provide support to, the percentage of boys is below 10%. Moreover, they noted that help-seeking in Moldova is influenced by gender norms about male stoicism, which result in few boys seeking help for abuse. Similarly, CHS

Alternativo in Peru shared that there are very few reported cases of male children or adolescents who have been victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse online and who are able to access the justice and support system. They only had one registered case involving a boy, who was still a minor and thus could not be included in this sample. Also in Albania, the local facilitators were unable to identify any young men who had been victims of committing child sexual exploitation and abuse online that had received any support services by neither CRCA/ECPAT Albania nor any partner organisations.



Conversations with Survivors

42

survivors aged between 18-23 participated in the conversations across the five countries

06

of the participants were young men (one in Mexico and five in Colombia)

Conversations' approach

The conversations were carefully planned to be conducted in an interactive and unstructured style, rather than a traditional form of research interview. The advantages of this design are that it is attentive to the nature and sensitivities of the topic, and promotes choice and empowerment, placing high value on the fact that participants have, and perceive themselves to have, significant control over what they share with the researchers. As such, participants were able to contribute verbally, but also through a range of visual tools to facilitate the conversations.

Participants were also asked if they preferred to take part in conversations one-on-one or in small groups (for example in case they already knew some of the other participants because of participation in the same support groups). All 42 young survivors decided to conduct one-on-one conversations.

16. 10 in Mexico, 10 in Moldova, 9 in Colombia, 7 in Albania, 6 in Peru.

Following initial agreement to take part, conversations were then held in two stages – a ‘pre-meeting’ was carried out and then the ‘main conversation’ a few days later. This two-stage process was deliberate, symbolically indicating a trusting relationship controlled by the participant from the outset. The pre-meeting involved explaining the process, answering queries about consent, and seeking any preferences that the facilitators could accommodate in setting up the ‘main conversation’ (e.g. time of day, room and seating preferences, who was present etc.). Arrangements remained flexible and up to the local facilitators and the young people to determine together, also in light of the fast-changing contextual circumstances because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The venues for carrying out the conversations were very diverse - private offices, private houses, an executive rental room, shelters, ECPAT member organisations’ premises - but in all cases as part of the ‘pre-meeting’ process the survivors were first consulted on their preference for a space, and advice was sought from the organisations and professionals that facilitated the connection with the survivors to settle on locations that also met ethical requirements (such as ensuring confidential discussions). In the case of Albania, all survivors preferred to be interviewed at CRCA/ECPAT Albania premises, because they were concerned that, if meeting at other premises in their towns, someone could see them and overhear their conversations. Similarly, the refusal to hold the conversations in their town of residence to avoid the possibility that family and communities could notice them, coupled with the long distance to the capital (where La Strada Moldova is located), led to four young women in Moldova declining to participate in the research.

Facilitators took every measure to make sure that the survivors felt as comfortable as possible during the course of conversations. The conversational nature, open questions, allowing enough time to respond, regularly giving permission not to respond, all helped shape the outcomes of the conversations. As per the conversations’ approach, the young people were also encouraged to draw as a means of illustrating their feelings and experiences as they spoke.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has meant lots of our interactions have had to be virtual these past years, the researchers were adamant that the psychological safety of participants would be hard to maintain if the conversations were held virtually. In-person interactions are necessary to read non-verbal signs of distress and to provide immediate support. Therefore, it was a requirement that all the conversations were held face-to-face.¹⁷ Although the research did not seek to determine the specifics of the exploitation and/or abuse that the young people were subjected to, in this way the facilitators – trained and experienced in working with trauma – were physically present and better able to support participants. In one instance, while negotiating Covid-19 travel restrictions, a hybrid model was necessary where the facilitator was in conversation with the survivor via Zoom, however a co-facilitator was also physically present with the young person.

Analysis

Following the conversations, the facilitators reflected on what they had heard, their notes, and other outputs (in some countries conversations were recorded upon consent by the young people). The facilitators then developed a brief preliminary report – in local language – that focused on specific

17. Some flexibility was needed to adapt to changing movement requirements and Covid-19 safety plans were applied, as detailed below in the *Limitations* section regarding one conversation in Peru.

themes across their conversations, such as barriers to disclosing, the quality, usefulness and accessibility of services, and summarised the young people's recommendations for improvements. These preliminary reports were then reviewed and discussed between the facilitators, the project expert, and the ECPAT research team. Once finalised, these preliminary reports were then made available to those participants who had indicated they wanted to see the output to offer their feedback and additional inputs. These preliminary reports for the five countries then informed the findings sections of the national reports and this overall project report.

Ethical considerations

Before beginning the research, ECPAT International convened a panel of three global experts for an independent third-party review of the proposed methodology. A detailed research protocol that included mitigations for ethical risks was developed, along with draft tools. Detailed feedback from the panel was accommodated in two rounds of review before the project commenced.

As detailed above, the local facilitators participated in extensive preparations together with the project expert prior to conducting the conversations. Moreover, the process for obtaining informed consent was conducted in two steps – so the young people had time to consider their involvement (not signing consent just prior to commencing) and could control some of the circumstances of the conversations.

Frontline support workers' survey

The engagement of frontline support workers through completion of a workforce survey was aimed at adding data to 'flesh out' a comprehensive picture of child sexual exploitation and abuse online by exploring the perceptions, knowledge and practices influencing young people's disclosures and the support that is available to them.

Rationale

Workforce surveys have increasingly been used in research to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of social support systems. Most commonly these surveys are used by health¹⁸ and social work professions¹⁹ to measure service delivery effectiveness.

Social support to children who are subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse is generally provided within the broader context of child protection. We therefore developed and delivered a survey for child protection workers. The survey explored perceptions related to the sexual exploitation of children – in general and online; factors related to children's access to support services; perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of such services; as well as details about the nature of their direct work with children.

18. Magadzire, P M et al. (2014, November). [Frontline health workers as brokers: provider perceptions, experiences and mitigating strategies to improve access to essential medicines in South Africa.](#)

19. Sadeghi, T and Fekjaer, S. (2018). [Frontline workers' competency in activation work.](#) *International Journal of Social Welfare*. 77-88; Netsayi, M. (2019). [Perceptions of frontline social workers on their contributions agenda for social work and social development.](#)

Sample

In each of the six countries, the ECPAT member organisations utilised their national contacts to identify organisations supporting children from which to invite staff working at the frontline of providing support.

While the research focus was child sexual exploitation and abuse online, very few services focus exclusively on support for online forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse exclusively. The sample therefore included a range of frontline support workers who had supported at least some children subjected to sexual exploitation over the last year.

The sample was a 'convenience sample' and therefore should not be considered representative of the diversity of frontline support workers in each country, however, attempts to represent different types of services, both in terms of geographic location as well as type of services were made during sampling.

In order to be eligible to complete the survey, frontline support workers needed to be:

- Over 18 years of age;
- At least last 12 months working in the field of social work, psychology or other social support;
- At least last 12 months managing own case load directly;
- Case load over last 12 months included at least some children;
- Case load over last 12 months included at least some cases of sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

In total, 413 frontline support workers who were providing support to sexually exploited children completed the survey.²⁰ It is worth noting that in addition to these completed surveys, we also received a further 408 partial responses, which were not included in the analysis, and a further 433 potential participants were disqualified by the initial hurdle questions because they did not meet the inclusion criteria. In particular, an analysis of disqualified responses showed how the criterion which was unmet was usually related to providing direct support to children in the past 12 months. Insights from the ECPAT member organisations who took part in the project, indicated that such high disqualifications could be partially explained by limited delivery of in-person support services during the research period because of Covid-19 movement restrictions.



Survey of frontline workers

413 eligible frontline support workers completed the survey

260 were from Latin American countries (Mexico, Peru and Colombia)

153 were from Eastern European countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Albania)

The survey

Self-administered online surveys (emailing a link) have notoriously low participation rates. Thus, the design for this project opted for in-person administration – though using an online tool with limits

20. 91 in Mexico, 89 in Colombia, 80 in Peru, 54 in Moldova, 50 in Albania and 49 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

and designated required items to help ensure a cleaner dataset. While restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant administrators had to support participants by phone in most cases, they - staff members from ECPAT member organisations - remained on standby to support, offer guidance and troubleshoot as the participants completed the survey. The personal connection helped motivate participants to complete the survey. Data collection took place between April and August 2021 in the six countries.

The online survey consisted of 108 multiple choice and short open-answer questions (a few extra questions were added for certain countries during the contextualisation process). The draft tool in English language was translated to Albanian, Bosnian, Romanian and Spanish, and ECPAT International and each ECPAT member organisation collaborated to check and contextualise each version of the survey, which was then pilot-tested with a small number of frontline workers in each country before being fielded.

The full survey in English, Albanian, Bosnian, Romanian and Spanish can be provided on request.

Analysis

Following data collection, data was cleaned, and open-ended responses were translated to English. Survey output was integrated into a custom analytical framework where analysis was then conducted based upon exigent themes and patterns that arose from the data. Qualitative analytical components were then added.

Quantitative and qualitative themes and patterns were explored, with direct (translated) quotes from the open text responses used to illustrate dominant narratives emerging from the quantitative data, along with occasional dissenting views. Care was taken during analysis not to present any qualitative responses that may have identified participants.

It should be noted that the data are not statistically representative of the experiences of all frontline support workers in the six countries. However, the estimates, perceptions and experiences reported here offer valuable insight into the access and quality of social support for children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained as an integrated part of the online survey tool. To protect confidentiality, names were not requested at any stage of completing the survey. Care is also taken when presenting qualitative data in this report so that participants are not identifiable by the content of the quotes.

Experts' roundtable

Preliminary findings from the survivors' conversations and frontline workers' survey were presented during a global experts' roundtable held virtually on 26th July 2021. The roundtable saw the participation of 19 experts from survivor-led organisations, academic institutions and frontline practice organisations from across the WeProtect Global Alliance's membership and network.

The expert roundtable aimed at using the preliminary findings as a basis to provide both a global and expert perspective on such findings with the following key objectives:

- Engage with the country-specific findings to explore their resonance with the general picture of this issue, and explore ways that the overall project findings inform generally applicable conclusions.
- Utilise insights from the survivors to inform the dialogue on service design and prevention initiatives.
- Explore and confirm the country-specific findings within the broader body of knowledge and expertise.
- Suggest next steps for the WeProtect Global Alliance, its membership and the sector to progress advocacy and implement project recommendations.

Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic meant movement restrictions varied at different times during the data collection period which had logistical impacts on both the conversations with survivors as well as the frontline support workers' survey. In particular, the pre-meetings with Colombian and Peruvian survivors took place virtually due to travel restrictions at the time (though conversations were all held in-person in compliance with government rules for interpersonal contact). As noted in the method section, one of the conversations in Peru had to be carried out with a hybrid approach, where one facilitator participated via Zoom, but a co-facilitator was physically present with the young person. This was because the facilitators who took part in the coordination sessions were unable to travel to the region where the survivor was located. This conversation was conducted by the facilitator using the Zoom platform but with the support of a psychologist co-facilitating in loco with the participant to provide support to the young survivor.

Regarding the frontline workers' survey, administrators from the ECPAT International member organisations reported challenges throughout the process of identifying potential participants. Many workplace operations (such as working hours and reduced personnel) were disrupted by Covid-19. This slowed the process of connecting with possible participants and likely reduced some participants' appetite to take part. Furthermore, a hurdle requirement for participation was that workers had supported children directly during the previous 12 months (this was to filter out staff working in management rather than direct service provision). With many services unable to work directly with clients, this may have excluded some eligible participants.

Finally, while anticipated, maintaining a consistent methodology across six countries is complex, particularly when translating and contextualising tools and collecting data in four languages. Translation, contextualisation, piloting and some back-translation was all undertaken through design processes. An innovative response that helped us achieve better integrity of the data was to train and support the country teams in a project-consistent approach to the preliminary analysis of the survivors' conversations – initially in the same language that the data was collected. While some consistency in the framework for analysis is inevitably lost (from multiple analysts) this is a trade-off for conducting the analysis in its original form.

FINDINGS



Characteristics of survivors and workers

Survivors

Forty-two young survivors took part in the conversations in five countries. They came from different cities and regions (urban and rural) in each country which allowed us to gauge a more comprehensive picture regarding their experiences of child sexual abuse and exploitation online, as well as to present diverse and diverging opinions and perceptions on accessibility, quality and usefulness of support services.

The 42 young survivors – 36 females and six males - were aged between 18 and 23 years old at the time the conversations took place. The age at which they had experienced child sexual exploitation or abuse online varied between 12 and 17 years old.

All survivors were identified among those children who had received support by the ECPAT member organisations directly or a partner organisation with whom they had a working relationship. Interestingly, in the case of Colombia, some of the young survivors who took part in the conversations were linked to a youth group active in programmes for the prevention of sexual exploitation of children. One of these young people - Conversations' Participant 5, Colombia - mentioned how being part of such a group has allowed him to facilitate prevention activities in his own community and to increase the visibility of the issue of sexual exploitation of children among his peers and neighbours.

Similarly, in Mexico, two of the young survivors were part of a social collective, the *Código Violeta*, formed by survivors and their mothers, aimed at providing support to women and girls who have experienced violence in digital spaces and contributed to the promotion of the Olimpia Law²¹ in the Mexican state of Hidalgo and at the Federal level. This organisation supports young women with mediation to psychological and legal services.

"I know that if it had not been for the support of two mothers of victims of digital violence, we would not be here today."

(Conversations' Participant 7, Mexico)²²

During the experts' roundtable, participants emphasised that support groups and networks for survivors to share their experiences and speak out are a good mechanism to encourage disclosure and can help in coping with the experience of abuse, reintegrate survivors into the community and empower them.

As expected, during the process of identifying participants, some of the invited young people declined to participate, noting that they preferred not to reflect again on their experiences of abuse and exploitation or that due to work and study commitments they did not have time to take part in the pre-meetings and conversations.

21. The Law Olimpia refers to a series of legal reforms imposing sanctions of up to six years for disseminating images of intimate and sexual content without the consent of the person involved. Federal Government of Mexico. (2021). [Technical briefing: Olimpia Law](#).

22. 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.

In some countries, social norms impacted on the survivors' participation as well as the way conversations were conducted. For example, in Albania young women often have to inform their parents and/or partners and seek their approval to participate in meetings and other events outside the home. Therefore, two of the young Albanian survivors would not consent to take part in the conversations if their purpose was not explained in advance to their family members; while the remaining five young women requested to be accompanied by a family member to the CRCA/ECPAT Albania offices.

"I agree to participate in this study, and I have no problems with it, but my parents are concerned about the reasons for this conversation, because I've told my parents everything that we have discussed here."

(Conversations' Participant 1, Albania)

Facilitators thus faced an additional challenge in holding conversations with survivors in terms of confidentiality. Another reason for the presence of family members during the conversations was related to the fact that parents and other close relatives were concerned that recollections during the course of the conversations could unearth new information, which could cause distress.

Time and care were taken to fully ensure everyone was comfortable with the approach, and the circumstances in which the conversations were to take place. An endorsement of the two-step, pre-meeting approach. Once they assured confidentiality, the facilitators proceeded with the conversation.

On a similar note, two of the young Moldovan women who declined to participate did so because taking part in the conversations would have put them in a situation where they would have to explain to their husbands where they were going and for what purpose.

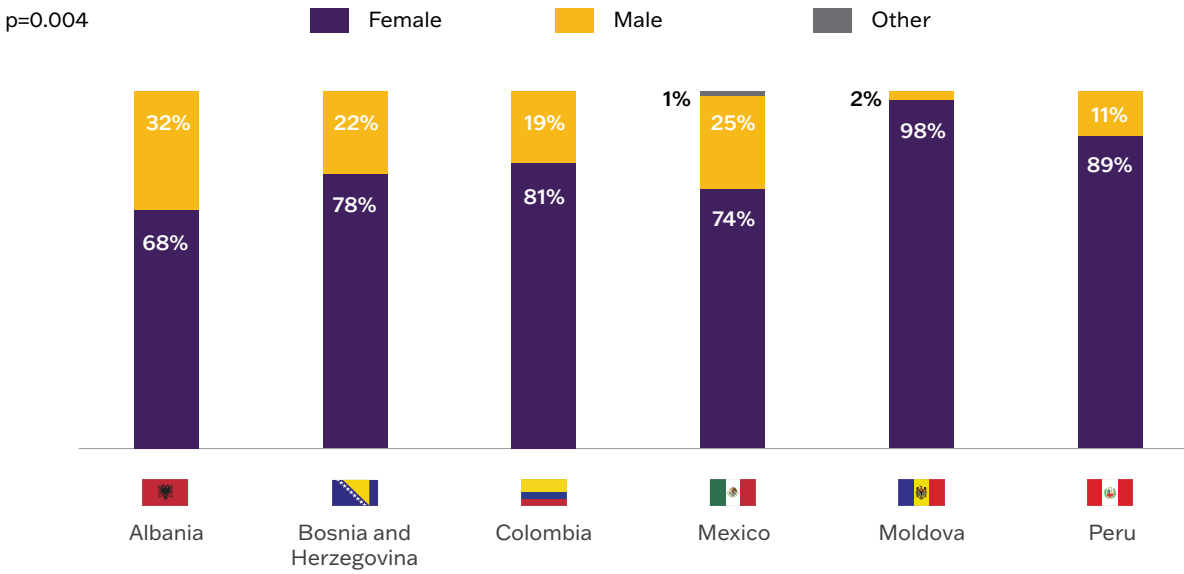
Frontline support workers

The survey was completed by 413 respondents across the six countries. The large majority of the surveyed frontline workers were female (81%, n=335), with a further 19% (n=77) being male and one respondent (from Mexico) selecting "Other".

There was a significant difference across the six countries on the gender distribution,²³ with the highest ratio of female respondents in Moldova (98%) and the lowest ratio of female respondents in Albania (68%).

23. Chi-Square test for independence indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(10) = 25.645, p = 0.004$).

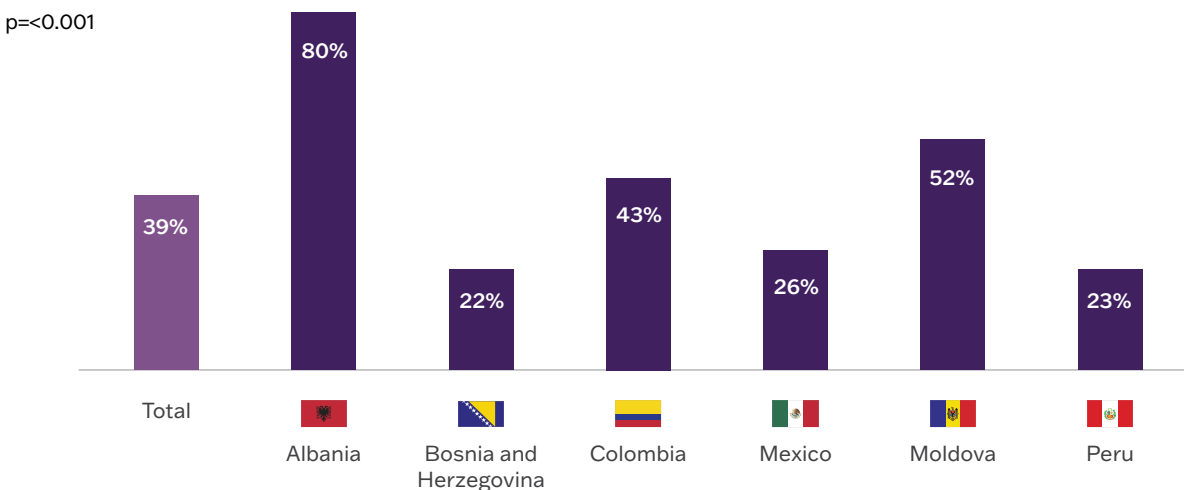
Figure 1: Gender of frontline support workers



More than two thirds of the surveyed frontline workers were aged 31-40 (41%, n=171), and an almost equal number were aged 21-30 (24%, n=99) and 41-50 (25%, n=104). The remaining 9% were older than 50 (n=39).

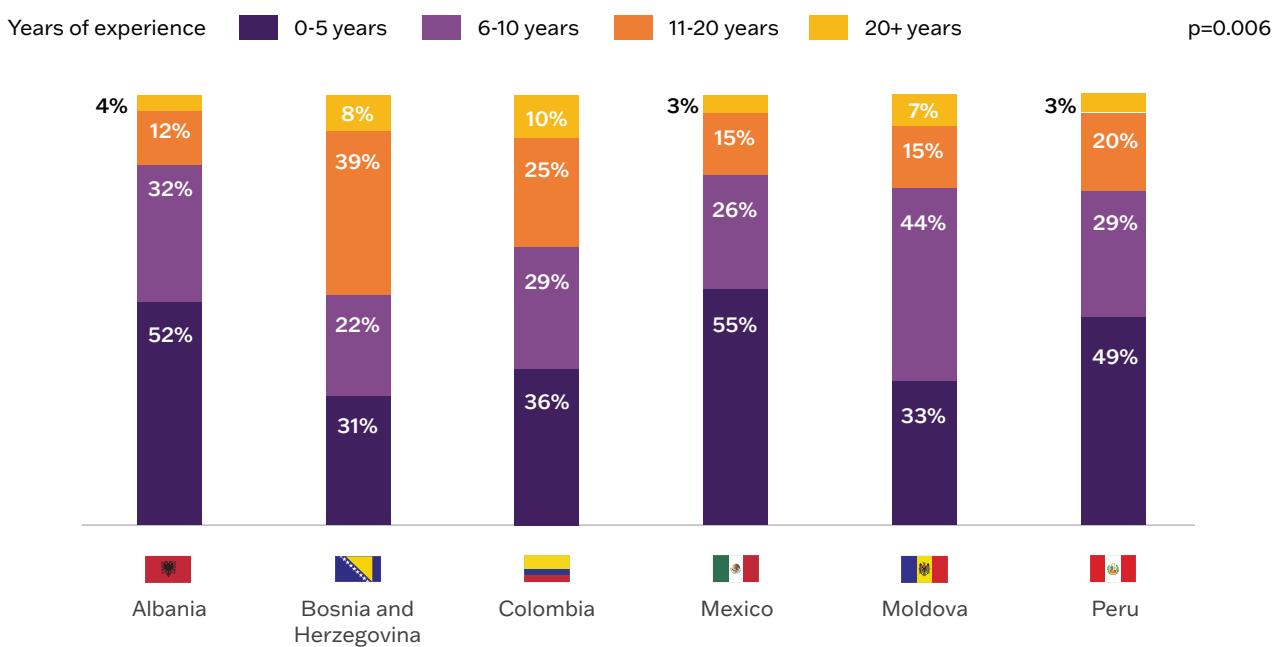
Overwhelmingly, the frontline workers were tertiary educated. In terms of highest level of education, the large majority of the sample either had a Bachelor’s degree (57%, n=237) or a Master’s degree/PhD (39%, n=159). Just 4% (n=17) across the six countries were providing support to child victims of sexual exploitation without tertiary qualifications. This professionalisation of the workforce is highly encouraging, and indicates an opportunity - that with the right inputs into existing training, issues related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online could reach the majority of the graduate workforce. Across the surveyed countries, Albania had the highest proportion of Master’s degree/PhD-level respondents (80%), followed by Moldova (52%) and then Colombia (43%). Only around a quarter of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mexico and Peru held a Master’s degree/PhD.

Figure 2: Proportion of frontline workers with post-graduate level degree or higher



When looking at the years of experience, nearly half of the surveyed frontline workers had between 0-5 years of experience (43.6%, n=180) and close to a third had 6-10 years of experience (30%, n=124). The remaining frontline workers had either 11-20 years of experience (21%, n=85) and 20+ years of experience (6%, n=24). Mexico had the highest ratio of respondents with 0-5 years of experience (55%).

Figure 3: Experience of frontline workers

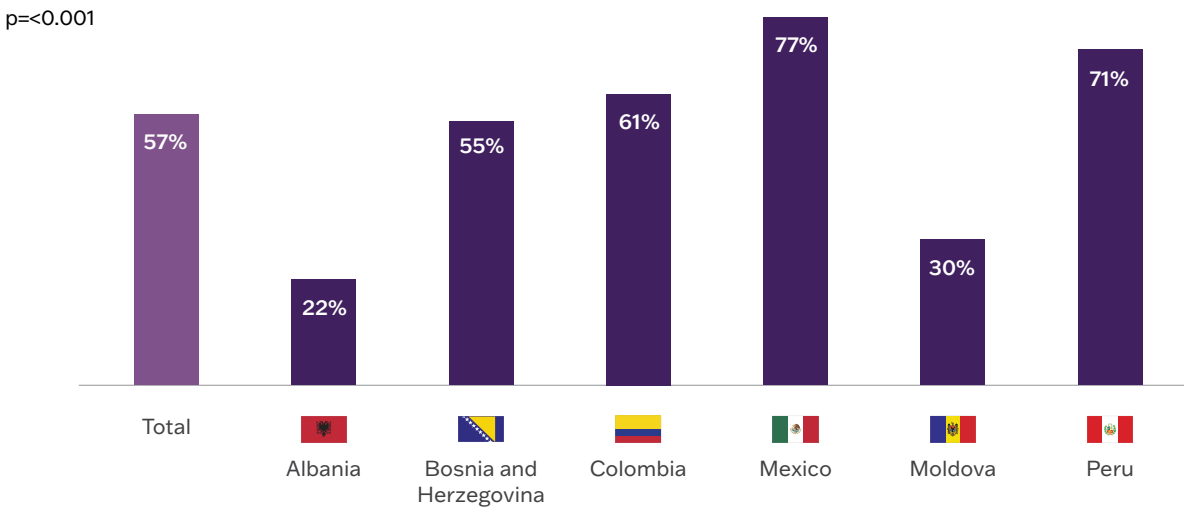


The respondents also talked about the types of training that they had received in open questions. These were mostly focused on training on working with trauma and sexual exploitation and abuse issues.

Many spoke about further professional development in the form of short courses and workshops. This was common in all countries. The responses give the sense that ongoing professional development was really valued, and thus if training related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online were to be widely available, it would likely be readily taken up by many workers. As we see later in the report with the scenario questions providing some indication of their knowledge related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online, many indicated “don’t know” to some of these questions and qualitative responses said they would appreciate opportunities to learn about the topic.

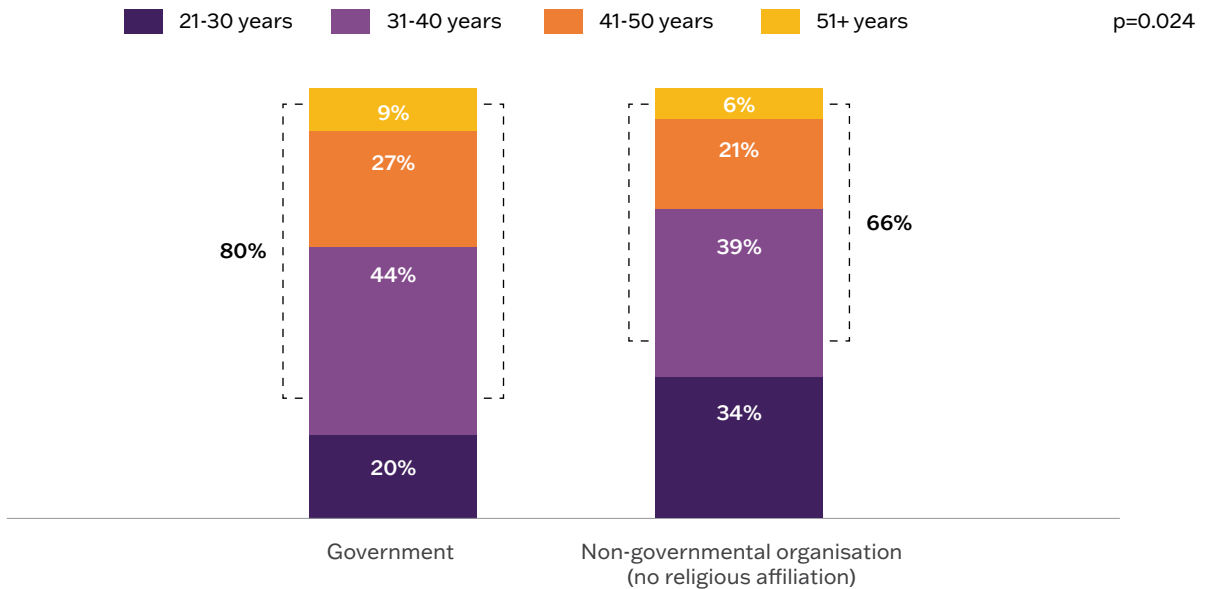
Respondents were also asked about the type of organisation where they worked and more than half were from government organisations (57%, n=235) and another third were based at non-governmental organisations with no religious affiliation (31%, n=128). The remaining 12% (n=50) responded “other”. Albania and Moldova were two exceptions with regard to the predominant type of organisation that the surveyed frontline workers were from, with only 22%-30% of governmental organisations compared to 55%-77% in the other four countries.

Figure 4: Proportion of frontline workers working at government organisations



Within our sample across the six countries, non-governmental organisations were significantly more likely to employ early career professionals, with 34% of their staff being between 21 and 30 compared to just 20% in the same age bracket in government jobs.²⁴ Despite this difference, the years of experience amongst workers more or less balanced out across the two workforces. So, while non-governmental organisations may hire younger staff, they also tend to have experienced staff working alongside them, whereas the spread for government organisations is more evenly distributed.

Figure 5: Age of frontline support workers



24. Chi-Square test for independence indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(6) = 14.605, p = 0.024$).

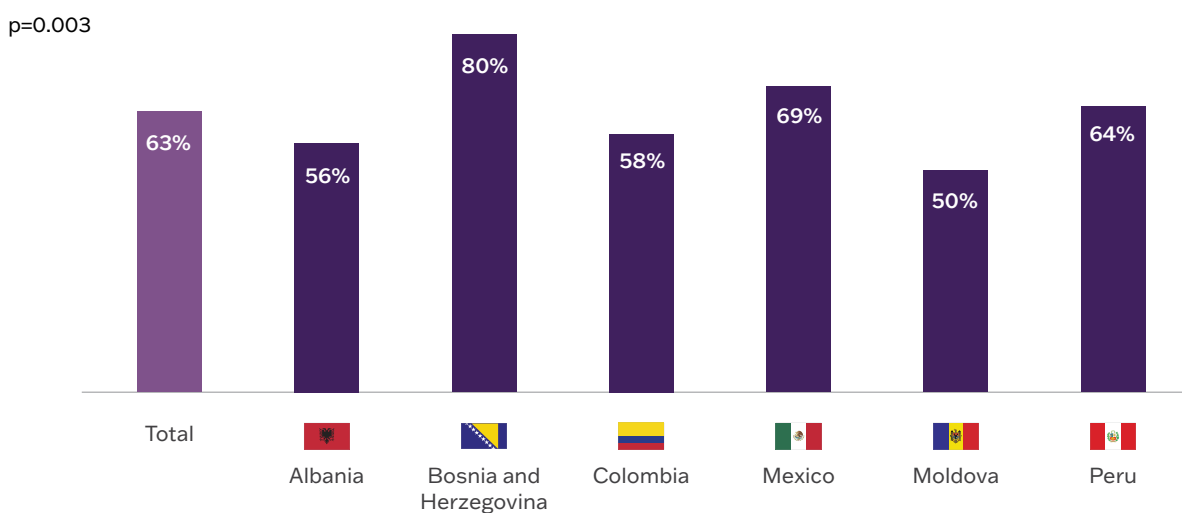
In terms of location, less than a tenth of survey respondents worked at rural-based organisations (7%, n=30), although 30% (n=123) worked for organisations that supported both urban and rural young people. The majority worked solely in urban areas (63%, n=260). This might indicate that for children living outside big cities accessing support services might be challenging. Survey respondents also noted that urban and rural services sometimes do not provide the same level of quality services:

"[...] there is a big difference between services in urban areas and rural ones. There is a lack of trust to children to seek help as the confidential services don't work very well."

(Survey Respondent from Albania)

In this regard, there were, however, some significant differences across countries, with Bosnia and Herzegovina having the highest urban-only representation (80%) and Moldova having the lowest (50%).²⁵

Figure 6: Frontline support workers in urban-based organisations



Across all six of the surveyed countries, one-on-one counselling was the most commonly provided service with 68% of respondents indicating their organisation offered it. This is positive when combined with the perspectives of the young survivors who overwhelmingly found the psychological support and counselling the most useful services to help them get through their experience of abuse and exploitation.

"I came to Renacer through a friend. At first, I didn't want to come; but I wanted to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The attention was excellent. What helped me the most as a person was the therapeutic part, [learn] how to become a better person, how to love yourself, how to value yourself. Apart from studying and preparing to be a professional, you first have to be a person."

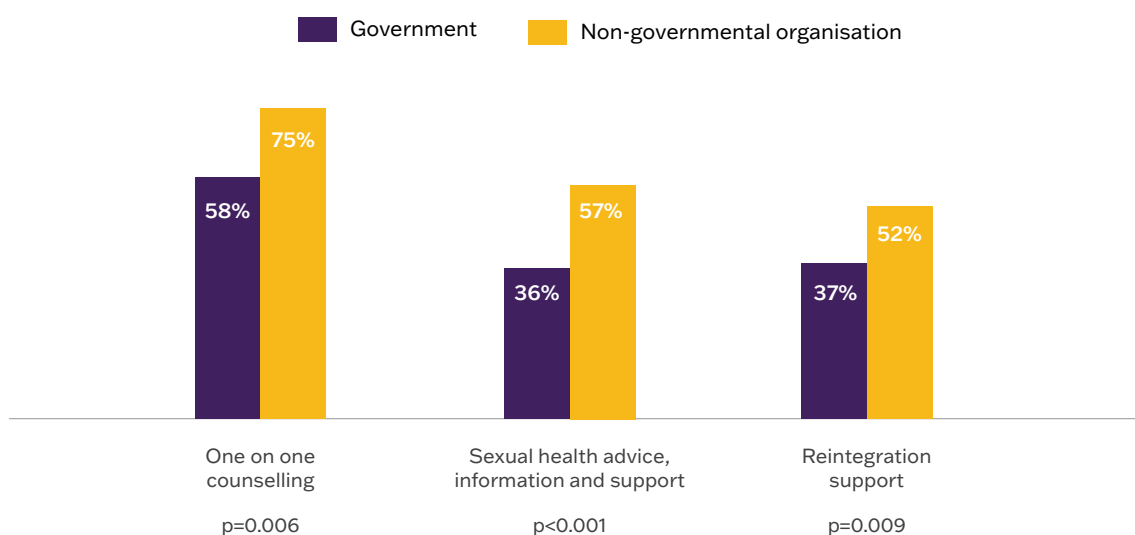
(Conversations' Participant 3, Colombia)

25. Chi-Square test for independence indicated that this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(10) = 26.817, p = 0.003$).

Forty-nine percent of the survey respondents said they offered support for families and caregivers, 48% offered legal support, 46% offered sexual health advice, information and support, 43% offered reintegration support and 42% offered group psychosocial support. There were some interesting differences amongst the top six services. Compared to the surveyed government organisations, the surveyed non-government organisations more commonly offered one-on-one counselling (75% vs 58%),²⁶ sexual health advice, information and support (57% vs 36%),²⁷ and reintegration support (52% vs 37%).²⁸ Support for families/caregivers and legal support were less commonly offered by surveyed organisations in rural areas compared to other organisations.

“It was very difficult for me to go to a psychologist so far. Many times, I was ready to give up.”
 (Conversations’ Participant 12, Moldova)

Figure 7: Most frequent services offered by support organisations



We explored possible differences in the services provided by gender, age and education, but there were very few significant differences. However, one that did stand out is that men were significantly less likely to provide one-on-one counselling than women (38% versus 54%).²⁹

26. Chi-Square test for independence indicated this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(2) = 10.147, p = 0.006$).

27. Chi-Square test for independence indicated this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(2) = 16.046, p < 0.001$).

28. Chi-Square test for independence indicated this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(2) = 9.468, p = 0.009$).

29. Chi-Square test for independence indicated this difference was statistically significant ($X^2(2) = 7.627, p = 0.022$).

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online

What it looks like to frontline workers

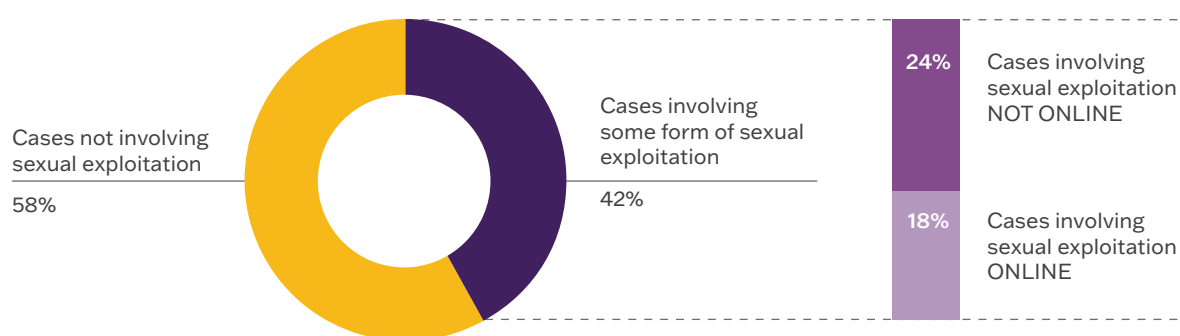
Responses from the frontline workers indicate that child sexual exploitation and abuse online is identified amongst many children seeking help. There were some differences, but also clear similarities across the six project countries in how things look on the frontline.

Exploitation generally and in online forms

Respondents were asked to use a sliding scale to indicate approximately what proportion of the children that they supported, according to their knowledge, had experienced any kinds of sexual exploitation. Forty-four percent (n=183) of the respondents across the six countries indicated up to a quarter of their caseload. On the other end of the scale, 17% (n=71) of the frontline workers indicated that at least three-quarters of their cases included known sexual exploitation - those respondents tended to be specialists in sexual exploitation or worked at organisations focused on this topic.³⁰ While understandable that there are experts in the field, these numbers perhaps indicate a concern in terms of worker self-care and support. These support workers having such high proportions of their caseloads involving complex and difficult experiences can be professionally draining. In this regard, the experts who took part in the roundtable reiterated that cases involving child sexual exploitation are difficult and stressful, and need careful monitoring and support for support workers to avoid burnout and vicarious trauma. The experts recommend that monitoring and professional mentoring be instituted where frontline staff are working with high proportions of such cases. These mechanisms allow staff to debrief about their work either individually or in groups.

We also asked the survey respondents about how frequently sexual exploitation that they saw involved digital, Internet and communication technologies. As displayed below in Figure 8, roughly half of their sexual exploitation cases involved technology. This means that out of ALL the cases that these workers were seeing, about 18% of their day-to day support work involves child sexual exploitation or abuse that involves technology.

Figure 8: Proportion of cases involving sexual exploitation and abuse



30. Please note that our sampling approach targeted organisations working in child protection so this does not represent sexual exploitation within the general child population. But it does indicate that sexual exploitation of children is frequently seen in cases being supported by child protection agencies.

There were no significant differences between countries for the ratio of general caseloads that involved sexual exploitation³¹ - this was somewhat stable at around 40%. However, there were differences between countries in what proportion of sexual exploitation and abuse involved digital, Internet and communication technologies.³² Respondents from Moldova reported the lowest proportion of online elements (30%) and Albania had the highest (53%). The fundamental takeaway is that when child sexual exploitation and abuse is presenting for support, between a third and half of the cases involve at least some element of technology.

Gender and age trends

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to share their perspectives on trends that they had noticed related to sexual exploitation of children in general and online. Overall, respondents often mentioned that most children they saw were girls:

“Most of them are girls and adolescent women with limited resources, who live in dysfunctional homes.”

(Survey Respondent from Peru)

They also referred to some perceived differences between female and male children experiencing these issues:

“The girls come from socially vulnerable families; from families with dysfunctional relationships; The boys...not necessarily coming from socially disadvantaged families.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

Interestingly, some qualitative responses on the survey did suggest that boys were becoming more visible to social support services including for sexual exploitation and abuse:

“Most of the cases of victims of exploitation concern girls, but we should point out that the number of boys is also on the rise.”

(Survey Respondent from Albania)

Survey respondents further indicated how the number of cases involving boys might be skewed by shame and stigma which prevents them from reporting:

“Girls tend to report much more, boys are ashamed. Slightly bigger number of girls are victims.”

(Survey Respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

31. A one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the countries ($F(5,407) = [1.978]$, $p = 0.81$).

32. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between the countries ($F(5,394) = [4.657]$, $p < 0.001$).

Despite a distinct impression from the qualitative responses of the surveyed workers that sexual exploitation of children overwhelmingly affects girls, amongst the 309 workers who had provided any support to boys (note 104 had only supported girls in the past year), 76% said they had helped at least some boys with experiences related to sexual exploitation and abuse online. However, workers did indicate that they did not see this as a prominent problem for boys - with most saying that it emerged in no more than a quarter of cases with boys. There were weak, but statistically significant, differences between the six countries though.³³ Albanian respondents displayed the highest proportion of online sexual exploitation among boy cases (42%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina the lowest (21%).

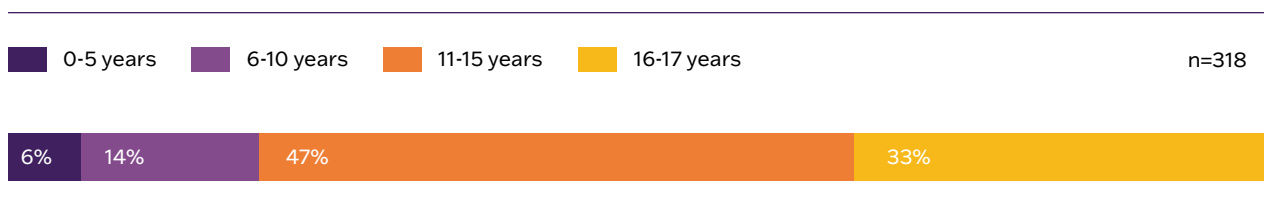
Of the 235 frontline workers who had supported boys in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse online, they indicated that the majority of those boys (68%) were targeted between the ages of 11-17 years old, but as many as 32% were targeted before turning 11. This was similar to the experiences of the few male survivors we got to speak with in the conversations who all explained they were exploited between the ages of 14-17 years old.

A total of 349 workers had supported girls in the past year (64 had only supported boys). Aligned with the expressed sense of the trends, almost all these workers (91%) had helped at least some girls with experiences related to sexual exploitation and abuse online. Contrasting the responses related to boys, 54% of the workers said that this issue emerged in more than half of their girl caseloads. Twenty-four percent said sexual exploitation and abuse online emerged in almost all, or all their cases.

The workers noted that girls tended to be a bit older than the boys who had been subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. The workers indicated that 47% were between 11 and 15 years old, and 33% were 16 or 17 when targeted. Twenty percent of girls were under 11.

This data aligned with the experiences of the young women who took part in the conversations who frequently recounted that they were targeted between the ages of 12 and 17. However, while a minority, one in five girls seeking help are doing so for abuse that began at ages below 11 years of age. One of the Mexican young women who took part in the conversations was just nine-years old at the time she was targeted.

Figure 9: Age of girls that have experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online



An interesting insight offered by the survey respondents with regards to the age of the children they were providing support to was that:

“Over time, the victims are getting younger, which is explained by the earlier availability of information technology to children.”

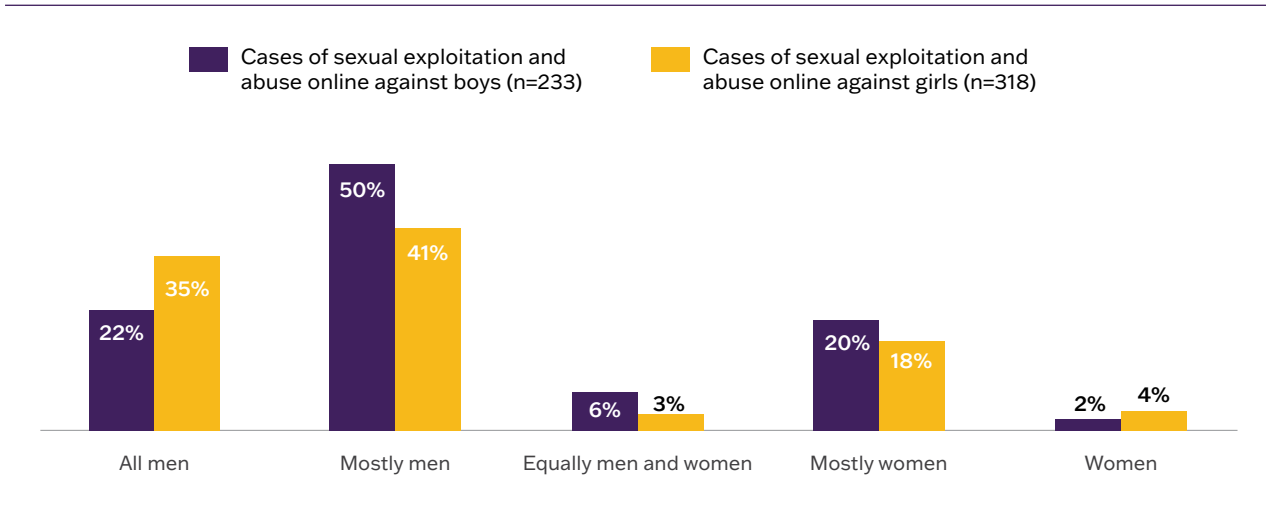
(Survey Respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

33. A one-way ANOVA revealed that there were significant differences between the countries ($F(5,3034) = [2.628], p=0.024$).

Insights from the frontline workers about offenders

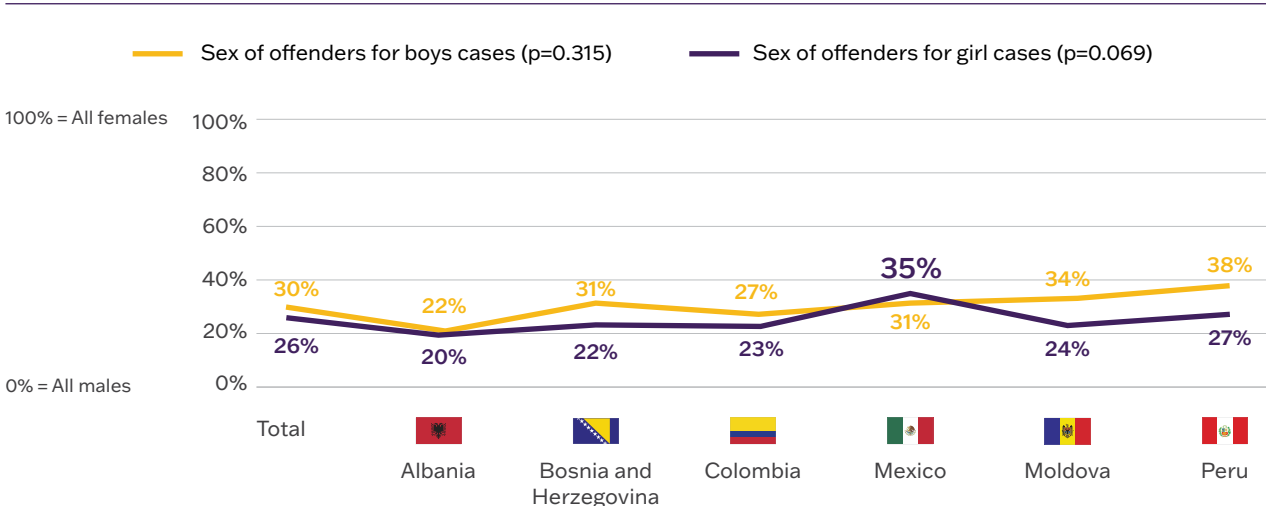
The workers were asked about the characteristics of offenders in cases related to boys and girls separately, presented in Figure 10 below. The findings presented here demonstrate that offenders were overwhelmingly male in both instances, however important to note that as many as a fifth of cases did involve female offenders.

Figure 10: Sex of offenders in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse online



We explored this finding between the six countries but there was no notable difference in terms of the sex of offenders when boys were targeted. But when girls were targeted, there was an interesting indication from the respondents in Mexico. More than a third of cases in the country involved female offenders which was higher than in the other countries. While not statistically significant, the trend was evident.³⁴

Figure 11: Sex of offenders involved in cases involving boys and girls



34. A one-way ANOVA showed that there were not significant differences between the countries, however it was approaching significance ($F(5,312) = [2.073], p=0.069$).

The researchers and facilitators from EDIAC/ECPAT México suggest that this is very likely an indication of women engaged in facilitating sexual exploitation and abuse of children, something anecdotally noted amongst organisations working in the sector. Women, sometimes coerced, but also sometimes not, access and groom children and may make arrangements for other offenders.

Nevertheless, while the data indicates that while men are overwhelmingly responsible for these crimes, interventions need not only focus attention on this majority. In fact, the ECPAT International Global Boys' Initiative³⁵ – a growing body of research projects which focus specifically on the sexual exploitation of boys – is also indicating that females are involved in offending in a variety of ways. While women's facilitation is noted, a global systematic literature review also highlighted that female offending is described in studies, though perhaps sometimes framed as occurring in less dramatic ways than when male offenders are involved. For example, studies described female offending in terms of older women friends 'supporting youth' to leave home by entering into sexual transactions for food and shelter.³⁶

The frontline workers were also asked about the national origin of offenders. The general consensus was that offenders were most commonly from their own country, with only 14% of respondents suggesting that offenders were more commonly foreigners.

Frontline workers were also questioned on the most common relationships of the offenders to their victims. Overall, there was no significant differences for boys or girls. The most common relationships between offenders and victims were all intra-familial:

1. Parents/step-parents (especially males);
2. Other relatives (over 18); and
3. Family friends (again, particularly males).

Such data was also corroborated by qualitative responses from respondents which frequently indicated that offenders were in the 'circle of trust' of the child.

"The perpetrators of the violence are mostly close relatives, fathers to daughters, stepfather to wife's daughter, male authorities to girls."

(Survey Respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina)

While these findings appear to contradict commonly held public perceptions – which tend to take a 'stranger danger' framing to child sexual exploitation and abuse online – they are certainly corroborated by these insights, are consistent with global literature³⁷ and were confirmed during the experts roundtable.

Although the conversations with survivors were not specifically focused on their experience of abuse and exploitation, in some cases survivors shared information about their offenders. In these instances, what they described aligns with the data from the frontline workers. For example, amongst the 10 Mexican survivors, offenders included family members (a mother, stepfather and cousin),

35. ECPAT International. (n.d.). [Global Boys Initiative](#).

36. ECPAT International. (2021). [Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys](#). 11.

37. ECPAT International. (2020). [Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation](#). 2.

friends/boyfriends, strangers, a non-clerical youth leader and a teacher. In this latter case, the young survivor shared how the same offender had many more victims and an organised approach to his sexual exploitation:

“A victim was captured in the fourth grade and one in sixth grade; in other words, there was always one per generation, being the victims more evident every two generations, so that while one was already in college, he would have someone from high school.”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Mexico)

Mechanisms of control used by offenders

Frontline workers were questioned about the sorts of things that were commonly exchanged in the cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse that they had knowledge of. Most commonly, in around half of cases involving both boys and girls, money was involved.

A young survivor from Colombia shared:

“The men who were adult [offenders] and with whom I had sexual relations, I met them on Facebook. The first contact was always by Facebook, I chatted and they sent me requests, ...one more friend, one friend less, it was not important. One day one of them opened my mind and proposed to me to have sexual relations and give me money. My ‘friends’ told me – ‘That doesn’t matter, do it’ - to be in the ‘Flow’ - I followed their game.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Colombia)

Beyond money, insights from the survivors with whom we had conversations also indicated how a range of other things – and concepts – were exchanged. For example, some of the survivors in Colombia mentioned how when they realised that their supposed friend or partner was actually an adult offender who was exploiting them in exchange for gifts, they felt influenced to consider what could be lost from ending the exchanges. They described how this manipulation would lead to them thus not perceiving themselves as victims, sustaining the cycle.

There were significant differences across the six countries in terms of the most common forms of exchange for boy³⁸ and girl³⁹ victims. In particular, compared to the other countries the Moldovan survey respondents indicated in a far higher proportion that goods are the most common form of exchange, particularly for boys. Interestingly, being offered shelter is, according to the respondents, a common form of exchange for Peruvian boys who have been subjected to sexual exploitation compared to the other countries and also compared to Peruvian girls.

38. Chi-Square test for independence indicated statistically significant differences ($X^2(20) = 52.120, p < 0.001$).

39. Chi-Square test for independence indicated statistically significant differences ($X^2(20) = 92.520, p < 0.001$).

Figure 12: Most common forms of exchange for boys

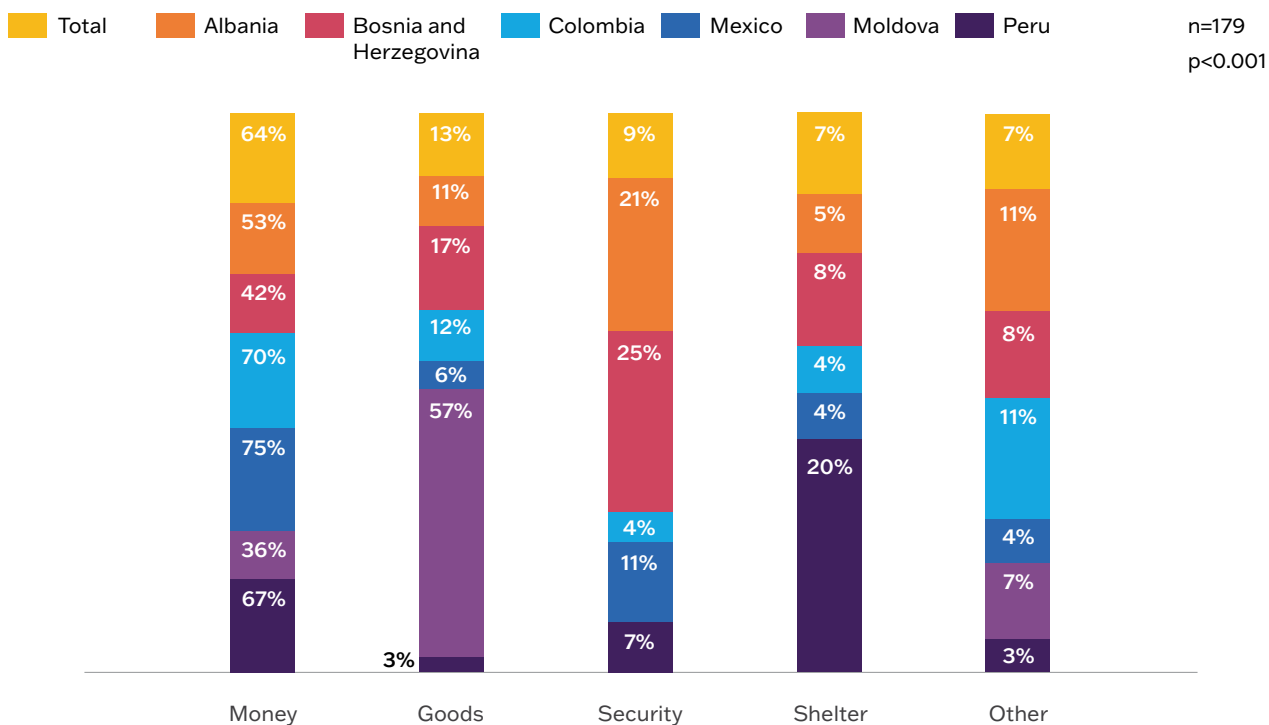
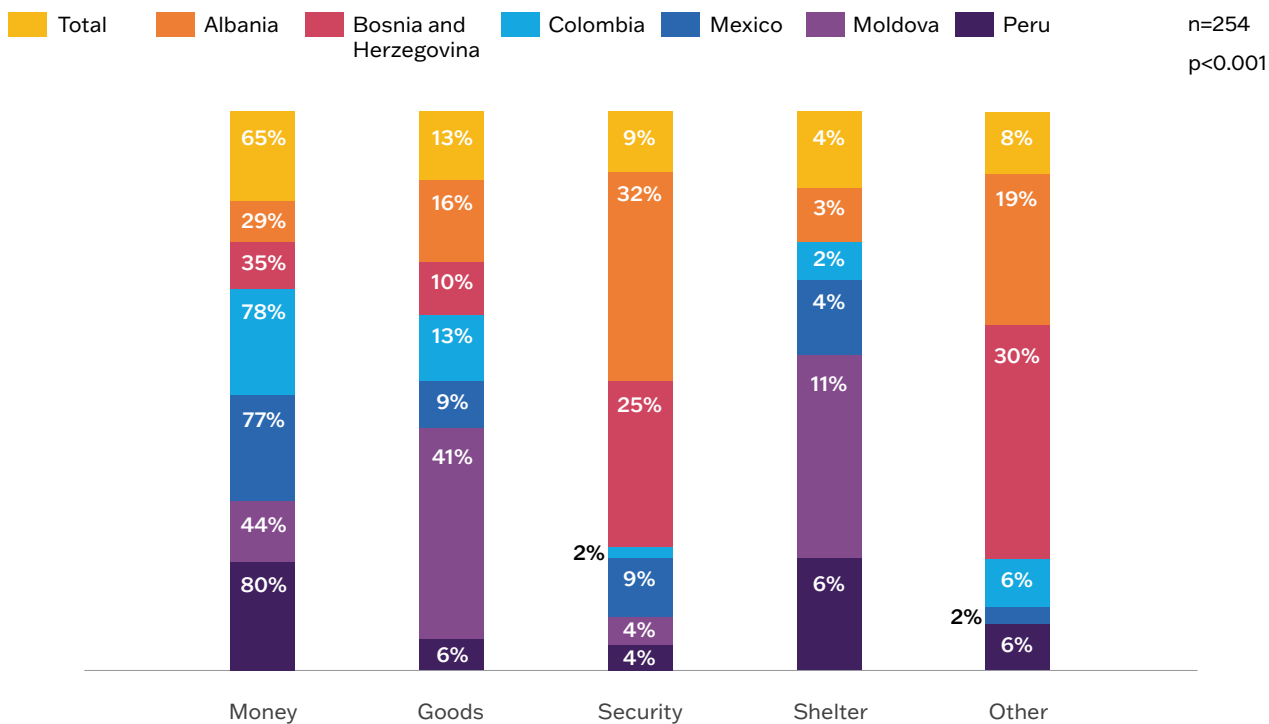


Figure 13: Most common forms of exchange for girls



Facilitators

A person who facilitates the commission of sexual crimes against children (but may or may not commit abuse directly themselves) can be referred to as a ‘facilitator’. Nevertheless, while the specific role played in the commission of a crime can be relevant from a legal point of view in determining the individual’s specific criminal responsibility, it is important to remember that the facilitator still also contributes to sexually victimising the child. From the exploited child’s point of view, the facilitator could harm the child as much or more than the person sexually abusing the child, by putting her/him in that situation.⁴⁰ Hence both despite the different roles played in the abuse and exploitation, all those involved in it would be considered offenders.

In this regard, frontline workers were also asked if there were adults involved who facilitate the abuse and/or exploitation but do not commit abuse directly themselves. More than half noted that there are adults involved who facilitate but do not offend themselves – in both cases involving boy and girl victims. Respondents described instances where a family member, friends or someone close to the child either introduced offenders, facilitated the sexual exploitation, or were aware of the abuse:

“Yes, in one of the cases from my experience there was a relative that was facilitating the abuse.”

(Survey Respondent from Albania)

Insights on these topics were consistent across countries

“Family members end up being facilitators of sexual exploitation.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

with at least some respondents in each of the six target countries mentioning the role of relatives, friends and community members facilitating the commission of the abuse or exploitation.

“Relatives or acquaintances who through their words manage to convince them to agree to the requests of others.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

40. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International. 90.

Silence as complicity

Another form of facilitation, albeit based on inaction and/or omission, was also evident in the data from frontline workers. Across the six countries, instances of ignoring child sexual exploitation and abuse despite being aware it was happening, were noted by participants as an enabling factor for abuse to occur.

“Adults who are aware of the abuse, but prefer to remain silent.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

“Participate through omission, sometimes they know about the abuse but they do not stop it and normalise it.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

“Unfortunately, most caregivers were aware of the abuse but did not take any action.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

While the important role that schools can play as sources of support and for victim identification are clear (this is explored further in a later section), there were also concerning indications that ignoring this issue in these institutions can also contribute to harm:

“The cover-up that they carry out in schools, by directors and teachers; since if they find out about the criminal acts, they generally try not to report it since it affects the image of the school and this results in a reoffending against the girls, due to the negligence of the teachers.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

This is in line with what was shared during the conversations with young Mexican survivors with some of them pointing out the role that schools played in ignoring warning signs of abuse:

“Even the psychologist from that school, I remember that there was one who gave us guidance and she knew everything and did nothing. I went to her and talked to her about various things but the same, I never felt confident because she knew everything. I knew it was wrong but I didn’t really know why or what.”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Mexico)

Conversations with the young survivors also provide additional insights on the role of those who facilitate the exploitation without committing abuse themselves, for example, two survivors in Mexico reflected on how their mother was an accomplice –and a victim – of the offender. (Conversations’ Participant 1, Mexico and Conversations’ Participant 2, Mexico)

Insights from the experts' roundtable

On 26th July 2021, the project partners invited international experts to participate in a roundtable meeting aimed at presenting the preliminary findings of the research project and gather participants' global and expert perspectives on such findings. Experts in attendance (see [Annex](#)) included representatives from survivor-led organisations, academic institutions and frontline practice organisations from across the WeProtect Global Alliance's membership and network.

Participants in the roundtable event shared a number of interesting insights on the basis of the preliminary findings. Such insights have been summarised and presented below as referred to throughout the report:



Improving engagement and support for caregivers

It is important that parents receive adequate support to understand risks of harm to children for prevention. This is particularly important as the majority of offenders come from children's circles of trust. From the perspective of supporting survivors, when equipped properly, families and caregivers can play a huge role in a child's recovery.

Ensuring anonymity in reporting

A key barrier to reporting discussed was the issue of children not wanting to disclose because of fears of someone finding out their identity. All reporting mechanisms must ensure that children have the option to report abuse anonymously.



Demystifying what survivors require from services

- Service providers sometimes report feeling ill prepared on how to handle cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse in general and online. Care needs to be taken by service providers to not overcomplicate what they believe survivors require from them – providers just require basic tools appropriate to their level of expertise that they can support children with.
- Must also consider that different survivors will require different levels of support – some children who experience sexual abuse will have been able to cope with it on their own and aren't necessarily traumatised.

Support is required for service providers

Safeguarding programmes and support need to be developed for service providers working with victims of sexual exploitation of children. Often, service providers do not have avenues to discuss their work with children, which can lead to burnout. International Justice Mission Philippines have identified that burnout among service providers has led to 'compassion fatigue' and has put in place safeguarding programmes where service providers can debrief on their work either individually or in groups.



Peers may be a source of information about response mechanisms for sexual violence

- Children most commonly disclose sexual violence to peers of their own age. The initial response of a peer could inform how a child copes with their abuse for the rest of their life.
- Education about how to access help can be provided to children so they are aware of how to react to disclosures empathetically, and know where to access professional support.

Growing the influence of survivor perspectives

So much can be learnt from listening to survivors, and they are experts on how to improve services. However, survivors do not always have platforms that reach a wide audience. Organisations should begin working alongside tech companies to grow the audiences of survivor voices.



Creating and developing self-help sites for survivors and resource libraries for service providers

- Educational resources must be available for children on sexual abuse and exploitation. Many young people seek information online. Contextualised information about sexual exploitation and abuse online accessible anonymously are of value.
- Resource libraries for service providers on best practices are useful.

Facilitate networks of survivors, service providers, practitioners, experts

- Support groups and networks for survivors are a good mechanism to encourage disclosure and can help in coping with abuse. In the Philippines, survivor groups of children from shelters have been found to be very helpful in supporting reintegration of survivors into their communities.
- Networks for service providers and experts in the field could also be designed to share emerging research and practices.



Ensuring trauma-informed and survivor-centred strategies

Responses must be trauma-informed and survivor-centred in order to engage survivors sensitively in advocacy, political participation and programme development.

Ensuring a rehabilitative approach with children and young adults who cause harm

Many people who engage in harmful sexual behaviours against children are themselves children or young adults just a few years older than their victims. They are vulnerable to making bad decisions for a host of reasons related to age, experience and development. Ensuring the safety of others is critical. So too is ensuring a rehabilitative approach that emphasises evidence-based interventions.



Continue integrating prevention and responses to online exploitation into overall response into child sexual abuse

- Online sexual abuse will continue to be a prominent form of sexual abuse and exploitation, and responses must continue to integrate responses to online abuse into the overall issue of child sexual abuse.
- This is particularly important as the majority of offenders come from children's circles of trust, yet some programming focuses on 'stranger danger'.
- International integration must also be considered as in online cases offenders may be from different countries than the victims.

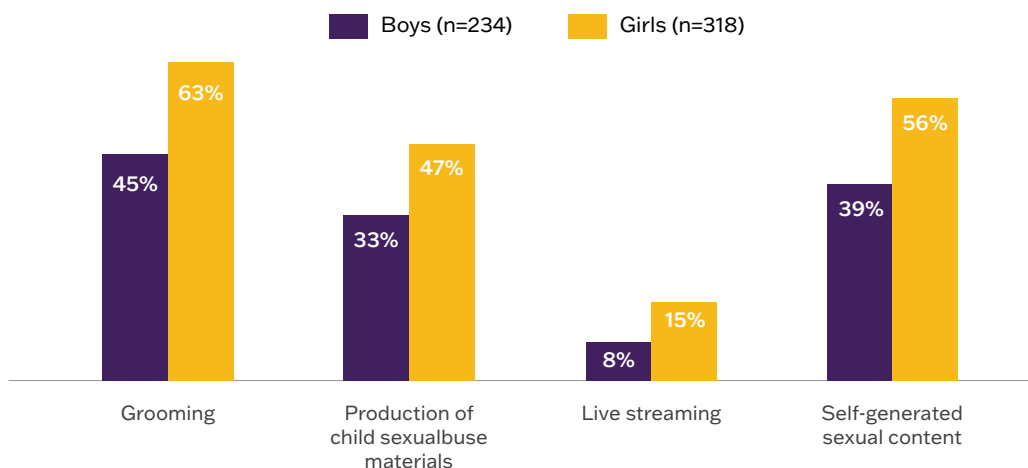
Forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse online

Until recently, child sexual exploitation and abuse online was mostly confined to the production, possession and distribution online of child sexual abuse material, and in fact this remains a major proportion of the problem. Yet things are changing. The dynamic nature of information and communication technologies has expanded the notion of Internet facilitated child sexual exploitation to include an evolving range of practices such as online grooming and the live-streaming of child sexual abuse.⁴¹

Surveyed frontline workers were asked whether they had ever directly supported children who have been groomed for sexual purposes, cases of children involved in the production of child sexual abuse material, cases of live-streaming of child sexual abuse and cases involving the sharing (coerced or not) of self-generated sexual content involving children.

Overall, the frontline workers reported far higher proportions of girls than boys exposed to grooming, the production of abuse material and sharing of self-generated sexual content. In general, live-streaming was seldom reported, but amongst those who mentioned it, was still also more common among girl victims. The gender differences for each category in Figure 14 below were all statistically significant.⁴²

Figure 14: Forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse online



For those frontline workers who had encountered grooming, the use of numerous platforms simultaneously to target children was common.

“We have supported cases of children, adolescents and young people who were manipulated by unknown persons during online communications to the extent that they exposed their private parts.”

(Survey Respondent in Albania)

41. ECPAT International. (2020). [Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation](#).

42. Chi-Square test for independence indicated statistically significant differences by gender for grooming ($X^2(1) = 29.421$, $p < 0.001$), production of CSAM ($X^2(1) = 25.161$, $p < 0.001$), live-streaming ($X^2(1) = 41.626$, $p < 0.001$) and self-generated content ($X^2(1) = 46.058$, $p < 0.001$).

Many respondents specifically mentioned the use of social media for grooming purposes.

“On Facebook, there are usually people who are harassing girls and adolescents, presenting themselves as the friend of a known person, gaining trust to accept the invitation and that’s when they are harassed.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

A key theme noted across the sample was the use of complex manipulation via baseless promises from the offenders who were grooming the children. These often took the form of fake job offers.

“The victim was groomed under the pretext of providing cleaning services. But later she was sexually abused.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

“Through social networks they offer work in modelling, acting and other activities.”

(Survey Respondent from Peru)

In other cases, respondents reported that offenders groomed children with the promise of trips and other benefits:

“The offender promised to help her go abroad.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

In terms of the production of child sexual abuse material, there was extensive qualitative input provided by survey respondents who named offenders using deception, blackmailing and manipulation in a range of forms:

“Some male adolescents I have cared for have been pressured to make videos of themselves masturbating, bathing or having sex with other men, animals or objects. The way in which they have been forced has been under threats of kidnapping them or harming their families.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

“I have assisted minors who while being abused by the perpetrator, were filmed and photographed, and later threatened that the material obtained would be made public. I also assisted minors who were first manipulated and forced to make and send to video to the perpetrator and photo materials that represent them in indecent poses.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

Furthermore, frontline workers also highlighted instances of parents and other family members being involved in the production of these materials:

“It was really shocking because the father took photos and videos of his daughter. While the girl’s mother recorded the abuse.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

“The brother, who shot a video of his brother and cousin touching each other’s sexual organs.”

(Survey Respondent from Albania)

Overall, live-streaming of child sexual abuse was rarely spontaneously reported by the survey respondents. The rarity of live-streaming of sexual abuse was specifically noted by some of the frontline workers who mentioned that they had not encountered such cases. The few respondents who had supported such cases described how children were primarily either blackmailed or manipulated into streaming sexual content of themselves.

“Among the cases brought to my knowledge, there have been situations in which adolescents are being caught in webcam for “job offers”, affirming that they would not be physically touched. Likewise, in TikTok there is a permanent exhibition of victimised adolescents who show off their tickets won, which is why it becomes a source of income when they require it.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

“A case of a private school student, who was convinced when they offered him a cell phone in exchange for the broadcast.”

(Survey Respondent from Peru)

There were explanations provided regarding live-streaming cases by respondents in Mexico, whereby it was actually the child and a family member who streamed the material:

“In only one case, the mother made her daughter participate in sexual encounters with third parties, while recording everything that happened.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

“The minor started live broadcasts, apparently not for money, nor was anyone asking for it.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

Cases involving the sharing of self-generated sexual images and videos were, according to the survey respondents, perceived to be far more common amongst girls. More than half of frontline workers supporting girls (56%, n=179) had such cases where the victims shared sexual content of themselves. This compared to 39% (n=91) of workers supporting boys.

Frontline workers also made reference to the use of social networking platforms in the self-generation and sharing of sexual content.

“Some male adolescents forced by schoolmates, to get into some challenges on the Internet or on social networks, have made photographic series of their totally naked bodies, having relationships with other men or women, animals, objects, masturbating, dancing, in the classroom. Said videos and photos have been shared in Facebook groups, in school groups, by WhatsApp and from there they have been contacted by unknown numbers or messages very insistently.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

Manipulation and blackmail were once again common themes:

“The victims were sexually blackmailed by the abusers, in order to continuously produce materials in which they are depicted in intimate poses.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

Respondents noted that girls had sometimes initially shared self-generated sexual content with friends or romantic partners voluntarily that was then shared-on without permission.

“Yes, I had cases when the girls posed naked and either posted them or sent them to the boys in private and they in turn sent them to others.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

“Especially girls who have shared intimate photos with their boyfriends who are later published in social networks.”

(Survey Respondent from Colombia)

On one hand, some frontline workers noted that self-generation of sexual content is increasingly becoming part of young people’s sexual experiences:

“Within their erotic life, young people share photos with erotic content; however, this material is shared by the aggressor(s) generating violence.”

(Survey Respondent from Mexico)

Others noted how the fact that the material had been self-generated was used against the child victim during the legal processes:

“I have assisted a case in which the girl was accused by the defendant’s lawyer of sending nude pictures of herself to the offender and other men to seduce them.”

(Survey Respondent from Moldova)

Looking across the data on forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, an interesting picture emerges across the six countries. Respondents reported a perceived far higher proportion of girls exposed to grooming, production of child sexual abuse materials, and self-generated sexual content involving children. However, the results also indicate that frontline workers have only supported a relatively small number of cases involving the emerging forms – such as live-streaming of child sexual abuse so far. The ways that young people are manipulated and coerced share similarities with known offender approaches, however technology also adds new ways that children are at harm. For example, while sharing content voluntarily between friends or romantic partners may be increasingly common, the permanence of such content facilitates the possibilities for these engagements to lead to harm.



According to the survivors

Offending patterns in Mexico

From the conversations with young people held in Mexico, insights were shared on the misuse of digital technologies by offenders in distinct ways:



Disclosures and formal reporting



According to the survivors

Disclosure in Colombia

Seven of the nine Colombian young people who participated in the conversations shared their experiences of disclosure. For two (Conversations' Participant 6, Colombia and Conversations' Participant 10, Colombia), the disclosure and subsequent activation of protection mechanisms involved professionals or social workers from their schools. Another young survivor explained they had recognised they were being abused thanks to a training they had attended on the topic and then, with the support of a peer, felt comfortable to seek help. (Conversations' Participant 3, Colombia). In the case of two young women (Conversations' Participant 1, Colombia and Conversations' Participant 7, Colombia), who had been kidnapped and exploited, they were rescued by law enforcement, so their disclosure was more passively experienced. A young man and a young woman (Conversations' Participant 4, Colombia and Conversations' Participant 9, Colombia) explained that they first shared what they had been subjected to with their families.

The young people consistently noted that a major factor in enabling their comfort to disclose such intensely personal experiences was indications of genuine interest in their wellbeing from people they trusted – professional helpers, friends and relatives. They commonly expressed that this first factor of having at least one key supporter who believed and non-judgmentally cared for them enabled them to begin processes to escape exploitative situations and access protection and support services. They emphasised that non-judgement, listening, persistence, patience and friendly treatment were characteristics of the individuals that they disclosed to.

One young woman remembers the support from her family who told her:

“Always count on us, here we will be as a family waiting for you so that you can recover.”

(Conversations' Participant 9, Colombia)

A final note related to this topic arose in the expert roundtable. While great care must be taken to ensure that the onus for protecting children is on adults, never children, experts noted that peers can be an excellent source of information for each other. While messaging must take care not to put the burden of responsibility on young people to provide support, encouraging information sharing between peers on mechanisms for help-seeking could be encouraged.

Awareness of mechanisms for reporting

Across the project countries, survivors who took part in the conversations indicated that prior to being subjected to sexual exploitation, they generally had little knowledge of the formal mechanisms for reporting or seeking help.

“There is no information on how to report. The girls and boys don’t report, it scares them, because of the process they are going to face because it involves ‘destroying the castle that you had built.’”

(Conversations’ Participant 6, Colombia)

Not one of the seven Albanian survivors reported knowing about reporting platforms until after they had sought help:

“Back then I did not know that there was a helpline for children such as ALO 116 111 where anyone could call and ask for help, all the while they protect your confidentiality, or the platform ISIGURT.al, but I only learned about that from you after what happened to me.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Albania)

Similarly, the nine young Colombian survivors noted among the difficulties in the reporting processes, the lack of awareness amongst young people of mechanisms for reporting a crime, both in-person and online.

The exception was amongst the Moldovan young people, where two of the ten young women knew of reporting mechanisms for child sexual exploitation and abuse online from their teachers, and one young woman learnt what to do from a successful online search. Another Moldovan young woman reported that she had an IT lesson in which the teacher talked to them about online safety and they watched a video, with a situation very similar to the one she was going through. The girl later searched for the reporting site and wrote on the chat about the situation she was going through,

“Until the moment of this discussion, I felt that I was alone. At the time of the discussion, I felt warmth. I had help. I could tell a person what happened and how it happened.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

Contrasting the positive experiences of a trusted individual captured in the box about Colombia, some of the survivors in Mexico reported that, when they were subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online they were just not ready to talk about it as they lacked the support of a close contact.

The survivors also tended to note barriers in accessing services simply because they were children. Sometimes parental or guardian relationships are not good, which can make it difficult to report or file a legal complaint where such adult support is expected – formally or informally.

"I also relied on the experience of people who are still minors at this time... they said that as a minor to be able to report, your father, mother or guardian needs to be present... there was a phrase they said, which I remember very well, 'they feel that instead of filing a complaint, you are exposing yourself'; which is understandable - being a minor with witnesses, with your father, they (the victims) actually feel more vulnerable."

(Conversations' Participant 7, Mexico)

The expert roundtable discussions perhaps touched on some of the factors that might underlie limited awareness of the available mechanisms. Although physical sites where children can access support should always be available, there is a real need to diversify the ways that young people might seek help – including online tools and targeted awareness raising via channels that young people use and are familiar with (such as social media). While some examples exist, financial resourcing constraints frequently prevent adaptation of services to new or technologically focused responses.

Accessibility and effectiveness of reporting mechanisms

When they reported, survivors at times felt re-victimised by the questioning they encountered from law enforcement or medical examiners. In the case of two young survivors, (Conversations' Participant 1, Mexico and Conversations' Participant 2, Mexico), when they went to report, the public prosecutor downplayed their complaint due to the time in which the events occurred, arguing that the statute of limitation had passed, and the place where the events occurred was in a different State to where they presented their complaint.

"They did not provide us with the help we needed, we told them what was happening and they asked us 'how long ago was it?' "... well, this was something that happened many years ago, since I was 5, and by then I was 16, which is why they told us that they could no longer do anything, that it was no longer a crime because it had already been a long time... So basically, they didn't help us to file a lawsuit and everything this involved... until we went to another State."

(Conversations' Participant 2, Mexico)

Another survivor remembered how she could immediately tell the reporting would not be helpful by the response she received when filing her complaint. Four months later, given the lack of progress and feeling that her case was not important to the police, she withdrew her complaint.

"The girl who admitted me told me "well, what are you reporting?" I had so many things to say at the time, and she said "no, no, just tell me what crime are you reporting today" and I was like "well, I don't know what I am reporting", that is when I realised that the service was not going to be what one would expect."

(Conversations' Participant 8, Mexico)

Fear, shame and guilt are barriers to disclosure

A common theme that arose during the conversations was the feeling of fear that often prevented young people from telling anyone about what they were subjected to. This concept of 'fear' appeared to be multi-faced according to the young survivors. Some explained it referring to the shame of disclosing to family and other acquaintances what they had experienced. Others mentioned the fear of being judged for what the community might perceive was their "sexual conduct". Fear of being stigmatised for his sexual orientation if he disclosed was another issue which came up in conversations with a young man from Colombia who identified as gay (Conversations' Participant 4, Colombia).

Another young survivor shared that girls are afraid to report these situations because of direct threats to their safety. She recalled that, in her case, the offender demanded that she hand over another virgin girl or else he would harm her younger siblings. Over time, the girl victims:

"Are trapped in fear of harming their families."

(Conversations' Participant 7, Colombia)

In Moldova, survivors also described that a form of fear prevented them from disclosing. They explained that they feared social norms which characterise victims of sexual exploitation as 'actively engaged' and thus often lead to victim-blaming. They explained how difficult it is to explain to others about the manipulation and coercion that can be involved in self-generation of sexual content:

"And what are you going to say to the police, that you undressed yourself?"

(Conversations' Participant 2, Moldova)

Instances where the young people had not yet understood or acknowledged that they were victimised were recounted as especially complex. One of the survivors said that she felt extremely guilty about what would happen to the offender, when the police came to take her statement. She did not understand why the offender was imprisoned by the police:

"And when I found out that he was imprisoned, I was afraid, I was worried about him. I didn't understand why he was imprisoned, I thought I was guilty."

(Conversations' Participant 2, Moldova)

In this case, the survivor was manipulated and forced to share self-generated sexual materials, which led to self-blame as at the time she considered herself an active party for sharing those photos – not yet understanding that the adult offender was entirely at fault:

"I thought I did everything with my own hands, because I sent the photos."

(Conversations' Participant 2, Moldova)

Survey responses from workers corroborated these insights with the majority of the respondents believing that the stigma and shame that victims often faced, the so called “culture of silence” (67%, n=278), and the fact that talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo (63%, n=260), are the top traditional beliefs and practices that can potentially increase children’s vulnerability to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

Institutional attitudes are a barrier to disclosure

Another recurrent theme from the young survivors’ accounts of disclosure were the perceived shortcomings of the police who are entrusted with receiving their complaints. A young survivor from Colombia reflected on the attitudes endemic in the relevant institutions which may lead to re-victimisation as well as perpetuate a sense that trust and empathy from those empowered to help may not be forthcoming:

“The fear of the report has to do with the fear of scandal. The entities (Colombian Family Welfare Institute, Police, Courts) need to have more bonding with the victims, more support; victims don’t easily access services; they aren’t well cared for. Officials don’t have empathy, they don’t understand the consequences of violence, they re-victimise them. They lack training. There is no psychological support for girls and boys to come and report.”
(Conversations’ Participant 10, Colombia)

One survivor reported that:

“At first the police were not very interested. I remember when I went to the police, they looked at me like I was nobody. It seemed to me that they didn’t care that I came to them and that I was a minor. Then came the psychologist and I felt a kind of support. But the police seemed to be making fun of me.”
(Conversations’ Participant 7, Moldova)

What was worse, in the eyes of the Moldovan survivors, was the fact that police officers did not appear to have the necessary knowledge and skills to work with children:

“Maybe he’s a good policeman, but he doesn’t know how to talk and differentiate between an interrogation with a criminal and a hearing with a child victim.”
(Conversations’ Participant 5, Moldova)

Similarly, a young survivor from Albania shared how:

“In the city where I live there is no mechanism to report my concerns about online harassment, there are no services that would help me in those moments. I did not know where else to go, except the police! However, you should understand that even if you go to the police, at times these officers are prejudicial, and they may even harass you when they learn what you are about to report!”

(Conversations’ Participant 7, Albania)

This was confirmed by other young survivors who shared their negative experience with local authorities:

“A cousin sought help for me and I went to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute and a psychologist who was there offended me and told me that I was the only one to blame for what had happened to me, I started crying, I felt hatred for her, how is it possible that you go to seek help and she tells you: it’s your fault, that’s unethical.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Colombia)

Such experiences foster negative reputations for institutions that in turn generate distrust and fear amongst young people needing help.

Finally, survivors shared how some believed that nothing would eventuate from their reports, so many young people make the conscious decision not to put themselves through potentially distressing experiences if they don’t anticipate a likely positive outcome.

In the experience of a young survivor from Mexico, no complaint was filed for the sexual abuse suffered online; however, at the age of 16-17 years old, she was a victim of rape, which she decided to report. Unfortunately, the treatment she received by the prosecutor even in this instance was re-victimising, and she was blamed for the situation. The medical examiner told her that she was not a virgin and therefore it was not rape, while also reprimanding her for having bathed after the incident:

“I got there and felt raped twice...”

(Conversations’ Participant 5, Mexico)

The young people also mentioned how sometimes they found themselves in situations where they had to interact with police officers of the opposite sex -

“The fact that the police officer was male made me feel ashamed. I couldn’t tell the policeman that I was naked, I was very ashamed.”

(Conversations’ Participant 5, Moldova)

- or with too many people at once:

“There were a lot of people in the office and I felt like they were too high [status], and I was too low [status]. There has to be a smaller number of people [present].”

(Conversations’ Participant 2, Moldova)

Another survivor from Moldova recalled that the policeman came to the town where she lived, to her home, to take her statement. She recalled her fear that the entire town would find out that something had happened in her family. She explained that this could be potentially very harmful to a child, especially if their caregivers did not know about what happened, or if family violence was present:

“I recommend that this discussion not take place at home, because the police leave, but you stay and can sometimes be beaten by parents.”

(Conversations’ Participant 12, Moldova)

A need for extensive opportunities for training and support to frontline workers was clearly confirmed also by the expert roundtable. Furthermore, the experts noted a need to actually demystify the support survivors need. While there is grounds for new learning regarding technology and the different ways it is misused to abuse children, at the end of the day, young people still need to be heard, believed and cared for – basic principles for all child protection work.

In an encouraging example of innovation being appreciated, survivors from Moldova shared how despite generally distrusting the reporting mechanisms, they nevertheless decided to report the abuse on the country’s online reporting portal, www.siguronline.md, with positive outcomes:

“At first, I was sceptical, I was thinking, how can a site help me?”

(Conversations’ Participant 14, Moldova)

One of them was surprised by the fact that she was answered immediately on the chat. She shared with the facilitators how she was desperate and thought she had no way out of the situation:

“If it weren’t for the psychologists at SigurOnline, I was ready to end my days, because I couldn’t see another solution.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

The messages she received from the consultant generated her trust and led to her disclosure.

“I was told that this is not the end, you will see, everything will be fine. Leave it for a while, you’ll see, we’ll work it out together.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

In one hour or so, the girl was called by a psychologist with whom she discussed more details about what happened to her. The girl particularly appreciated the fact that she was called regularly and was asked how she was feeling and if her situation had changed in any way. Moreover, the psychologist suggested that she talk to her parents, to explain what happened and prepare them so they could go together to file a complaint with the police.

Another important issue raised by four survivors who took part in the conversations in Albania was the failure to secure anonymity and leaking of personal data following the filing of a report. The personal data and statements (city, street, initials, names of parents, the name of the school, interviews showing the face of parents, pictures of their houses) of five of these survivors had been published by the media. These kinds of incidents have extraordinary repercussions – with other survivors observing these circumstances losing any trust in institutions. It is both damaging to those impacted, and also likely leads to other victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse online withholding their disclosures.

“What kept me from going to the police was a case that became public a long time ago, in which the media published the name of the school, the city, the age, faces of family members, school teachers and lots of other details, and as a child I remember being distressed by this whole thing. This kept me from reporting it sooner, because I was afraid that maybe my case would be in the media as well. As a matter of fact, this fear came true because the same thing happened to me when I reported it!”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Albania)

“I do not understand how the police can share information that I provided to them when I reported the case! Why should the police do this? Who gives them the right? They did the same thing with my case!”

(Conversations’ Participant 1, Albania)

International experts convened for the roundtable discussion also emphasised the importance of ensuring anonymity in reporting to address children’s reluctance to disclose due to the fear of someone finding out their identity. The experts recommended that all reporting mechanisms must ensure that children have the option to report situations of abuse and exploitation anonymously.

Some survivors in Peru also identified corruption as the reason why sometimes reporting mechanisms are not accessible to children who have experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

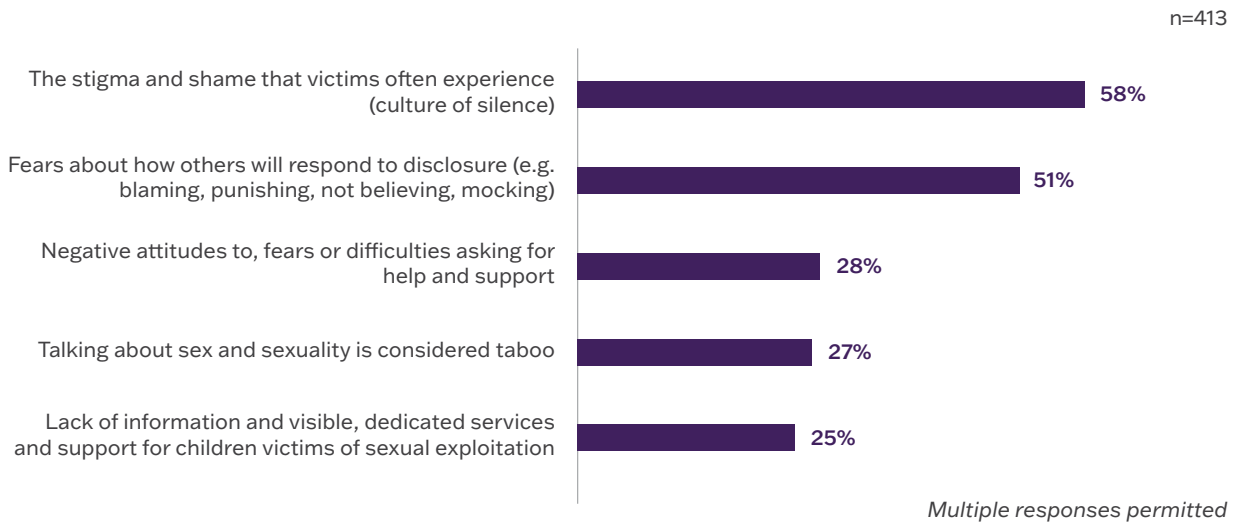
“I would tell them [law enforcement] to get more involved in the matter, not to ignore the accusations, because many times they say that there is not enough evidence. More help should be given to those who ask for it... they should not be carried away by money, because that is what happened to me.”

(Conversations’ Participant 1, Peru)

Barriers to disclosure according to the frontline workers

Frontline workers were also presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children’s disclosure and reporting of online sexual exploitation and abuse. In line with what was shared by the survivors, by far the most commonly selected factor (58%, n=241), was “the stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence)”. This was followed by “Fears about how others will respond to disclosure” (51%, n=210).

Figure 15: Top five factors that potentially limit children’s disclosure of sexual exploitation and abuse online

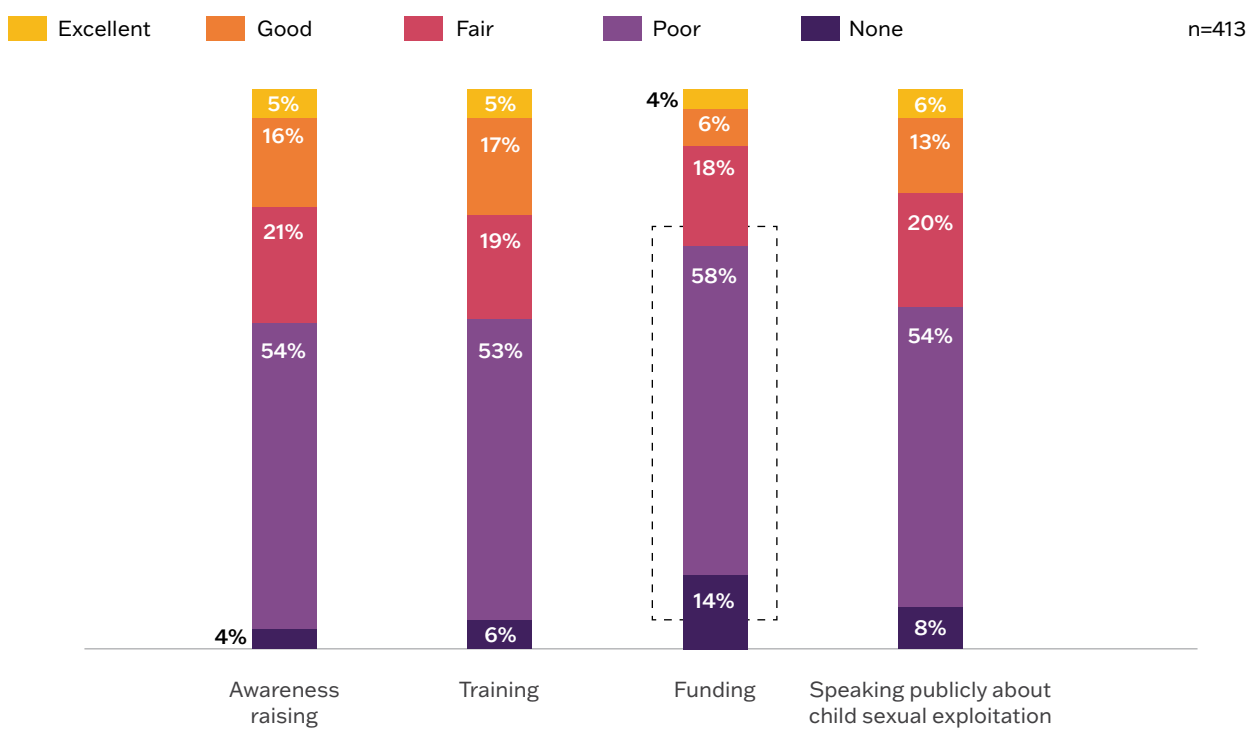


The barrier of “Fears about how others will respond to disclosure” was selected by a significantly higher proportion of Bosnian and Moldovan respondents, compared to the other four countries. With regard to the barrier of taboos around talking about sex, respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina displayed the highest level of agreement. A higher proportion of Colombian and Peruvian respondents noted the “Lack of confidence in being able to obtain helpful help” as a barrier to disclosure, compared to the other countries. Amongst the six countries, Mexican frontline workers more frequently selected “Fear of being criminalised” and “Police don’t accept report” than other countries.

Support services

When asked about the quality of government action to address child sexual exploitation and abuse online in their countries, frontline workers were most critical of funding shortfalls. Figure 16 below shows that a total of 72% (n=296) of all frontline workers rated the quality of government funding as either “poor” or “none”. Awareness-raising, training and advocating publicly about the issue were rated quite similarly, with between 59%-62% of respondents rating their government activities in these areas as either “poor” or “none”.

Figure 16: Frontline workers’ views on the quality of government activities



Awareness of support services

Across the 42 conversations with young people, a recurrent theme was again the lack of awareness of different support services prior to their help-seeking. The young survivors in Moldova did not know that there are some services available for children who go through experiences of abuse or sexual exploitation online:

“I did not know about La Strada, not even my parents knew about this Centre”

(Conversations’ Participant 2, Moldova)

said one of the young women who benefited from the services of this organisation. Eight out of ten young women who took part in the conversations in Moldova ended up benefiting from support services provided by non-governmental organisations, being referred by the representatives of police or prosecutor’s offices.

"I have not heard anyone call on these services. In our village, everyone handles it in the classic way. My mother or father deal with this and other services are not reached."

(Conversations' Participant 14, Moldova)

During the conversations with the Albanian young people, all seven young women explained they had no awareness that dedicated government child protection workers were stationed in the municipalities where they lived.⁴³ They had never come into contact - such as seeing them in public meetings or public outreach activities like open classrooms at school or various social, cultural and awareness-raising events.

"Only when everything had happened, did I learn that out there is a social worker who was supposed to take care of children and provide protection to them. No one had told me about the existence of this social worker, not even her!"

(Conversations' Participant 8, Albania)

Some survivors also shared a general lack of clarity on what services existed and that they might have had access to. One young survivor mentioned after being asked what services supported her after the situation of abuse:

"I don't know, Miss ... I would have liked a psychologist to be present..."

(Conversations' Participant 3, Peru)

Legal support services

Overall, most of the survivors who took part in the conversations were aware of the possibility to access legal support and benefited from such services at different levels. Many survivors indicated how legal support in child sexual exploitation and abuse online cases is very necessary and useful. A particular mention was made of lawyers who took the time to explain all stages of criminal proceedings, what would happen at each stage, and accompanied the survivors throughout the process.

"The only thing that gave me peace and confidence is that the lawyer assured me that I would not testify before the offender, but I would be heard only once in a special room."

(Conversations' Participant 12, Moldova)

Eight out of ten survivors in Moldova received free legal assistance in criminal proceedings. This made them feel safer when they interacted with representatives of the police or the justice system,

"The lawyer was like a guarantee certificate for my safety."

(Conversations' Participant 14, Moldova)

43. Republic of Albania. (2017). [Law No. 18/2017 On the Rights and Protection of the Child](#). Articles 53 and 54.

However, not all the survivors benefited from legal assistance on their first contact with the justice system. For example, one survivor said that she received the assistance of a lawyer only half a year after the police were notified:

“When the lawyer appeared, I understood that he (the offender) would be punished for what he did. I was confident that the lawyer was the person driving my interests, that I would no longer have dark thoughts or that he would not be punished. I had completely changed my mind.”

(Conversations’ Participant 7, Moldova)

A young survivor from Peru reflected on how sometimes although such services existed and could be accessed, the information provided to them was very limited:

“I don’t remember, I only get papers from my lawyer, and I didn’t even know that I had a lawyer.”

(Conversations’ Participant 10, Peru)

Unfortunately, even when legal support was provided, some survivors decide not to pursue their cases due to flaws in the system and lengthy processes. This is what happened to one of the young survivors in Mexico, who despite having the support of a private lawyer in her case, who accompanied her throughout her process, after four months hearing nothing, she ultimately still decided to withdraw her complaint.

“I withdrew it because of the answer I received. I think I withdrew it around the middle of February... as I told you this was, if I’m not mistaken, at the beginning of November and well, November passed, December passed, January passed and even February, after not having any news that would help this to continue because I do not know if this is being resolved. Let’s say it like this, I did not have any news from the authorities, I never had information about what the progress was, the only information I had was ‘we do not have access, Twitter denied us’ and at that moment I no longer wanted to go through with it.”

(Conversations’ Participant 8, Mexico)

While this may not represent a long time in institutional court processes - these are deeply difficult and troubling experiences that can consume survivors while they wait in limbo for action and – as in the case of the young Mexican woman we spoke to, can lead to a denial of a child victim’s right to access justice, legal remedies and support.

In addition, survivors in Peru noted a lack of inter-institutional coordination, which ultimately hindered support processes. Three participants mentioned that at first the situation and responsibilities of the different institutions seemed clear, but as things progressed, they became more complicated and their cases seemed to not be adequately monitored.

“At the beginning I had the help of state lawyers, I felt strange because I have never had lawyers. But now I don’t know who my lawyer is, I’m a bit lost. They only send me papers to my house to read, I would have liked them to help me more.”

(Conversations’ Participant 10, Peru)

Psychological support services

In general, most survivors who took part in the conversations indicated that although they were aware of the existence of psychological support services, but a number noted that their access had been hindered by prejudices in their communities about the effectiveness of this type of specialised care. A common theme noted by the survivors across the countries was the sociocultural stigma associated with seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist, as these services are considered targeted only for those who are mentally ill.

“They told me that I was crazy, that I was hysterical, which is why I was going to the psychiatrist and I said, ‘well, that is not the sole purpose of a psychiatrist or a psychologist’. So it is good to let people know that if you go to a psychologist, it is not because you are crazy but because you may have a certain emotional problem...”

(Conversations’ Participant 3, Mexico)

“When I asked my parents to go to the psychologist because I realised that my relationships, especially with my boyfriend, were not good, they just told me that I was crazy, and that it was not necessary.”

(Conversations’ Participant 9, Mexico)

“My parents ... they think that seeing a psychologist is something serious, very serious, that you are already crazy.”

(Conversations’ Participant 10, Mexico)

“At first I did not want to go to a psychologist because I thought that the person who goes to a psychologist has problems with his head. I thought that I would go to him and he would make me draw, or that he would make me feel mentally ill.”

(Conversations’ Participant 2, Moldova)

Because of such a belief, the survivor did not benefit from psychological assistance from the moment she reported the abuse. In Moldova, on the one hand, psychological services are not sufficiently accessible and available to children who have experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

On the other hand, even if there are services, children refuse to benefit from them because of the stereotypes they hold about what the profession of psychologist entails.

In other cases, although survivors tried to access psychological support, this was inaccessible to them; a young woman from Moldova mentioned that she had repeatedly called a centre that provides assistance to young people, but she did not receive any support:

“I have called on that organisation many times. There was an indifference. I did not have a moment of support. I was looking for refuge, I wanted to talk to the psychologist, but he did not come out to meet me. The first contact is very important.”

(Conversations’ Participant 14, Moldova)

Survivors also reported an overall difficulty in accessing psychological support as this is not provided by the government but only local NGOs.

“I had difficulties accessing the psychology service, as no state authority provided this service except for the NGO CHS Alternativo.”

(Conversations’ Participant 3, Peru)

In some cases, where survivors were provided with psychological assistance, the psychologists who were assigned to them failed to create a proper connection with them,

“And even at the last centre when I was there, there was a psychologist and I talked to her, but anyway I couldn’t tell her what was on my mind.”

(Conversations’ Participant 11, Moldova)

One survivor from Moldova mentioned that during the criminal trial, the psychologist changed and another specialist was invited to attend the hearing. However, the psychologist did not get involved at all and did not communicate with her:

“Then another psychologist came to the police. I didn’t feel comfortable at all then. She didn’t try to approach me either. I was used to the first psychologist who felt closer to me. The second psychologist was distant. He seemed to be smiling, but I didn’t feel I could trust him.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

Additionally, participants mentioned how often the psychological support provided is only for the short-term and noted how longer-term care might have supported them to overcome the experience of abuse and exploitation.

“It would have helped me to have ‘continuous’ psychological support, to fill ‘the gap’ and pain that the situation had left. Also, I would have loved to have more workshops (‘theatre, cooking, cosmetology, zoology’), which I was able to receive from CHS.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Peru)

Unfortunately, none of the Moldovan survivors we held conversations with attended long-term rehabilitation programmes. Some young women received counselling for a week, others for a few months, but responses indicated that support rarely lasted as long as the survivors needed it:

“I went to a psychologist for a week, we can say that’s almost not at all.”

(Conversations’ Participant 2, Moldova)

One of the successful experiences mentioned by some survivors is free legal and psychological assistance, right from the moment of reporting online sexual abuse. In the opinion of the Moldovan survivors, a successful example is the www.siguronline.md service where any child, as soon as they report about the abuse, is contacted by specialists who know how to talk to children, know about the specifics of these cases and how to help them,

“Immediately after I wrote, I felt a relief. They answered me quickly. I didn’t have to wait many hours. They were asking me various questions and they told me that they would call me, I therefore felt that it would be resolved, everything would be fine and I would receive the support I needed.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

Another successful example is the psychologist’s discussion with the child’s parent, before reporting the case to the police. Survivors believe that often parents do not know about such cases, and may have aggressive reactions if they learn about such experiences and could blame the child for what happened,

“I could not let my father know. I asked the psychologist to talk to him. When he found out, he called me and told me everything would be fine. I was amazed at my father’s reaction. He was very, very calm. After the conversation with the psychologist, the second-best support was from my father.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

Another good experience was consulting the child about all decisions that affect them and actively asking for their opinion.

“They always asked for my opinion. They tried to do everything for me, to make me feel good.”

(Conversations’ Participant 13, Moldova)

Overall, the young survivors emphasised the importance of psychological support being given from the beginning of the process, and that it should be continuous to help them face the abuse and exploitation they have experienced. Along the same lines, a young survivor from Peru reflected on the need for a trained psychologist of the same sex as the child to participate in the medical examination for the legal process to start.

“They should assign a psychologist [in the legal medical examination], a woman to speak to a woman, or a man to speak to a man, because one feels strange when a man comes to deal with you, especially if you have been raped, it is rare to have a man come and touch you. A more understandable psychologist, I felt that the one who attended me was very abrupt and did not understand me. I wish my grandmother was there to help me.”

(Conversations’ Participant 6, Peru)



According to the survivors

Psychological Evaluations in Peru

During the course of the conversations, the Peruvian young survivors often mentioned the Office of Forensic Medicine of the Public Ministry which is in charge of carrying out the medical examinations and psychological evaluations for legal action to proceed. Regarding the psychological evaluations, one young survivor shared how she felt pressured because she could not “be wrong” or “make changes” within the testimony provided, because she may be accused of being a “liar”, feeling that created fear in her and made her feel guilty. She did not feel comfortable to tell everything that had happened to a person she hardly knew, and this was “a traumatic experience.” (Conversations’ Participant 1, Peru) This was also raised by another participant, who mentioned that in the psychological evaluation, she felt pressured by the professional, because she “had to declare.” (Conversations’ Participant 5, Peru)

The survivors also mentioned that the length of the numerous sessions they had to attend ended up being a significant strain on their time and affected their other activities and responsibilities.

Medical support services

Most of the survivors considered medical support services very important in recovery. As evidence shows that child sexual abuse and exploitation online can occur fully online or through a mix of online and offline interactions and that it commonly overlaps with other forms of violence against children, medical assistance is indeed paramount at different stages of the reporting and recovery process.

The forms of medical support provided to the young survivors who took part in the conversations included forensic examination, tests for sexually transmitted infections, general blood tests, urine tests for traces of narcotics that offenders may have used, as well as psychological and psychiatric evaluation as mentioned in the previous section.

Insights from such services vary across the countries. For example, the five young Albanian survivors (all those who required medical support), indicated that they received all available support thanks to the coordination of the child protection system.

“As soon as I reported the case to the police, they performed a forensic medical examination at the hospital to check and verify whether anyone had abused me, and how far this abuse had gone. I would also like to say that I was taken to the psychiatrist immediately after I filed the report, because in those moments I wanted to kill myself given everything that had happened to me.”

(Conversations' Participant 1, Albania)

“I did receive medical assistance in Tirana at the [...] Centre, where they performed a forensic examination, including blood and urine tests, because that is what the institutions needed to carry out their investigations. Also, if I am not mistaken, I had general tests done in the city of [...], where I now live, to check general health parameters. All of this assistance was carried out in the presence and with the support of CRCA organisation and the Child Protection Worker.”

(Conversations' Participant 9, Albania)

In contrast, survivors in Peru and Mexico commented on the substandard support they received at the local health centres as well as the inadequate attitude of the personnel who made them feel judged and shamed.

“I would have liked to be treated well in the hospital, since when I came for a medical problem, I did not get adequate care and I did not receive good treatment.”

(Conversations' Participant 1, Peru)

"I went to have some examinations, those that you do after ... you know, after having sex ... and I felt judged by the people who attended me and I was afraid that others could find out about the results, or they could tell my mom... I didn't want anyone to know."

(Conversations' Participant 10, Peru)

In particular, survivors in Mexico mentioned experiencing re-victimisation when accessing gynaecological services as well as the inconvenience of having to frequently change doctors or medical facilities.

"It was not of good quality, because they constantly changed my doctor. I did not have a set one and not having one made me repeat everything again, starting from scratch and it was really very tedious for me. I no longer wanted to receive more support because I already felt very emotionally tired in that regard. Also, regarding the medications, it was complicated because I went to ask for the medication and they said 'we no longer have it, buy it in that place', or 'get it somewhere else.'"

(Conversations' Participant 2, Mexico)

Other supports

A very important element of support that was identified during the survivor conversations was the importance of the education system and family as a protective environment and first line of victim identification and access of support.

Examples included common perceptions amongst the Albanian survivors that there were not enough school psychologists across the country and that they currently were somewhat inadequate at protecting and providing the necessary support services for children and young people. According to the survivors, these positions are very much the first point of call for young people and can facilitate referral to other services. Without easy access to such professionals, children don't know how else to access the support structures. It is worth pointing out that psychologists are not stationed in every school in Albania, but cover several schools simultaneously, which makes it very difficult for psychologists to be at a given school every day of the week to establish presence, relationships or to be accessible to children and young people whenever they are needed. According to the statements of the survivors, five out of the seven young women, even when psychologists were present at their schools, were not aware that the school psychologist could help them report incidents, defend and support them from such situations and threats.

"To be honest, until the moment when the incident happened, I had no information about any services available to me, and I did not know who could help me. It is not like I had talked to the psychologist at school, because she showed up once in a month or two, and even when she was there she did not do anything...!"

(Conversations' Participant 5, Albania)

Also, all the survivors in Albania pointed out another problem regarding school staff. They did not consider them to be supportive of and cooperative with children in guaranteeing protection and support to them in such situations. On the contrary, according to the statements of four of the participants, they may have been treated with prejudice and blamed by the teaching staff for the abuse that occurred against them.

"I did not open up to my teachers because you know very well that in small towns if you talk about sex you are branded as a 'whore' who is well past salvation. To them it was inconceivable that a girl my age would discuss sexual relations, and even if a girl were to speak up, others would think that 'you like it like that'... Imagine for a moment if I were to tell them 'they want to force me to have sexual relations against my will'!!! But why? Because I've had sex with my boyfriend when I was 14 or 15 years old! Ahhhh!"

(Conversations' Participant 1, Albania)

Lack of concern and negligence in responding to clear signs of abuse and distress from the teachers and in general school staff were also raised by the survivors who took part in the conversations in Mexico. According to these young people, there was no attention to signs such as decreasing school performance, isolation, harm and self-harm.

"Several times I came to school with punch marks, both on the face and on the body and it was never like they worried, they saw me coming with a black eye, whatever it was, but they never stopped to ask me 'are you okay? Is something wrong with you?'"

(Conversations' Participant 2, Mexico)

However, some participants also acknowledged that perhaps these circumstances arise as teachers are not trained in the knowledge and skills needed to identify and intervene in risky situations.

"To be frank, not even our teachers, or the psychologist at my school, have any idea at all on how we can protect ourselves online, or how they can come to our defence. During open discussion classes, we did nothing but discuss fun stuff..."

(Conversations' Participant 6, Albania)

Conversations' Participant 10, Colombia, explained that given her experience, she felt that teachers simply had not been trained to identify indicators of abuse in children; and that they had no information about the dangers of sexual violence on social media.

Knowledge amongst frontline workers

In general, participants indicated that, in addition to the barriers to services mentioned in the sections above there is often a lack of knowledge about the functions of the available support services which may hinder their uptake.

Similar to the reporting mechanisms, a major barrier in accessing support services was the re-victimisation that can occur as a result of problematic engagements from some support workers. One young survivor from Peru commented that she felt pressured by the approach of a psychologist involved in her case.

"I felt scared, I had appointments before with psychologists who told me that I could not change the version of things because they could blame me for it; that was a traumatic experience for me because I felt a lot of pressure with every word I said."

(Conversations' Participant 1, Peru)

Survivors shared examples of insensitivity from other workers that may be the first point of contact for victims seeking help:

"In the end the answers were the same and also the responses of the officials were that 'we cannot do anything more and if we can do something more it is when you bring us such information.'"

(Conversations' Participant 8, Mexico)

Survivors in Mexico indicated that they felt that the specialised prosecutors, to whom they reported, conveyed an indifference and normalisation of violence that was off-putting. Victims were blamed for the sexual abuse and exploitation that they had been subjected to:

"I went to the Prosecutor's Office, to begin with, they treated me super badly. They sat me down and asked me what happened? Their treatment was very cold. 'What happened?' as well as. 'What happened to you?' It was ugly, because I already started to tell him the story, ...or was trying to finish, I said 'I think it was here', because I did not remember what hotel it was, 'I think it was here, but I do not remember the name because I did not see it'. (He said:) 'How come you don't remember? ...you got high, that's why you don't remember'. (Then I said) 'I didn't get high, they drugged me'. and (then he answered) 'how do you know if you don't remember that?'"

(Conversations' Participant 5, Mexico)

Additionally, five of the six young Peruvian women shared how they felt their experience would have been very different if they had been male, since they mentioned that the institutions and people would not have believed them or would have treated them in a very different way because of attitudes that males do not suffer sexual exploitation and abuse:

“... When women are the victims, they believe it.... If the case is with men, they don't believe him, they think they're misleading...”

(Conversations' Participant 3, Peru)

“I think society would be tougher and less supportive of a man who has experienced this situation...”

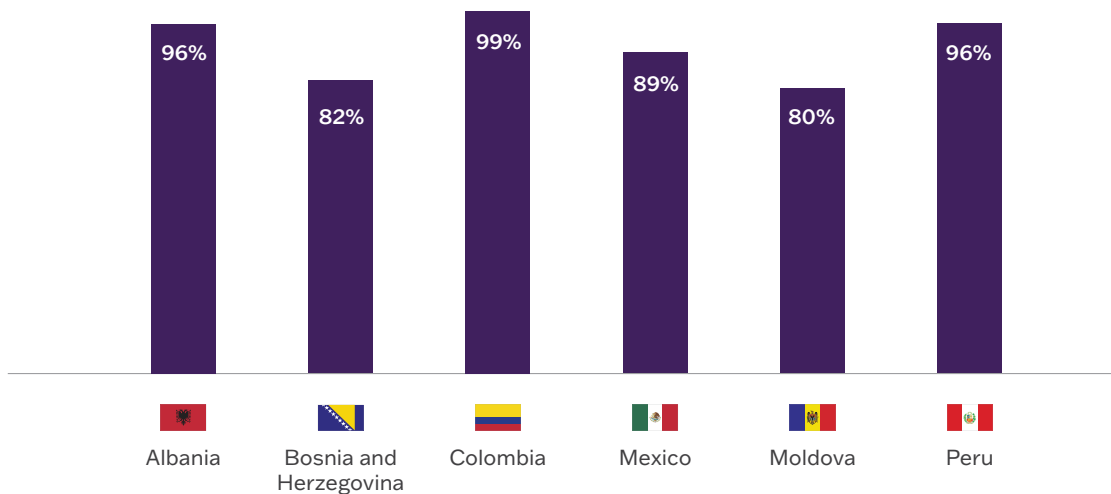
(Conversations' Participant 4, Peru)

Along these lines, a hypothetical scenario in the frontline workers' survey explored perceptions related to gender and sexual exploitation and abuse online. A scenario with a female victim and male offender was flipped, and respondents were asked if this changed their perspective.⁴⁴ The proportion of frontline workers who agreed the situation constituted sexual exploitation dropped (91% compared to 96%⁴⁵ and 98%⁴⁶). This may suggest that respondents tend to attribute sexual exploitation and abuse to male offenders more commonly than to female offenders. There was statistically significant difference between the six countries.⁴⁷

Figure 17: Responses regarding victimisation of a male child in a hypothetical scenario

p=0.003

n=413



44. Scenario question: “If Bernard was a woman and [Local female name A] was a boy, would this situation still be considered online child sexual exploitation or abuse?”

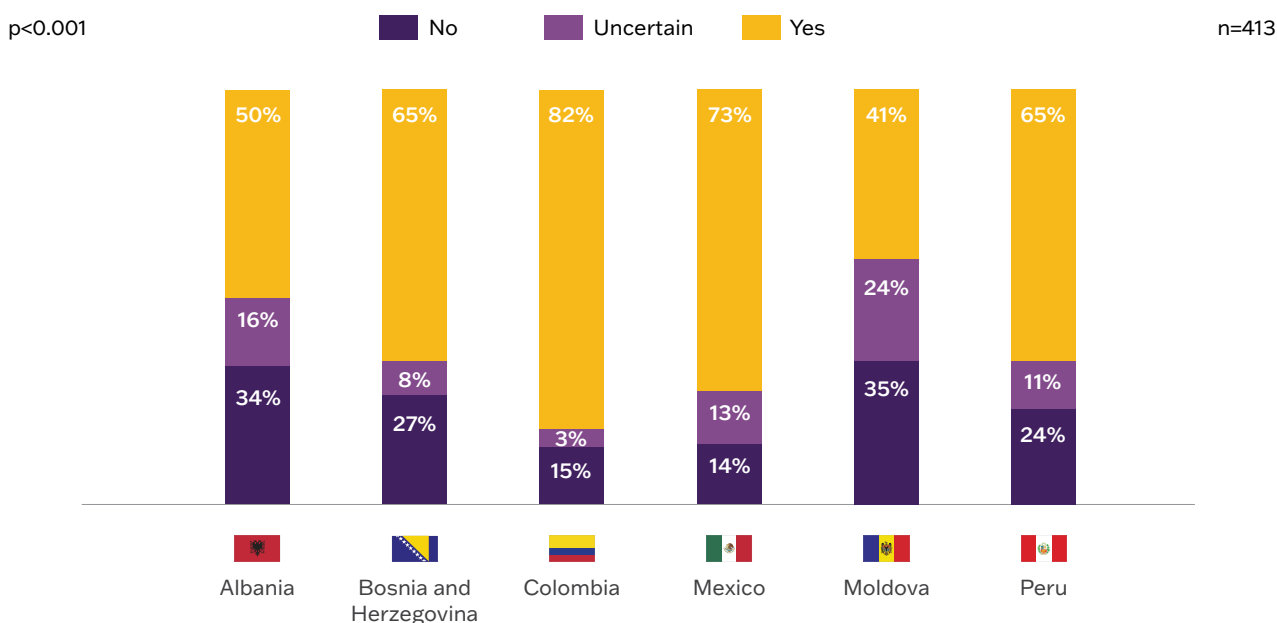
45. Scenario question: “Bernard, who lives in Australia, pays a 16-year-old in [Country], [Local female name A], to undress while they are on a video call. Do you believe that [Local female name A] is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse?”

46. Scenario question: “Bernard secretly records the videos and later posts them online. Do you believe that Bernard has committed online child sexual exploitation or abuse?”

47. Chi-Square test for independence indicated statistically significant differences by gender for grooming ($X^2(10) = 26.567, p = 0.003$).

Other interesting insights can be drawn from the workers' responses to the scenario-based questions. For instance, when asked whether a stranger watching video of a child undressing in front of a camera with another offender would qualify as committing child sexual exploitation and abuse online, 23% (n=94) of the respondents responded "no" and 12% (n=49) were uncertain. There were significant differences between the countries.⁴⁸ A higher proportion of respondents from Colombia (82%, n=73) believed that the 'viewer' has committed an offence compared to respondents from the other countries.

Figure 18: Responses regarding viewing of child sexual abuse in a hypothetical scenario



In another scenario, survey respondents answered some questions about a scenario where two adolescents were dating, regularly having sex and sometimes watched adult pornography together. Eighteen percent of the respondents (n=73) across the overall sample incorrectly considered that this would constitute a form of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

As suggested by the international experts during the roundtable meeting, creating and developing resource libraries for service providers may be useful tools to address their training and information enhancement needs. In turn, this could foster a shift in perspectives.

48. Chi-Square test for independence indicated statistically significant differences by gender for grooming ($X^2(10) = 37.200, p < 0.001$)

Prevention

Almost all the conversations with young people emphasised the strong need for better prevention actions regarding sexual exploitation and abuse of children – both in general and when technology is involved:

“At that age, one believes that pigs fly and do not fly, when you are at that stage, you pretty much believe everything.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Peru)

A young survivor from Colombia, for example, reflected on the importance of education and awareness-raising:

“Knowing about cybercrimes - that would have made me stop a bit and I would have realised that what was happening to me was that I was being the victim of a crime. For us as young people it is important to recognise the strategies that these people use to manipulate and deceive and thus achieve to identify and stop them, not knowing how they act gives them an advantage to be able to deceive us.”

(Conversations’ Participant 5, Colombia)

He also noted how in his country, prevention information related to the use of Internet and communications technologies are not disseminated widely, and usually not beyond the most central cities and neighbourhoods.

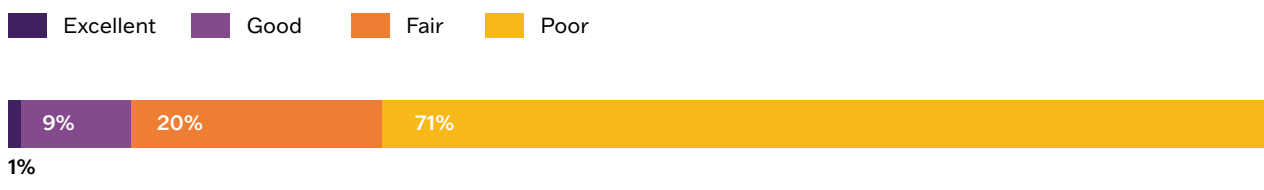
On this point, another participant proposed that information dissemination strategies must include a combination of virtual and face-to-face approaches. There must be an online component to handle contacts and reach young people who prefer to access information online. But it is also important to be present in the community and to be able to facilitate in-person contacts from both the perspective of prevention and response:

“In the communities, if you reach people with a grounded message, you are guaranteed that people know that this is a reality and they do not want this to happen to their sons and daughters - and they commit themselves.”

(Conversations’ Participant 7, Colombia)

When asked about the general level of awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the general community, the frontline workers across the six countries rated this as generally poor (71%, n=291). Only 10% of frontline workers (n=39) felt awareness was good or excellent.

Figure 19: General public awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online



The young survivors strongly emphasised the critical role that schools play in the prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

“Children are at school most of the time, so I think teachers can work on different forms of prevention, explain what they can do to prevent, which happens many times at home, inspire children not to remain silent if something happens to them, that they have a voice and they can express what is happening. They can also do prevention activities with puppets or something like that. They can make these situations or forms of prevention more normal.”

(Conversations’ Participant 1, Mexico)

A specific theme noted by survivors which handicaps prevention efforts is the aversion that many adults have to discussing sex and sexuality with young people, both in family settings and school environments:

“Sexuality is not talked about in the family, parents with their children, at school, teachers, if sexuality is talked about more frequently, children would not see it as sin, as bad and they would not be deceived so easily.”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Colombia)

Survivors shared how in schools, sexual education is often understood as “avoiding getting pregnant”. Conversely, the young survivors believe that such classes should provide children with advice and guidance on what to do when encountering grooming and other risks of sexual exploitation and abuse online. Information about where to seek help, as well as making space to discuss issues like consent and navigating healthy relationships are essential.

“These lessons at school will stop not only online abuse, but also rape, abortion, violence and many prohibited actions.”

(Conversations’ Participant 14, Moldova)

One survivor - Conversations’ Participant 2, Colombia - firmly stated that the State should be responsible for guaranteeing access for all boys and girls to quality education, where issues related to sexuality, sexual orientation, and other taboo subjects are addressed.

According to the young survivors, it is fundamental that families know how to create safe avenues for dialogue on these issues so that children can find answers to their questions and ask for help when

they need it. Survivors also mentioned education programmes for parents as a prevention tool, with one young woman from Moldova recommending the involvement of teachers in educating parents.

“To hold meetings with parents and teach them how to behave with the child.”

(Conversations’ Participant 2, Moldova)

Survivors also mentioned how prevention could be conducted via media, with specific mention to television.

“There is no prevention... on television; they deal with other issues, but I have never seen any prevention campaign on the matter, neither on television nor on the radio.”

(Conversations’ Participant 10, Peru)

The same survivor proposed that radio and television could broadcast programmes sharing real stories on this issue narrated by young people, in order to capture the attention of the public.

With regards to technology companies, while this was not often raised by survivors as a key priority, suggestions from them included strengthening age and identify verifications and better monitoring for problematic content.

“There should be more questions, some deeper data, with more security... One of two, because there are men who pretend to be girls or nice young men and all that...”

(Conversations’ Participant 4, Peru)

RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo by Ricardo Resende

The recommendations presented below were foremost drawn from the conversations with the young people who took part in the conversations as this project has primarily sought to centre the perspectives of survivors. Relevant data from the survey with frontline workers and the expert roundtable was then added to build on the suggested ways forward to provide concrete, and practical actions.

The Model National Response to Preventing and Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse⁴⁹ provides guidance to governments to organise and improve their response. The recommendations captured from this project are not borne of the model, and tend to fall into two categories: how to improve access and quality of reporting mechanisms, and how to better support children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Nevertheless, there are clear indications of capabilities identified in the Model National Response – specifically, the ‘Criminal Justice,’ ‘Victim’ and ‘Societal’ capabilities are comprehensively prominent. However, other capabilities are also acknowledged in the ways forward suggested by the survivors and backed by the frontline worker survey data.

Reporting mechanisms⁵⁰

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

Reporting mechanisms should be as visible as possible. For instance, if videos are made for children through which these services are promoted, straightforward language understandable to children should be used. Some of the young survivors who took part in the conversations indicated how they would prefer for such messages to refer explicitly and directly to the concepts of abuse and exploitation, without disguising the message through metaphors or unclear language.

2 Child protection services and technology platforms simplify the tools for reporting child sexual exploitation and abuse online and ensure they are child-friendly and allow children to choose the gender of service provider, where possible.

The 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. Children should be allowed to select the gender of the person they will be reporting their abuse or exploitation to. Tools that enable privacy are important given that children reporting may be doing so from unsafe environments.

49. See: [WeProtect Global Alliance: The Model National Response](#).

50. Throughout the report we use the phrase ‘formal reporting mechanisms’ to describe avenues for making formal reports of abuse or exploitation such as police, hotlines and child protection services. ‘Formally reporting’ is distinguished in the report from ‘disclosure’ which can include informally raising concerns with peers or caregivers.

3 Duty-bearers take steps to enable training for staff working on reporting mechanisms, including frontline police, on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The persons receiving the reports through all available reporting mechanisms should have up-to-date knowledge about online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse and skilled in providing child-sensitive support to survivors. These individuals should know how to encourage children to talk about what happened. Moreover, these individuals should respond to reports as quickly as possible to ensure the necessary support and safeguards are put in place. Financial constraints are a major barrier to these actions and must be directly addressed by governments.

4 Promote information and awareness campaigns in and out of schools about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services when harms occur.

There is a clear need for greater awareness and understanding of the risks children can incur in the online environment in relation to sexual exploitation and abuse. Survivors indicated how in schools, children are not taught about committing child sexual exploitation and abuse online, and how to use the Internet safely. When children don't fully understand sex or what interactions are and are not appropriate, it enables offenders to take advantage. Thus, we must ensure that knowledge about sex, consent, personal boundaries and what adults can and cannot do around children is readily available. Such information may be integrated in existing sex education school curricula. These could help children understand the full extent of the risks of sharing sexual content and how to engage in harm minimisation to limit possible negative repercussions.

It is essential to remember however, that while children may be part of the solution, the responsibility to act lies with adults, and we must be careful not to place the burden of action on children.

Survivors also indicated that prior to being subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online, they generally had little knowledge of the formal mechanisms for reporting or seeking help. Information and awareness campaigns should provide indication on the reporting mechanisms available and how to easily access them.

5 Provide educational programmes for communities and caregivers that focus on encouraging open dialogue with young people and take a preventative approach to understanding online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

For the young people who engaged in the conversations, the family plays an important role both in the prevention and protection of children. Therefore, it is crucial that caregivers have the capacity to engage with children about using the Internet safely. Caregivers don't have to be experts that teach, but can learn and negotiate the online world together. It is important that caregivers create avenues for dialogue so that children feel confident to raise concerns, disclose harms, and seek support.

Caregivers of children who have been subjected to online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse should also be guided on how they can support children. Parents and carers should be supported to understand that children cannot be blamed for the sexual exploitation and abuse they have experienced. Responses to disclosures of child sexual exploitation and abuse online should always convey that it is never the child's fault.

6 Once reports are made, children should receive age-appropriate information about the processes to be followed and their rights throughout. These rights must be the paramount consideration when proceeding with investigations and court processes.

Child-friendly justice provides greatest protection to children who have been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes ensuring that children are kept informed throughout the various stages of the justice process in an informative and child-sensitive way. A protocol of child-friendly procedures should be developed and applicable to cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse in whatever court they are heard, ensuring that the procedures are flexibly applied to address the individual needs and interests of each child.

7 Provide training to law enforcement officers that enables improved investigation and prosecution of online sexual crimes against children.

Law enforcement should improve the approach to conducting investigations related to reports of sexual abuse and exploitation online, in order to ensure offenders are brought to justice and that those who have been subjected to such crimes are able to access compensation and other legal remedies. This would also encourage new victims to report cases of sexual abuse and exploitation. Protecting anonymity and being child-focused in approaches is an evident barrier that discourages reporting and simply must be addressed. And while rhetorical support is often strong for such recommendations, governments must commit financial resources in order to enable this work.

8 Governments impose legal duties for Internet service providers and platforms to comply with law enforcement on investigations into child sexual abuse.

Such duties are aimed to ensure that Internet service providers and social media companies promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material, sharing of user data and other requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

9 Internet service providers and social media platforms should conduct preventative screening for content and take other ‘safety by design’ approaches that include impact assessing all their products and services from a child rights perspective.

Such approaches would allow Internet service providers to preventively identify and, as appropriate, warn, expel and report individuals who pose a risk to children.

Support Services

10 Duty-bearers and child protection services can better promote the availability and accessibility of a full range of support services for child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Such services should be available and accessible across the country, regardless of location. Frontline victim identification and referral mechanisms, such as within schools, must be strengthened.

Any child who goes through an experience of abuse and exploitation should have access to helpers who can support them. These professionals should be especially knowledgeable and skilled. Not everyone needs to be a specialist, but all at the frontline need at least some knowledge, though referrals to specialists are also an important part of the picture. Efforts to enhance collaboration amongst support services and law enforcement to smooth the process of ensuring children reach the right helpers. Such results could be achieved through the implementation of child advocacy centres (also known as Barnahus model). This model reduces possible re-traumatisation of children in a number of ways, including by coordinating the relevant professionals around the child so they provide their testimony fewer times and in a safe and confidential space.

11 Commit funding that enables free access to psychological support with professionals trained and experienced in supporting children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse in general and online and disseminate information on the availability of such services.

These support services should be available at any time to children and young people who have survived online sexual exploitation and abuse. It is also recommended to provide more funding to civil society organisations that offer psychological and community assistance to children and young people who have been subjected to online and offline sexual abuse and exploitation. The innovative use of remote/digital platforms in Albania to work around geographic barriers was encouraging to see and should be further enabled so that it can be done appropriately, confidentially and ethically.

The stigma around the notion of seeing a mental health professional and receiving counselling is also an important barrier. Child-friendly information dissemination could normalise and increase children’s (and families’) awareness and benefits of such service.

12 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.

Recognising the importance of protecting the privacy of children involved in cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, court hearings should be closed to the public and press. States should also prohibit disclosure of the child's personal details and any identifying information without the consent of the child.

The implementation of child advocacy centres to coordinate delivery of multi-disciplinary services, as mentioned in recommendation 10 above, could also provide a child-friendly setting for holding pre-trial interviews and depositions during proceedings while offering psychological and other support to the children throughout the process.

13 Provide and fund widespread training opportunities for social support workers on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Both amongst the young people who engaged in the conversations and the responses from the frontline workers, it was evident that there is a need to improve the knowledge and skills of the professionals whom victims come into contact about this topic. Many young people had negative experiences in accessing support services after they summoned the courage to disclose. Mostly these negative experiences were because the professionals did not take their cases seriously or did not understand the online elements of the sexual exploitation and abuse. Training on the implications of online risks and harms is urgently needed.

Annex: List of Expert Roundtable participants

Name	Title	Organisation
Emily Cashman Kirstein	Policy Director	Thorn
Brisa del Angulo	Chief Executive Officer and Founder	A Breeze of Hope Foundation
Toby Dagg	Head of Investigations	Office of the Australian e-Safety Commissioner
Eva Cristina Dengler	Program and Business Relations Manager	Childhood Brasil
Jenette Jadloc-Carredo	Senior Lead, Aftercare – Survivor Leadership & Advocacy	International Justice Mission Center to End Online Sexual Exploitation of Children
Afroz Kaviani Johnson	Child Protection Specialist	UNICEF
William Kent	Grant Manager	Porticus
Dr. Elizabeth Letourneau	Professor and Director, Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse	Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University
Carla Licciardello	Digital Inclusion Coordinator	International Telecommunication Union
Dr. Daniela Ligiero	Chief Executive Officer	Together for Girls
Saba Lishan	Senior Technical Officer in Child Development and Protection Programme	African Child Policy Forum
Sean Litton	Executive Director	The Technology Coalition
Ovidiu Majina	Senior Project Officer	Council of Europe
Dr. Jennifer Martin	Associate Dean, Graduate Studies and Research	Faculty of Community Services, Ryerson University
Lianna McDonald	Executive Director	The Canadian Centre for Child Protection

Dr. Michael Seto	Director of the Forensic Mental Health Research Unit	University of Ottawa Institute for Mental Health Research at The Royal
Gabrielle Shaw	Chief Executive Officer	National Association for People Abused in Childhood
Dr. Jennifer Wortham	Chair	World Day Global Collaborative for Child Sexual Abuse Prevention, Healing, and Justice
Dr. Paul Zeitz	Interim Movement Executive Coordinator	Global Movement to End Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescents

Support provided to the report's development as an attendee of the Expert Roundtable does not imply endorsement (in part or in full) of the contents of this report.



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