



# Child 'self-generated' sexual material online:

Children and young people's  
perspectives

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safeguarding

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# 1. Acknowledgements

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# 2. Executive Summary



## 2.1 The purpose of our research

This research focused on listening to children’s views on the issue of ‘self-generated’ sexual material in three diverse country contexts – Ghana, Thailand and Ireland. The aim was to understand how children themselves feel about the issue of ‘self-generated’ sexual material\* and how they feel they might be better supported. The children and young people in all three countries had a lot that they wanted to say about the impact these issues had on young people, as well as the ways they felt changes could be made to improve the response. We deliberately chose diverse locations for this research to understand both the similarities of children’s online experiences on these issues, and some of the key differences.

This research comprised qualitative data gathering in the form of small focus groups with children aged 13-17 in the three countries to discuss and explore the issue. For the purposes of our discussions the children were divided into different groups according to age and gender. In total we spoke to 97 children in Ghana, 73 children in Thailand and 41 children in Ireland and a total of 17 professionals across the three countries.<sup>1</sup> The sessions with children encouraged them to share their general thoughts about how and why ‘self-generated’ sexual materials were shared, their views on current responses to this issue within their countries and their ideas on how this could be improved. In addition to this, we conducted a literature review of existing research on the nature and prevalence of child ‘self-generated’ sexual material, as well as a targeted review of research and policy in the three countries we visited.

\*In this research we define the term ‘self-generated’<sup>2</sup> sexual material as including a broad span of images or videos from voluntarily ‘self-generated’ material that is usually shared between adolescent peers (where harm is typically caused when imagery is reshared against a young person’s wishes) to coerced ‘self-generated’ sexual material – which includes the grooming, pressure, or manipulation to share material.<sup>3</sup> Although this study was primarily designed to explore the sharing of voluntarily ‘self-generated’ material among groups of teenagers in schools rather than focusing specifically on children known to have experienced coercion – the study allowed scope for children to speak generally about all of the behaviours included within this definition and express their views about them.

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<sup>1</sup> See Methodology section in Chapter 4 for more details about our sample.

<sup>2</sup> We use adverted commas when using this term to recognise that although this term reflects the current policy consensus around how to refer to this kind of phenomenon and the material it generates, it is not a definition that is universally used or understood by either professionals or children.

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed definition of these terms can be found in our literature review in Section 6.



## 2.2 Summary of key findings

The children and young people in all three countries had a lot that they wanted to say about the impact of 'self-generated' sexual material on children, as well as the changes they wanted. Below are some of the identified shared themes in conjunction with findings that were specific to the individual countries and contexts. *Please note that a more detailed explanation of each of the key findings can be found at the end of this report in Chapter 9.*

### **1. Children expressed that the creation and sharing of 'self-generated' sexual material among children and young people is common with gender playing a key role in experiences.**

*"Girls can get a name and boys don't. Girls get called a slut, guys get a pat on the back for it. It's happening a lot." Girl, 16, Ireland*

### **2. Children described a range of motivations for engaging in 'self-generated' sexual material, from excitement and connection to pressure, coercion, and financial exploitation. Children's evident concern about a range of the negative experiences and consequences came through clearly in the data.<sup>4</sup>**

*"Sometimes it's an emotional 'in the moment' feeling - sometimes they just send them because they want to send them, and it feels good. At other times they might feel compelled to do it. We cannot tell anyone else." Girl, 15, Thailand*

### **3. The children described a complex mix of motivations and drivers including pressure and expectations in relationships, the influence of social media, and a desire for affirmation and self-esteem.**

Children reflected on a range of different reasons for engaging in image sharing. The concept of unwanted pressure to do so in their relationships came through strongly and consistently. We also heard that many young people were motivated to share because they wanted or needed to feel validated.

*"I know girls who want to feel good about themselves. They post sexy pictures on sites... like TikTok and Instagram because they want people to say they are beautiful." Girl, 16, Ghana*

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<sup>4</sup> In the research, we spoke to children in small same-sex groups rather than individually and this may have contributed to some of the negative framing that we heard from children. The stigma that we learned about that attached to 'self-generated' material may have made some children reluctant to speak about the positives, even when asked, in small groups with peers.

**4. Children, especially girls, expressed that the content and architecture of social media environments drives and facilitates the creation and sharing of 'self-generated' sexual material.**

We heard from children and young people about the influences and expectations created by social media content. Sending images in this context was partly seen to be about trying to live up to these expectations and representations of being normal and successful online.

*"There is pressure to be seen as attractive and to meet expectations. There is a view that you are valued for your body these days - especially in the media - you're either a whore or a housewife."  
Girl, 16, Thailand*

**5. In Ghana children talked about sharing of images in relationships which showed many similarities to Thailand and Ireland, but the main reason they thought children engaged in sharing 'self-generated' sexual material was because they were exploited for money.**

In Ghana, the motivation to sell indecent images for money was perceived as overwhelming for many poor children in both the city and rural school. The selling of images for money to 'white foreign men' and to local men was described as commonplace and the children told us that the most important response to 'sexting' in Ghana was to address poverty and the lack of economic opportunities.

*"There are people who give these pictures to men or boys in their community for money. We are very poor here so if someone offers money, girls will want to say yes." Girl, 15, Ghana*

**6. There is widespread shame and stigma around 'self-generated' sexual material when this is known to have been shared. This appears to partly be linked to a cultural divide between the norms and expectations children encounter online and the traditional cultures of their offline lives.**

Much of the testimony of the children we spoke to reflects a clash between their online experiences and the conservative values and attitudes that were still prevalent in their offline social lives. The children conveyed a strong sense that they were trying to navigate and make sense of this cultural divide, largely unsupported by adults around them.

*"I do not think that any adult in Ghana would understand why a child would send a sexual picture to someone. They would definitely blame the child and punish them. Most adults are very judgemental here." Girl, 14, Ghana*

**7. Children and young people felt that the shame and stigma relating to self-generated sexual material was unhelpful and needs to change. They felt it creates barriers to help seeking and contributes to bullying and poor mental health outcomes.**

The children and young people were concerned about the ways in which stigma and shame created barriers to the help that children needed particularly when images are leaked.<sup>5</sup>

*“Thai society and Asian parenting may make it tough for young people to tell anyone. They don’t talk about these things, and they don’t want to disappoint their parents.”  
Girl, 15, Thailand*

*“Your life would be miserable once people know what you have done...There will be too much shame and you would not cope.” Boy, 16, Ghana*

**8. Children felt they could not or would not report to the police or seek help from the police, due to both the specific risks of criminalisation as well as a general fear that the police would be hostile and make their situation worse.**

The children and young people relayed that they would be extremely unlikely to seek support from the police for this issue. One reason for this was the legal position with children aware of the risks of being criminalised for sharing ‘self-generated’ sexual content in Thailand and Ghana. They also viewed the police as not being capable or trustworthy in such cases and considered that they were hostile to children.

*“We are afraid of consequences of reporting to the police because in Thailand, it’s illegal to send any nude photo. There was a case last year of some boys being arrested for sending a video but also the girl in the video was arrested which is really unfair... In [dealings with the police] it’s not about who is in the wrong, it’s who has the most money.” Boy, 16, Thailand*

*“The Garda<sup>6</sup> needs to just stop stereotyping young people, particularly young boys. If we go to them for help, they just accuse us of lying or assume we have done something wrong.” Boy, 14, Ireland*

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<sup>5</sup> They also felt it was unfair that the blame should attach to the person whose images were sent and shared rather than the person who had leaked the material or pressured them to send it.

<sup>6</sup> The Garda Síochána, often referred to as the Gardaí or “the Guards”, is the national police service of Ireland.

**9. Children want, but do not currently have access to, confidential support when it comes to dealing with issues relating to 'self-generated' sexual material. This is particularly the case where children have lost control of their material and want support.**

Children wanted somewhere to go where they could get support from adults, where their information would be kept confidential and where they could benefit from advice and guidance. Across all three countries, the children and young people were sceptical about reporting to school counselling services, safeguarding leads, hotlines or other adults due to concerns about confidentiality.

*Many adults in authority are not discreet in Ghana. They will tell others who you are and what you have done." Girl, 14, Ghana*

**10. Children report a significant generational divide between themselves and their parents in relation to internet use.**

The children in all three countries described a generational divide between themselves and their parents/guardians and said that their parents generally lacked an understanding of their online lives. Many of the children in this study would have liked to turn to their parents and carers for help and guidance but felt the gap in understanding was too substantial for them to do so.

*"Because of the age gap, this generation wouldn't understand. Thai parents tend to be older, so they don't get it." Boy, 13, Thailand*

*"They [our parents] need to think about what it's really like for kids in our generation growing up online. They need to put themselves in our shoes. They need to be calmer and listen to us." Boy, 13, Ireland*

**11. Children wanted better information and education from schools to deal with 'self-generated' sexual material as well as improved online safety and sex and relationships education more generally.**

The children and young people across all three countries wanted better education and support on these issues from their schools. They felt that a more appropriate, up to date, and responsive education in schools would help them understand and navigate issues of online safety - including the sharing of sexual material.

*"For the school programme we don't get education on this - but in our class the teacher printed out some information on being safe online and it was printed out and put at the front of our classroom so that we can read it."  
Girl, 14, Thailand*

*"Young people, educating each other informally could really help, in a space that allows for conversation. The gender of groups should be the same so children can speak openly." Boy, 16, Thailand*

## **12. The absence of education in schools means that children are learning about sexual issues from social media or in some cases from pornography.**

Most of the children we spoke to told us that they sought information about these topics directly from online influencers. In addition to social media influencers some of the children spoke about being influenced by and learning from pornography.

*"It's so easy to look at pornographic pictures and we are so used to seeing them on websites. We see porn and feel we need to set the same standards and want to copy it."*  
*Boy, 13, Ireland*

## **13. A number of boys' groups expressed feeling particularly isolated, as culturally it was less acceptable to talk with peers about feelings and emotions.**

A number of the boys in our study relayed feeling negatively stereotyped and dismissed, but also unsupported.

*"Schools don't really talk to us about this. We have wellbeing lessons, but they only talk about things vaguely. You don't really get a chance to discuss this issue. They just tell us but don't allow us to talk about it." Boy, 13, Ireland*

## **14. Children felt that technology companies can provide useful resources for them, but also that they should do more to manage content and behaviour on their services.**

The children in all three countries felt that technology companies could do more to support them with these issues. The children talked about having more creators specifically paid to provide educational videos and information that they could seek out online and which they could trust. They also wanted platforms to do more to reduce the spread of 'self-generated' sexual material, and also to deal with offenders making unwanted advances or sending sexual content.

*"The companies like Facebook, TikTok and Instagram should run education videos for children and also their parents, we would listen to them." Girl, 15, Ghana*

*"You could ban porn on platforms, make it more difficult to send images (so you make it so that people can't upload explicit images)." Boy, 13, Ireland*

### **15. The language of 'self-generated' sexual material is not used by children and generally unhelpful.**

None of the children in this project used the phrase 'self-generated' sexual material. They used terms such as 'sexy selfies', 'sexting', 'nudes' or 'sexy photos' to encompass 'self-generated' sexual material. The language of 'self-generated' material was broadly understood by the professionals we spoke with once the definitions were shared but overall did not appear to support the effective framing of these issues. In many of the exploitative and coercive contexts, especially where older adult perpetrators are involved, the material was not truly 'self-generated' and a different term altogether would be more appropriate.

## **2.3 Recommendations**

Although the fieldwork for this research was conducted in Ghana, Thailand, and Ireland, there are clear implications for the global response to the issue of 'self-generated' sexual material. The recommendations below derive from direct suggestions from children in this study and are based on their key messages. In our recommendations we have sought to identify the actions that would help to realise the changes that they wanted. *Please note that a more detailed version of these recommendations can be found at the end of this report in Chapter 9.*

### **Improved education**

1. Governments and school authorities should review their educational responses to these issues in the light of the key findings above and consider whether their approach is likely to meet the needs that children have outlined in this study.

### **Non-judgemental support**

2. Governments should make provisions to educate and inform parents and carers.

3. Governments and civil society organisations should seek to increase public awareness that encountering these issues online is commonplace for children.

4. Governments, schools, and civil society organisations should provide children with confidential support from trained adults where they could get advice and guidance when things have gone wrong without blame or making their situation worse.

## Structural and institutional change

5. Legal reforms are needed that ensure that children are not criminalised for the possession or sharing of their own images either where they are a victim, or where they were engaging in a normal and consensual way with another child or young person.

6. Governments and those working in the criminal justice system should consider how to ensure children have opportunities to engage with the police as victims or witnesses without encountering scepticism, judgement, or blame.

7. Governments should prioritise tackling sexual exploitation of children and their images/videos.

## Technology companies

8. Technology companies should do more to support children on this issue, including providing high quality information from online influencers and educators from whom they are currently seeking help.

9. Technology companies should invest in technical solutions to respond to the circulation of 'self-generated' sexual material.

## Language

10. Relevant and effective language should be used when talking about 'self-generated' sexual material online.





# 3. Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore the issue of child ‘self-generated’<sup>7</sup> sexual material by seeking to understand how children themselves feel about the issue and how they feel that they might be better supported. The views and perspectives of children facing these issues in their daily lives have important implications for potentially improving the responses of adults, including professionals working in education, youth work, social care, and policing, as well as across government, the technology industry and civil society.

In this research we define the term ‘self-generated’ sexual material as including a broad span of content generation from voluntarily ‘self-generated’ material that is usually shared between adolescent peers (where harm is typically caused when imagery is reshared against a young person’s wishes) to coerced ‘self-generated’ sexual material - which includes the grooming, pressure, or manipulation to share material.<sup>8</sup> The term ‘self-generated’ sexual material is used to encompass both images and video content.

This research has been conducted in three countries in different global regions – Ghana, Thailand and Ireland and represents a snapshot of children’s experiences in these locations. The research recognises that these issues manifest themselves differently in different parts of the world and that children often experience them differently.<sup>9</sup> Whilst this project seeks to understand this phenomenon as a distinct aspect of children’s experiences of growing up with digital media, it also recognises that, for children themselves, such experiences cannot be understood outside of their experiences of adolescence in the offline world, and the framing provided by their peers, family, community, schools, authorities, culture and broader networks. Responses and solutions therefore need to be grounded in ways that recognise both the shared challenges children and young people face online as well as some of the profound differences shaped by the wider context in which they are growing up.

The international context is also important because, as identified in the WeProtect Global Alliance Global Threat Assessment 2021<sup>10</sup>, this is a truly global issue. As with many other online matters, safety challenges are particularly urgent and acute in many regions of the world where growth “often occurs far ahead of any understanding of what constitutes safe and positive use in digital contexts”.<sup>11</sup> Some evidence suggests a particularly stark gap between higher and lower economic regions concerning the risks taken online and the protections that are available, with similar risk-taking online but fewer protections or

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<sup>9</sup> Economist Impact Study

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

<sup>11</sup> Livingstone et al., 2014. Children in many parts of the world do not always have the benefit of adult guidance or legislative and regulatory mechanisms that support or protect them online (Livingstone et al., 2014).



mitigations available in lower-income regions.<sup>12</sup> In all locations of this research, there were fascinating similarities and differences in the contexts in which these issues are occurring and the challenges they create.

In sharing our findings, it is important to emphasise that this is qualitative research that provides a useful snapshot of the perceptions of children and young people across the three countries, but which does not represent an assessment of the situation or response in those countries – and that as such our findings do not claim to necessarily be representative of children in those countries. The research in different countries is contextualised through the country specific literature reviews that offer a frame for the country data and which reference a range of other studies (such as recent national studies).<sup>13</sup> However, the primary data in this report comprises a small qualitative study that provides a platform for a group of young people in those countries to express their experiences and views of how they see the issue of ‘self-generated’ material in their lives and countries.

Each child that participated in this research has helped to provide important and contemporary insights into the experiences of young people using the internet today. Their thoughts and reflections have helped to shape the findings and recommendations of this targeted research report, which will have important implications for the global response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm>

# 4. Methodology

This research comprised qualitative data gathering in the form of small focus groups with children aged 13-17 in three countries (Ghana, Thailand and Ireland) to discuss and explore the issue. These sessions were facilitated by members of the research team, and the children were divided into different groups according to age (with separate sessions for 13-15-year-olds and 16-17-year-olds) and gender with girls and boys engaged with separately. The sessions encouraged children to share their general thoughts about how and why 'self-generated' sexual materials were shared, and their ideas on how responses to the issue could be improved. In addition to this, we conducted a small number of professional interviews in each country, and we completed a literature review of existing research on the nature and prevalence of child 'self-generated' sexual material, as well as a targeted review of research and policy in the three countries we visited.

In each country we spoke to children in two or three different schools and settings. This was designed to increase the diversity of our sample of children living in each country, so for example we spoke to children in Ghana in a rural and in an urban school. In Thailand we contrasted schools that were private and state schools, and in Ireland we spoke to children in faith-based and non-denominational schools.

The numbers that we engaged with were as follows:

Ghana	Thailand	Ireland
October 2022	November 2022	January 2023
97 child participants	73 child participants	41 child participants
Two schools: Urban state school and rural state school	Two schools: International private school and Government state school	Three schools: Two non-denominational state schools and one faith-based state school
6 professional interviews	5 professional interviews	6 professional interviews

Our workshops with children were designed to provide an opportunity to explore their views, opinions and perceptions of 'self-generated' sexual material. The research sought to encourage children to work alongside the researchers to directly define, frame and explore the topic from their own point of view.

The toolkit we used included a set of engaging, interactive age-appropriate activities and tasks and asked children to complete written and verbal exercises around a range of themes/prompts. These themes included exploring with children how they used the internet generally, whether they were familiar with 'self-generated' image sharing as an issue, what they thought the motivations were for sharing, what young people liked and disliked about this practice, what (if any) issues it created, and how in general children could seek support. The toolkit also provided a series of exercises that prompted discovery of the kinds of information and support that children would appreciate receiving. The toolkit used generalised case studies and prompts that encouraged children to offer opinions on the issue rather than share personal experience.

Children were engaged in both individual, small group and whole group discussions, to encourage active engagement during data generation. The sessions were facilitated in a way that allowed the discussions to flow freely from an initial introduction of a question or topic (as outlined above) which was usually accompanied by a short-written exercise. Children were not pushed to answer questions or come up with responses on any give discussion topic and children in the sessions could choose whether to write down answers, engage in the group discussions, or just listen. The contributions from children reflected the free flow of discussion and ideas that came out in the sessions.

The methodology described above was informed by a robust safeguarding strategy and subject to an independent ethics review<sup>14</sup>. This was integral to our design of the sessions and the reason that sessions were focused on activities that elevated and surfaced children's views, ideas, thoughts, and opinions and which engaged them in a form of shared problem-solving – rather than asking about personal experiences. The safeguarding approach included background work in each country, which influenced the selection of schools worked with. Appropriate partner schools and organisations were selected on the basis that they had safeguarding processes in place and professional leads with a clear understanding of the issues who were able to offer appropriate follow up.

A clear referral pathway for any child protection concerns was agreed in advance in each location. As part of the child protection policy, the project team worked with partners to identify a choice of viable routes of support for children should they need them. Before starting the sessions, the children and young people were informed about safe spaces, how to create one and ensuring that the space remained one, and what to do if they did not feel safe. Children had recourse to support – and had options available to seek support following the session.

A fuller explanation of the methodology and our approach to engaging with children and young people safely can be found in Annex 1.

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<sup>14</sup> The methodology for this project was independently assessed through a research ethics review by Health Media Lab Institutional Review Board [info@hmlirb.com](mailto:info@hmlirb.com) / [www.HMLIRB.com](http://www.HMLIRB.com)

## Limitations of this study

This research sought to engage children and young people from very different community contexts – rather than seeking to be globally, nationally, or regionally representative.

By speaking to children aged 13-17, (divided into groups that were 13-15, and 16-17) this project is excluding the views of younger children whose increased exploitation via coerced production of self-generated sexual material is of significant concern.<sup>15</sup> This decision was made because it was felt that older children would be better able to safely reflect and share insights from their earlier childhood and would be more likely to understand and relate to the concept of 'self-generated' imagery. In addition, the researchers had greater confidence around their ability to engage children in a session with fully informed consent and to do so safely in the context of the wider constraints of this project.

This study was primarily designed to explore the sharing of voluntarily 'self-generated' material among groups of teenagers in schools rather than focusing specifically on children known to have experienced coercion. However, the study allowed scope for children to speak generally about all of the behaviours that they included within this definition and express their views about them. The study also recognises that even consensual, age-appropriate sharing can be exploited by offenders and therefore carries risks of non-consensual sharing or victimisation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See statistics from the IWF <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated> which found that 6 in 10 of their actioned reports showed the sexual abuse of girls between the ages 11-13 who have been groomed, coerced or encouraged into sexual activities via a webcam.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/> (p54)



## 5. What is known about child 'self-generated' sexual material

The definition of child 'self-generated' sexual material is a complex one that many professionals and policy makers are currently grappling with. This is partly because, as we explore below, the definition contains within it a such a broad range of relational dynamics, interactions, and image-sharing scenarios that it can now be said to account for a high proportion of the child abuse content currently being shared online<sup>17</sup>. The term 'self-generated' includes within it the content created within children and young people's peer or online relationships that may constitute a positive and consensual exploration of their sexuality. On the other hand, other 'self-generated' material may occur following unwanted pressure or harassment within relationships or even directly through the circumstances of grooming, exploitation, abuse and coercion by adults or other peers.

WeProtect Global Alliance's 2021 Threat Assessment<sup>18</sup> identified an increase in the sending of 'self-generated' material, drawing upon data and analysis from the Internet Watch Foundation in the UK.<sup>19</sup> The threat assessment reflects that this increase has occurred amidst uncertainty about how best to respond to the issue:

*"Child 'self-generated' material comprises an increasing proportion of child sexual abuse content... Recently the volume of 'self-generated' material has spiked dramatically. This escalation has been partly attributed to the 'perfect storm' created by the COVID-19 pandemic: children spending more time online, and reduced opportunities to commit 'in-person' abuse fuelling online offending and demand for imagery."*

It identifies the importance of understanding the range and diversity of young people's own motivations or reasons for sending 'self-generated' imagery. It also states the need to centre children's experiences and voices to properly understand this phenomenon. For example: "In such scenarios, harm is typically caused when imagery is (re)shared against a young person's wishes. Across 39 different studies involving 110,380 participants aged 12 to 17, 12% reported forwarding [another person's] 'self-generated' sexual image without [that persons] consent."

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<sup>17</sup> <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/wp-content/uploads/Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>

**Importantly, it concludes that:**

*“Long-term sustainable prevention will require considered approaches grounded in the complex experiences of children and young people grappling with self-discovery in the digital age. Given that sharing ‘self-produced’ sexual images is not uncommon and does not always cause harm, excessive focus on potential negative outcomes risks being dismissed by young people.”*

**The recognition of both prevalence of this phenomenon, the diversity of different dynamics it includes and the need to speak to children in ways that they recognise, and which connect with their own experience of this issue, underpins this research.**

## **5.1 Categorising different kinds of 'self-generated' material**

**For the purposes of clarity and consistency, this report uses the 2021 Global Threat Assessment definitions of ‘self-generated’ sexual material described below:**

***Non-sexual material is ‘self-generated’ content that is not sexual in nature but is misappropriated and used in connection with child sexual exploitation and abuse online.***

*This might include for example, a child semi-naked on a beach. Although the victims may be unaware, such material facilitates offender activity.<sup>20</sup> In some cases, direct harm is also caused to victims as a result of offenders manipulating images to appear sexual, and then blackmailing children by threatening to share them.*

***Voluntarily ‘self-generated’ material is usually shared between adolescent peers.***

*This category covers ‘self-production’ by adolescents only, because younger children cannot consent, and therefore ‘self-production’ involving them cannot be considered ‘voluntary’. In such scenarios, harm is typically caused when imagery is (re)shared against a young person’s wishes.*

***Coerced ‘self-generated’ involves the grooming of children to cause the creation of sexual imagery and has been linked to ‘capping’<sup>21</sup>. Children involved in ‘coerced self-production’ may not perceive themselves to be victims, and may potentially view their own actions as voluntary.***

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<sup>20</sup> See for example <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/pinterest-algorithm-young-girls-videos-grown-men-investigation-rcna72469> Such activity is also a violation of the rights of the child in the image even if they are not directly harmed.

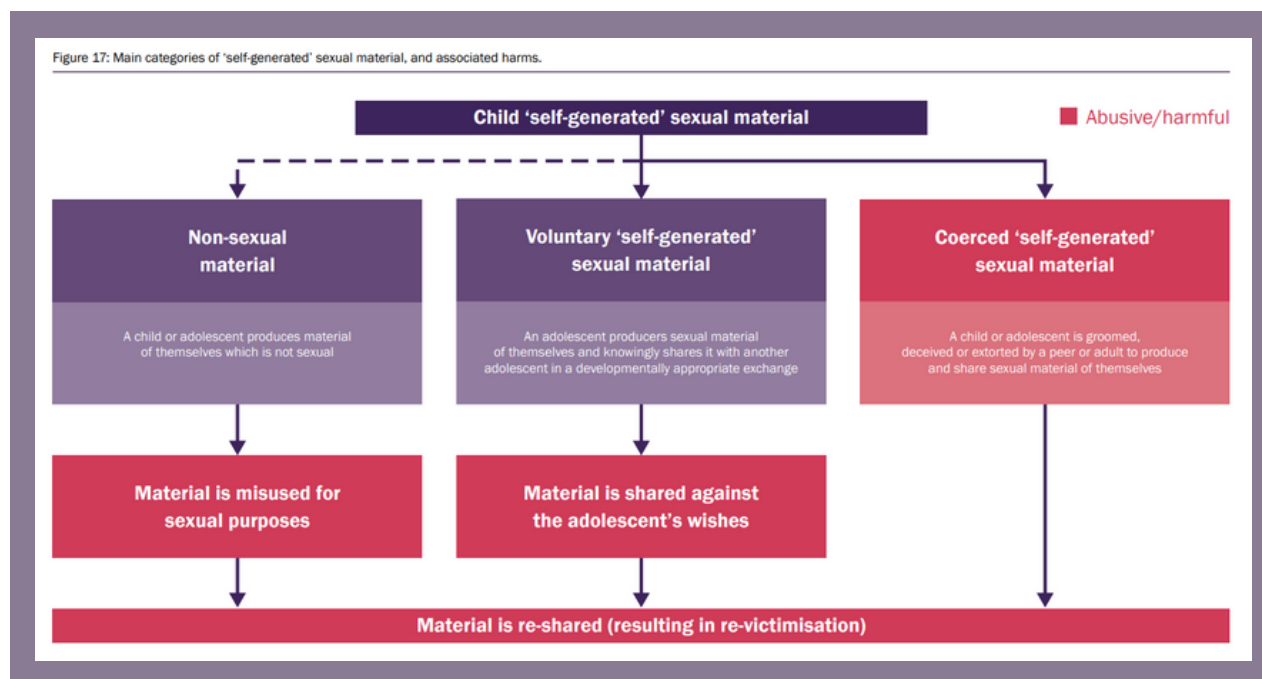
<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.inhope.org/EN/articles/what-is-capping?> Capping is the act of capturing imagery of videos of others performing sexual acts without their knowledge or consent. WeProtect Global Alliance also includes in the definition of capping the act of capturing innocuous imagery of children and using it for sexual purposes.

The recording might be created for multiple reasons:

- . To add to the individual’s personal collection of material they find erotic.
- . To share with others
- . To sextort the individual into performing further sex acts or transferring money



This is represented in Figure 17<sup>22</sup> of the Global Threat Assessment shown below:



In existing research literature, there is often a mix of terminology used and much of the literature refers to 'sexting' or 'sending/sharing nudes', which can include coercive or exploitative interactions alongside consensual content sharing.

In line with this typology, we seek to distinguish between content that has been created 'voluntarily' between adolescent peers and that which has been generated by grooming, coercion and exploitation throughout our analysis.

## 5.2 Research and data on the nature and prevalence of sexual exploitation and abuse online

### Reports from law enforcement and specialist agencies

A number of law enforcement agencies have reported a rise in online grooming and exploitation whereby children are coerced into sexual activity and the creation of 'self-generated' images and video as a result of that interaction.<sup>23</sup> The increase in online grooming has been identified as one of the drivers of 'self-generated' material creation.<sup>24</sup> A

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/> (p54)

<sup>23</sup> See for example Europol reporting pages 36 -41 Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2020 (IOCTA 2020) and page 25, IOCTA 2021. IOCTA 2020, available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2020#downloads> and IOCTA 2021 at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2021>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

2020 study from the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children in the US identified a near doubling in reports made to the CyberTipline regarding 'online enticement' (which includes an adult communicating with a child in order to sexually offend or with the intent to abduct the child)<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, a survey of law enforcement conducted in 2020 documents an increase in attempts by adults to contact children compared to previous years.<sup>26</sup>

There is also evidence of children creating 'self-generated' material in exchange for payment. Commercially motivated 'self-production' is when children create sexual images or videos of themselves in exchange for payment. Reports of commercially motivated 'self-generation' have emerged in a number of contexts<sup>27</sup>. In the Philippines, for example, authorities have uncovered instances of teenagers creating groups on social platforms to sell sexual images and videos "to fund expenses in online learning".<sup>28</sup> One such group amassed 7,000 members before it was taken down. In Cambodia, some young people (mostly girls) were found to be using their sexual material to sell cosmetic products online.<sup>29</sup> In these scenarios it appears that this self-commodification becomes a coping mechanism of poverty, scarcity and the closing of legitimate avenues of opportunity, but enabled by a broader context of the sexualisation of children online, and the minimisation of their sexual harm.

In 2021, the UK's reporting hotline the IWF – actioned 182,281 webpages that were assessed as containing 'self-generated' imagery compared to 68,000 webpages containing 'self-generated' images in 2020 – almost 2.5 times as many. The IWF reported that each of these 147,188 reports included a female child between the ages of 11-13<sup>30</sup>, who had been groomed or coerced into sending 'self-generated' sexual images or video. They report that frequently, these child sexual abuse images and videos have been produced using live streaming services, then captured and distributed widely across other sites by offenders.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup><https://www.missingkids.org/content/ncmec/en/blog/2021/online-enticement-reports-skyrocket-in-2020.html>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.datocms-assets.com/74356/1662373830-netcleanreport-2020.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> See for example <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-57255983>

<sup>28</sup> Faster Takedown of Online Sexual Abuse Sought (Manila-Standard.Net, 2021) Accessed from: <https://manilastandard.net/news/national/349129/faster-takedown-of-sexual-abuse-online-sought.html>

<sup>29</sup> WeProtect Global Alliance Global Threat Assessment <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

<sup>30</sup> Each report included a child within this 11-13 age band, and it is the age that the IWF see the most. These reports are compiled from proactive searches for this content as well as from taking reports from the public.

<sup>31</sup> Further information about the latest trends in self-generated child sexual abuse material identified by the IWF can be found in the IWF annual reports <https://annualreport2021.iwf.org.uk/trends/selfgenerated>



## **Research on the prevalence of online sexual harms<sup>32</sup>**

A number of recent large scale survey studies have found that globally children's exposure to online sexual harms is high. A 2021 survey of 5,000 18-20 year olds in 54 countries found that 34% percent respondents who had had regular access to the internet as children reported that they had been asked to do something sexually explicit online when they were teenagers that they were uncomfortable with and did not want to do, and that 29% had received sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know online.<sup>33</sup> The survey also found that of those surveyed who had regular access to the internet as children - 29% had had someone share their sexually explicit images and videos of themselves without permission. It should be noted that this is a significantly higher percentage than the majority of other prevalence studies on this issue.

Another substantial survey project exploring the prevalence of online sexual abuse across 13 South East Asian and African countries found across each country between 1-20% of children surveyed self-reported at least one form of child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the last year. Online child sexual exploitation was defined in the study as: someone offering money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos, someone offering money or gifts online to meet in person to do something sexual, someone sharing sexual images of you without your consent, someone threatening or blackmailing you online to engage in sexual activities.<sup>34</sup>

Recent national surveys in the United States, run by Thorn, found that the experience of online sexual interactions and encounters are highly prevalent among American children<sup>35</sup>. Its 2020 survey of 2,002 children from across the United States, including 742 9-12-year-olds and 1,260 13-17-year-olds, found a high level of exposure to risk on the major online platforms that children use. The survey identified that 40% had been asked for nude photos or videos by people online that they did not know (including 28% of the 9-12-year-olds). Thorn's most recent survey<sup>36</sup> with self-reported data from 1,141 9-17-year-olds from 2021 found that 22% of children reported having online sexual interactions with adults (the same percentage as kids who report having sexual interactions with peers their own age). Also from the US, a recent survey study of 2,600 young adults which sought to measure the

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<sup>32</sup> This term has been defined in the Economist Impact Study (<https://www.weprotect.org/economist-impact-global-survey/>) to mean a set of harmful behaviours considered as risk factors for potential or actual child sexual exploitation and abuse online. We assess a range of studies in this section that explore different kinds of harmful behaviours that children experience online.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/economist-impact-global-survey/>

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2022). Children's Experiences of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in 12 Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

<sup>35</sup> Online Grooming: Examining risky encounters amid everyday digital socialization (2021) [www.thorn.org](http://www.thorn.org).

<sup>36</sup> Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspective on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021, (2023) [www.thorn.org](http://www.thorn.org).

prevalence of multiple forms of online child sexual abuse found that 15.6 % of young adults in the US had experienced at least one type of sexual abuse online before the age of 18.<sup>37</sup>

### 5.3 Global evidence base on 'sexting' and the exchange of sexual content between peers

The research that specifically focuses on the 'self-generated' material between adolescents (often described as 'sexting' or 'sharing nudes') can be difficult to interpret as it often includes looking at potentially consensual actions alongside the harmful and exploitative elements of this behaviour, perhaps in part because they can be difficult to disentangle. In some quantitative studies on 'sexting', the definitions combine or conflate consensual and non-consensual acts and ignore the relationship context for these interactions making it difficult to fully explore and understand the different impacts these have.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the reliance on cross-sectional survey data, and a lack of longitudinal data creates difficulties in understanding the interrelationship with other experiences and risk taking more generally.<sup>39 40</sup>

Nevertheless, a range of research has been undertaken to better explore and understand the different motivations, behaviours and dynamics that comprise the exchange of 'self-generated' sexual material. Research shows that gender (males), older age (of adolescents), sexuality (LGBTQ+) and low socio-economic status predicts a higher likelihood of 'sexting'.<sup>41</sup> However, a number of studies suggest that some groups have more negative experiences, particularly girls (and especially girls from disadvantaged background)<sup>42</sup> as well as those from particularly marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ young people.<sup>43</sup> A study on 'Teens, 'sexting' and Risks' by the UK charity Internet Matters found that 'vulnerable groups' (children with one or more physical, mental, or social impairments or disabilities) are far more likely to be pressured or blackmailed to share 'nudes'.<sup>44</sup> The finding that more excluded and/or minority groups (especially sexual minority

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<sup>37</sup> Finkelhor D, Turner H, Colburn D. Prevalence of Online Sexual Offenses Against Children in the US. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2022;5(10):e2234471. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.34471

<sup>38</sup> Krieger MA. Unpacking "sexting": A Systematic Review of Nonconsensual 'sexting' in Legal, Educational, and Psychological Literatures. *Trauma Violence Abuse*. 2017 Dec;18(5):593-601. doi: 10.1177/1524838016659486. Epub 2016 Jul 19. PMID: 27436858.

<sup>39</sup> Investigating Risks and Opportunities in a Digital World, Innocenti Discussion paper 2020-03.

<sup>40</sup> 'sexting' and the Definition Issue - Yara Barrense-Dias, André Berchtold, Joan-Carles Suris, and Christina Akre (2017) *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 61, 544-554.

<sup>41</sup> Investigating Risks and Opportunities for Children in a Digital World. Innocenti Discussion Paper 2020-03

<sup>42</sup> Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

<sup>43</sup> Revealing Reality Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

<sup>44</sup> Look at me: Teens, 'sexting', and Risks (Internet Matters, 2021) Accessed from

<https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Internet-Matters-Look-At-Me-Report-1.pdf>  
06/05/2021311

groups) are more vulnerable to the pressure to send sexual images and its negative consequences has been replicated across a number of studies across a range of countries.<sup>45 46 47</sup>

### **Images shared without consent**

Research shows that the non-consensual experience of having images shared onwards without consent or sharing images onwards is a relatively mainstream element of the experience of 'sexting' among children and young people. A substantial statistical meta-analysis of 39 studies from multiple countries (22 in the United States, 12 in Europe, 2 in Australia, 1 in Canada, 1 in South Africa, and 1 in South Korea), looking at multiple forms of 'sexting' behaviour (with a total of 110,380 participants between the ages of 11-17) found that prevalence overall has increased<sup>48</sup>, and increases as youth age.<sup>49</sup> The statistical summary of these studies found that 14.8% of youths report sending and 27.4% percent of youths receiving 'sexts'. It also finds that 12.0% have forwarded a 'sext' without consent and 8.4% have had their 'sext' forwarded without consent.

### **Gender differences**

The finding that girls are more vulnerable to negative experiences in relation to 'sexting' has been replicated across a number of qualitative research studies.<sup>50 51 52 53 54</sup> These find that girls are more likely to be victims of coercive 'sexting' practices and put under unwanted pressure to send a 'sext'.<sup>55</sup> One study describes how "*girls were commonly judged*

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<sup>45</sup> An Exploratory Study of 'sexting' Behaviours Among Hetero-sexual and Sexual Minority Early Adolescents (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019) Accessed from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31473082/> 14/05/2021310

<sup>46</sup> Heterosexual, Cisgender and Gender and Sexually Diverse Adolescents' 'sexting' Behaviors: The Role of Body Appreciation Journal of Youth and Adolescence volume 51, pages 278-290 (2022)

<sup>47</sup> 'sexting', pressured 'sexting' and image-based sexual abuse among a weighted-sample of heterosexual and LGB-youth Computers in Human Behavior Volume 117, April 2021, 106630

<sup>48</sup> The year of study data collection demonstrated increase in the prevalence of sending a sext over time. Study publications ranged between the years 2009 and 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Madigan S, Ly A, Rash CL, Van Ouytsel J, Temple JR. Prevalence of multiple forms of 'sexting' behaviour among youth: a systematic review and meta-analysis. JAMA Pediatr. 2018;172(4): 327-335 [PubMed

<sup>50</sup> Burén, Jonas & Lunde, Carolina. (2018). 'sexting' Among Adolescents: A Nuanced and Gendered Online Challenge for Young People. Computers in Human Behavior. 85. 10.1016/j.chb.2018.02.003.

<sup>51</sup> How do adolescents experience 'sexting' in dating relationships? Motivations to 'sext' and responses to 'sexting' requests from dating partners – Lauren A. Reed, Margaret P. Boyer, Haley Meskunus, Richard M. Tolman and L. Monique Ward (2020) Children and Youth Services Review, 109,

<sup>52</sup> Physically distant, virtually close: Adolescents' 'sexting' behaviours during a strict lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic – Chelly Maes, Laura Vandenbosch (2022) Computers in Human Behaviour.

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Investigating-Risks-and-Opportunities-for-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> ECPAT (2021) "Everything that is not a yes is a no" A report about children's everyday exposure to sexual crimes and their protective strategies.

<sup>55</sup> Kernsmith, P. D., Victor, B. G., & Smith-Darden, J. P. (2018). Online, Offline, and Over the Line: Coercive 'sexting' Among Adolescent Dating Partners. Youth & Society, 50(7), 891-904.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X18764040>

harshly whether they sexted (e.g. 'slut') or not (e.g. 'prude') whereas boys were virtually immune from criticism regardless".<sup>56</sup> Girls were motivated by a desire for approval and social acceptance or even "fear they would lose their boyfriends".<sup>57</sup> Other studies that explore gender inequality identify the perception among young people that boys are entitled to view and share images of girls, and this is endorsed by male peers – whilst girls are still perceived as responsible for what happens to their images.<sup>58</sup>

A number of in-depth qualitative studies highlight just how sharply gender expectations can shape the practices of 'sexting' for girls. A study based in inner city London schools explores in detail how weighted negative experiences and consequences of 'sexting' are towards girls, and that while 'sexting' may be motivated by sexual pleasure its dynamics are often coercive and linked to bullying and harassment.<sup>59</sup> This study finds that:

*"Sexting' is not a gender-neutral practice; it is shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, family and school that fail to recognise the problem or to support girls'. The study argues that 'This creates gender specific risks where girls are unable to openly speak about sexual activities and practices, while boys are at risk of peer exclusion if they do not brag about sexual experiences."*

The study describes the children as worried, confused and upset about the 'sexting' pressures they face whilst being poorly supported by parents, teachers and others. This study argues that there are oppressive hierarchies around appearance and a damaging commodification of imagery by boys even within peer produced interactions.

Another study in the UK which surveyed over 5000 teenagers challenges the minimisation of 'sexting' as mere 'flirting' where it occurs between children of the same age identifies a broad range of harms that voluntary sexual image exchange introduces for already socially disadvantaged and disempowered girls.<sup>60</sup> It found that whilst the majority of children 14–16–

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<sup>56</sup> Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't...If You're a Girl: Relational and Normative Contexts of Adolescent 'sexting' in the United States – Julia R. Lippman & Scott W. Campbell (2014) *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 371-386.

<sup>57</sup> 'sexting': adolescents' perceptions of the applications used for, motives for, and consequences of 'sexting' – Joris Van Ouytsel, Ellen Van Gool, Michel Walrave, Koen Ponnet & Emilie Peeters (2017) *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(4) 446-470. <sup>58</sup> Setty E (2018) Young People's Attributions of Privacy Rights and Obligations in Digital 'sexting' Culture. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 4533-4552.

<sup>58</sup> Setty E (2018) Young People's Attributions of Privacy Rights and Obligations in Digital 'sexting' Culture. *International Journal of Communication* 12: 4533-4552.

<sup>59</sup> A qualitative study of children, young people and "sexting": a report prepared for the NSPCC – Jessica Ringrose, Rosalind Gill, Sonia Livingstone, Laura Harvey (2012) National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, London UK.

<sup>60</sup> Revealing Reality Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people

years-old had not shared a nude image of themselves - only 17 percent of girls and 11 percent of boys had done so. Girls were consistently more likely to have been targeted and asked to share with 34% of girls and 9% of boys asked to share a nude image of themselves when they were 13 or younger.

The study found that, for girls, pressure and social expectation were key factors with 46% of girls who sent a sexual image feeling pressured into it compared to 10% of boys. Girls were more likely to send an image out of feeling the need to prove they were not 'frigid' or to avoid a break-up. Meanwhile, girls were four times more likely to be sent an image of someone they did not know and did not want, and more likely to have images taken without permission and without consent and more likely to have them leaked. Girls from less privileged backgrounds have the worst experiences and suffer the worse consequences. The study found that this group were more likely to have shared because they felt under pressure to do so and less likely to say that it made them feel good about themselves or that they liked having positive comments.

For the boys in this study, image exchange was often about power status and value exchange with boys more likely to collect them, bait others to send them, and to leak them to their wider friendship group. This study found that leaking 'nudes' only had negative repercussions for girls and not for boys who gained status as leakers of images. Other survey studies suggest that while leakers of images are seen as responsible for negative outcomes - significant blame is also levied against the original sharer by both boys and girls. In this respect victim blaming attitudes appear to be common among both boys and girls.<sup>61</sup>

## **LGBTQ+ youth**

A range of research suggests sexual minority youth are more vulnerable to 'sexting' behaviour than heterosexual young people. When comparing 'sexting' behaviours between LGB and heterosexual youth, studies show that LGB adolescents are more likely to have ever taken, sent or received a 'sexting' image. LGB youth are also at higher risk to have experienced 'sexting' pressure.<sup>62 63</sup> Some studies suggest that LGBTQ adolescents potentially feel freer to express their own sexuality through 'sexting' rather than offline

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<sup>61</sup> [https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn\\_SG-CSAM\\_Monitoring\\_2021.pdf](https://info.thorn.org/hubfs/Research/Thorn_SG-CSAM_Monitoring_2021.pdf). This study found that in 2021, minors remained less likely to blame the person in the photo (40%) and more likely to blame the resharer (60%) in instances involving non consensually reshared imagery, across most age, gender, sexuality, and ethnic demographics

<sup>62</sup> 'sexting', pressured 'sexting' and image-based sexual abuse among a weighted-sample of heterosexual and LGB-youth - Joris Van Ouytsel, Michel Walrave, Lieven De Marez, Bart Vanhaelewyn, Koen Ponnet (2021) 117, Computers in Human Behaviour.

<sup>63</sup> An Exploratory Study of 'sexting' Behaviours Among Hetero-sexual and Sexual Minority Early Adolescents (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019) Accessed from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31473082/> 14/05/2021310

under scrutiny of heterosexual peers. It also offers these youth the opportunity to explore and establish their own sexual identity, which they are less likely to have the opportunity to do offline.<sup>64</sup>

### ***'Sexting' and mental health***

A recent overview study that considers the research on 'sexting' and depression identifies a positive association between depressive symptoms and 'sexting' behaviour.<sup>65</sup> However, not all the research finds this association, with an important caveat being around definitions used in different studies (as explored above) and the difficulty in disentangling the different experiences of consensual and non-consensual 'sexting'. Overall, the review found that 12 out of 14 studies noted a positive association between 'sexting' and depressive symptoms. Out of 8 studies looking at the link to anxiety, seven affirmed a positive association with anxiety. The review acknowledges that the evidence is difficult to assess conclusively and that the relationship with depression and anxiety may be bi-directional with depressive symptoms predicting 'sexting' but also potentially being an outcome of those symptoms. As above, this relationship will also be impacted and mediated by the presence of pressure, coercion, bullying or victimisation.<sup>66</sup>

An earlier literature review found significant relationships between 'sexting' and risky sexual behaviours and other adverse outcomes, such as the sharing of sexual content without consent, legal consequences, and negative mental health repercussions.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, research highlights an existing relationship between mental health or psychological health and online victimisation experiences, such as cyberbullying<sup>68</sup>, online dating violence or so-called 'revenge porn', which relate to and overlap with some non-

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<sup>64</sup> "It's not just sexy pics": An investigation into 'sexting' behaviour and behavioural problems in adolescents – Mairead Foody, Angela Mazzone, Derek Alan Laffan, Magnus Loftsson, James O'Higgins Norman (2021) *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> Part of the differences may relate to inclusion of consensual and non-consensual 'sexting' – the review uses Wolak and Finkelhor's conceptual framework of 'sexting'. According to these authors' typology, 'sexting' behaviours can be divided into two broad categories: aggravated 'sexting' and experimental 'sexting'. Aggravated 'sexting' behaviours encompass all types of 'sexting' that may involve criminal or abusive elements beyond the creation, sending or possession of youth-produced sexual content, including (1) adult involvement; or (2) criminal or abusive behaviour by minors. On the other hand, experimental 'sexting' behaviours comprise those instances that do not include abuse or coercion, whereby teens voluntarily took pictures of themselves to create flirting or romantic interest in others. See Wolak, J.; Finkelhor, D. 'sexting': A Typology; Research Center Crimes Against Children University New Hampshire: Durham, NH, USA, 2011. [Google Scholar]

<sup>66</sup> Medrano, J.L.J.; Lopez Rosales, F.; Gámez-Guadix, M. Assessing the links of 'sexting', cybervictimization, depression, and suicidal ideation among university students. *Arch. Suicide Res.* 2018, 22, 153-164. [Google Scholar][CrossRef][PubMed]

<sup>67</sup> Klettke, B.; Hallford, D.J.; Mellor, D.J. 'sexting' prevalence and correlates: A systematic literature review. *Clin. Psychol. Rev.* 2014, 34, 44-53.

<sup>68</sup> Fahy, A.E.; Stansfeld, S.A.; Smuk, M.; Smith, N.R.; Cummins, S.; Clark, C. Longitudinal associations between cyberbullying involvement and adolescent mental health. *J. Adolesc. Health* 2016, 59, 502-509. [Google Scholar] [CrossRef]



consensual experiences of 'sexting'.<sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> There is also an association between these experiences and suicide and having suicidal thoughts.<sup>71</sup>

### **COVID-19 lockdowns**

A recent theme to emerge from the literature is the potential impact of COVID-19 lockdowns. One study survey for 543 participants aged 12-18 based in Belgium explored the prevalence of 'sexting' during the pandemic. It found the prevalence to be high with 40.9% of the adolescents engaged in at least one type of 'sexting' and 'arousal needs' given as the most common reasons to 'sext'.<sup>72</sup> Analysis and discussion suggests 'sexting' became a way of dealing with emerging sexual feelings when denied intimate contact<sup>73</sup> and suggests it was also a way to deal with boredom and loneliness during a strict lockdown period.<sup>74</sup>

Further components of the research literature can be found at Annex 2. These explore research relating to the impact of digital design, policy and professional responses to 'self-generated' sexual material, what is known about effective educational approaches and what is known about parental responses.

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<sup>69</sup>Drouin, M.; Ross, J.; Tobin, E. 'sexting': A new, digital vehicle for intimate partner aggression? *Comput. Hum. Behav.* 2015, 50, 197-204. [Google Scholar][CrossRef]

<sup>70</sup>Bates, S. Revenge porn and mental health: A qualitative analysis of the mental health effects of revenge porn on female survivors. *Fem. Criminol.* 2017, 12, 22-42. [Google Scholar][CrossRef]

<sup>71</sup>Medrano, J.L.J.; Lopez Rosales, F.; Gámez-Guadix, M. Assessing the links of 'sexting', cybervictimization, depression, and suicidal ideation among university students. *Arch. Suicide Res.* 2018, 22, 153-164.]

<sup>72</sup>Physically distant, virtually close: Adolescents' 'sexting' behaviours during a strict lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic - Chelly Maes, Laura Vandenbosch (2022) *Computers in Human Behaviour.*

<sup>73</sup>How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting our sexualities? An overview of the current media narratives and research hypotheses. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2020), pp. 1-14, 10.1007/s10508-020-01790-z

<sup>74</sup>Common Sense Media 2020



# 6. Ghana

In Ghana we engaged with:

- 47 children between the ages of 13–17 from a school in an urban area of Accra.
- 50 children between the ages of 13–17 took part from a school in the Bono East Region of Ghana (a more rural area).

These groups were split by age into groups of 13–15-year-olds and 16–17-year-olds and further divided by gender so that we spoke to boys and girls separately.

## 6.1 Ghana: Views of children and young people

As identified above, we identified partner schools which we could work in where we had confidence around the safeguarding process and support mechanisms. We spoke to children in urban and rural schools to increase the diversity of experiences and perspectives. It should be noted however that although the Accra school was based in a city, many of the children at the Accra school were also from rural regions rather than urban areas. According to the school, around 50% of the children in the Accra school had come from lower-income regions around Ghana and were living in Accra only temporarily so that they could attend the school.

### **Internet use among children**

Children were asked about their internet and social media use generally – how and when they accessed the internet, what they did online, what they liked and disliked about it. None of the children we engaged with had access to a computer, tablet, or laptop. Their internet access was through a mobile phone – one which they owned or borrowed and shared with their friends and/or siblings.<sup>75</sup> The schools had no computers or internet access but 4G connection is widespread throughout the country. This was relayed as being common across Ghana.

Throughout the discussions, it was evident that there was a high level of engagement and enjoyment of using mobile phones and real enthusiasm for being able to connect with information, entertainment, and other people in this way. It was seen as an important opportunity and something that gave the children access to advice and information that could not access elsewhere in their lives. In general, all the groups in Ghana described a

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1060-growing-up-in-a-connected-world.html>



good range of positive opportunities around their internet use. A fear arising later from the discussions about 'self-generated' material was fear of a protective response that might lead to them losing access to their devices.

*"If you tell parents they could take your phone from you. You could lose your connection from the internet and have your phone taken." Boy, 15*

### **6.1.1 Motivations for sharing 'self-generated' sexual material**

Sessions started by introducing concept of 'self-generated' sexual material and asking children if they were aware of or familiar with this issue. Having identified that children were familiar with this issue, we then asked them to explain and frame the phenomena in their own words and describe how they think it happened in their country. The children identified that their term for this was mostly 'sexy selfies'. They felt that this was a significant issue for children in Ghana.<sup>76</sup>

In line with the methodology, children were not asked to share personal experiences or stories but were invited to work with us to analyse the key issues facing children based on their observations and knowledge. When asked about motivations the participants discussed a range of themes that are familiar from existing studies around the motivations and benefits of sharing images. These related to having fun, relationship building and feeling close to others. There was a discussion of the culture of the internet, the exposure that young people have to photos and images of themselves and others, and the normalisation of taking and sharing photos and images that are sexualised from their exposure to screens.

The young people were also thoughtful about their relationships and peer pressure, the pressure to be seen to conform and be included. They talked about how many of their peers used self generated images to seek affirmation, attention and affection online. In some cases it is also seen as a way to prepare for a relationship

*"The pictures could show someone what you look like with no clothes on before they start a relationship." Boy, 16*

They also talked through how some young people share for fun, for attention, for comments and compliments, and because their friends are doing it.

*"I know girls who want to feel good about themselves. They post sexy pictures on sites... like TikTok and Instagram because they want people to say they are beautiful." Girl, 16*

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<sup>76</sup> In all three countries the children talked more frequently about the sharing of sexual images than about sharing video content, but they did include both types in their discussion and did refer to live streaming and video content from time to time.

*"... For someone to say that you look beautiful, and I love you." Girl, 14*

*"They are doing it because their friends are doing it, so they want to." Boy, 16*

The negative sides of peer and relationship pressure were also raised. This negative expectation to share to please a partner and to avoid a breakup arose in one of the younger girl groups:

*"They could be forced by their boyfriends and bad peer group". Girl, 13*

*"They don't want their boyfriends to break up with them." Girl, 14*

However, the young people were divided as to the extent to which this occurred in Ghana in peer relationships or simply as part of 'flirting' in the build-up of a relationship with most of the older girls saying they did not consider this common. Some of the younger girls raised it as an issue, and some felt it was a way of strengthening and tying down a relationship - but for most the focus of concern from young people was on grooming and coercion:

*"I don't know many girls who feel pressured by a boyfriend to send a picture like this. But I do know girls who have been blackmailed to send a naked picture by people they know and also by strangers they have met online." Girl, 16*

### ***Emphasis on the impact of poverty and vulnerability to commercial exploitation***

The children in both schools raised repeatedly that they felt the key motivation for the children they knew sharing images was to generate income for themselves and their families. In explaining this, the children reflected on how the poverty of their communities made children vulnerable to commercial exploitation. They identified this as a significant risk of harm and common among the children and young people they knew.

This phenomenon was described and explored in discussion within the groups and identified as affecting both boys and girls.<sup>77</sup> The children and young people identified perpetrators of this exploitation as both local men and "white men from overseas" who sought to connect with children online.

*"There are people I know who have been paid to send pictures of them without clothes to white men they have met on Facebook. They are added as friends and then they are given money to send these pictures." Girl, 16*

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<sup>77</sup> It is important to note that none of the children we engaged with made individual disclosures. These discussions revealed concerning perspectives around the prevalence of child sexual exploitation, but it is important to note that these comments were not made in the context of individual experience but were about children's perceptions of the issues and problems created within their environments. However, given the strength of this issues raised collectively we debriefed with safeguarding leads in each school, planned follow up work and additional support with these groups.

*"There are people who give these pictures to men or boys in their community for money. We are very poor here so if someone offers money, girls will want to say yes." Girl, 15*

**They described friends and people they knew experiencing the impact of continuous harassment for pictures in return for money over a long timeframe as being hard to resist.**

*"Some girls would say no I am not interested, but the man will keep asking again and again and it can be hard to stay strong and keep saying no. It can be hard to say no to money." Girl, 16*

**Many respondents also talked of their awareness of the issue of parents or guardians compelling young people to take indecent images of themselves to sell to local or international men for money. This was seen as sad and unfortunate but regarded as something which happened in some families to provide money when they were in very difficult circumstances and had no alternatives. The children felt that those who were affected by this would be powerless to stop it since it was controlled by parents or carers:**

*"Their parents might ask them to do it to bring in some money into the house." Girl, 14*

**This was understood to be a distorted way of earning income but difficult for children to resist if it occurred at the behest of parents:**

*"I would not feel comfortable if my parent asked, but I couldn't say no." Boy, 16*

**This was regarded as a problematic and worrying issue and the groups expressed considerable empathy for children affected by these issues but struggled to see how the situation could change. The older boys reflected how economic circumstances could make children vulnerable. They also related that they saw this as a relatively low risk way of making money contrasting with some of the other ways they were expected to earn income – one example given was standing in traffic to sell things or wash cars which they knew was very dangerous.**

*"It's hard to get a job here...doing this would be easy money." Boy, 16*

**Whereas some understood that families were involved in some cases, others reflected on the impact of the lack of parental care for some of the children they knew:**

*"Some children [do this because they] do not have parents... they haven't been taught how to live their lives properly." Boy, 17*

It was notable that in all the groups in Ghana – when children were asked the open question about what they thought was the main motivation for sharing ‘self-generated’ material – whether amongst peers or with others – the issue of commercial exploitation linked to financial pressures was raised as the primary issue and driver for this behaviour. For some children, this contributed to the view that the response that they needed was one that created economic opportunities and tackled poverty. They wanted the government to resolve this situation by creating jobs and economic opportunities.

*“If there were jobs and other ways to make money, then children would not need to send naked pictures for money. But there are no jobs. Everyone needs money but there are not enough jobs, so they are forced to do this to get money for food.”*

The fact that image creation and sharing could be an income source was also cited commonly as a reason why children and young people would not report to a friend, family, or wider support network as it would mean they could no longer get money this way.

## **6.1.2 Potential consequences of sharing ‘self-generated’ sexual material**

### ***The extent and impact of being shamed in Ghanaian society and culture***

A key theme that arose in our discussions with children in Ghana was the experience of shame and distress for children that had their nude or intimate images shared or leaked to a wider group. In Ghana, this shame appeared to be shaped for many by the clash between the sexually permissive contact and culture online and the strict traditional religious morality of the broader community – which often included their parents.

For many children, the shame and stigma relating to having shared a ‘self-generated’ image could also be cast over their families and this public shaming could have real consequences for their life circumstances. The consequences could impact worryingly on their wider family stability and marriage prospects. This was acknowledged to be especially acute for girls – but boys also told of how shame would also affect them. In discussions in Ghana, any wider awareness of their involvement in image sharing was expressed to us as deeply shameful and problematic for girls and boys.

The children described the consequences of shame to child and family as potentially life changing. The girls group talked about how it would be perceived as an “abomination on your family”. All of the groups expressed that parents would generally be ashamed and angry with them with fears of being asked to leave the house and being cut off from the family as a consequence:

*"Parents might tell them to leave and not talk to them anymore. They might throw her out of the house." Girl, 14*

*"The parent would reject the child if they discovered they had sent a naked picture, so you must not tell." Girl, 16*

*"There is a fear for many children that they would be sent away if they told their guardian that they had done this." Girl, 17*

**The children also talked about shaming within the wider church community and were fearful of the attitudes of pastors who they felt would shame them rather than support them and that they might be made an example of to others:**

*"They would preach with it - they might preach about it as an example in a service." Boy, 15*

*"They might think that you don't follow Christ...they would think that you are not for Christ and throw you out." Boy, 14*

**Overall, they described the potential to be ostracised across their communities with devastating consequences:<sup>78</sup>**

*"A person might take their own life... their life would not be worth living as no one around them would want to know them anymore." Boy, 17*

*"Your life would be miserable once people know what you have done...There will be too much shame and you would not cope." Boy, 16*

*"They can be banished from the village for being a bad influence." Girl, 15*

**The young people identified a generational gap in the use and understanding of the internet – their parents were not part of the same internet-using culture and did not go online so it was seen as difficult for them to understand the context of 'self-generated' images or understand the motivations or vulnerability for children and young people when they were online.**

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<sup>78</sup> Children in this session were reflecting their views on these aspects of experiences rather than making individual disclosures. However, given the strength of these themes arising in conversation there was follow up with the schools. See Annex 1 Methodology



### 6.1.3 Difficulties seeking support and reporting

Children and young people expressed the view that those affected would be very unlikely to seek help or support even if they needed it. This was due to the fear of increasing the number of those who knew what they had done, as well as their perception of the distress and anger of the parental response. They indicated that the only people they would share their worries with were their friends.

*“The main reason girls would not tell anyone if they had sent a naked picture in Ghana is because they would feel that they would be in disgrace with their family and their community. Even if it had gone wrong and they were in trouble, they would keep this close to themselves, maybe tell their friends but they would really find it hard to tell adults in case it is spread across the community.” Girl, 16*

*“I do not think that any adult in Ghana would understand why a child would send a sexual picture to someone. They would definitely blame the child and punish them. Most adults are very judgemental here.” Girl, 14*

#### **Status and respectability**

The young people related that sending indecent images could also potentially impact on whether you were seen as a ‘respectable’ person, and, consequently, on marriage and future prospects. Much of their testimony reflected a clash between their online experiences and the conservative values and attitudes that were still prevalent in their offline social lives. They relayed how individuals involved in ‘self-generated’ image incidents might be deemed less able to marry ‘better people’ due to disgrace or shame on them and their family.

*“The person will not get a good place in society, and they may be called a prostitute.” Girl, 14*

*“They may not get a good marriage.” Girl, 15*

*“It brings shame on your family. Friends and relatives may stop having a relationship with you.” Boy, 15*

Sadly, some respondents relayed that those involved would be seen as sexually permissive and therefore would be more likely to become vulnerable to sexual assault:

*“You could be raped – more likely to be because of this.” Girl, 14*

## **The police response**

Children were asked about the potential for reporting such issues to the police. Generally, they were adamant that they would not go to the police in any circumstances. They described the risk of arrest even if they were a victim.

*"They would be worried that they [police] would arrest them. It is not a safe space to go."  
Girl, 13*

Overall, the view was that the police would not respond properly to reports, even in clear cut cases of grooming and exploitation. They felt the police would not punish a perpetrator who forced a child to send images of themselves, rather they would punish and shame the child.

*"They need to punish the people who did something wrong not the child who didn't know what they were doing." Boy, 17*

*"They should catch those who teach children to do these things." Boy, 14*

In contrast to formal resolution through the police, there were a number of references to limited police involvement with the families of perpetrators of grooming or the perpetrator themselves paying off the families of victims.

*"If someone tells that there has been a problem, the family will try to hush it up. They will not want the people to go to the police or to face justice, they would prefer to settle it within the family. The family would be paid to say sorry, and that is it and the girl will feel shame." Girl, 16*

## **6.1.4 Solutions and improvements**

### **Appetite for online safety education**

When the children were asked what solutions and improvements would help with these issues, they expressed a desire for education on these topics that would allow them to learn about and understand these issues better at school. They related that currently their input from school in relation to sexual education was limited to physical relationships and they had received very little internet safety education apart from a small number of sessions run by the Ministry of Education as an add-on to their usual curriculum. They explained these sessions had focused on the concepts of 'stranger danger' and warning them of the dangers of meeting with unknown men online – with an emphasis on foreign men. They felt this approach was too simple and not one that really understood their experiences, addressed their needs or the pressures they faced.

They gave examples of topics they wanted addressing – and indicated they wanted a

**broader education to help navigate and analyse what they encounter online:**

*"We need lessons on staying safe when sending pictures." Girl, 14*

*"They [the Ministry of Education] should advise and teach children how to critically use the internet." Boy, 15*

**The children and young people related that learning about these issues in schools would be useful:**

*"In school we learn and can listen to the teachers. If they tell us how to be safe on our phones and the internet, then people will listen, and bad things won't happen to children." Boy, 17*

**As the discussion unfolded it was clear that some respondents felt their teachers would need more information and knowledge about the complexities of being online themselves in order to be in a position to educate them:**

*"My teachers need to learn more about this in order to be able to teach me to be safe." Girl, 14*

*"My teachers use websites to help teach. It could work for this issue...If they could learn about this from the internet it would be good... Lessons about internet safety would be good." Girl, 13*

**They were also aware that there were cultural barriers to discussing the issues related to 'self-generated' material – despite them being common online:**

*"No-one talks about such intimate things here. We do not discuss sex or these kinds of topics at home and in school. Never this kind of thing." Girl, 14*

**It was clear that for many respondents, the absence of information in school had led them to seek advice and information directly online:**

*"I find information on the internet. TikTok taught me about many of these things." Girl, 14*

*"I follow people who help me to learn, influencers online who share information." Girl, 13*

*"It would be useful to have a website where I could find out more." Girl, 14*

**It was also evident when talking to children that they were not encouraged during any of the inputs that they had received to report things that had gone wrong for them online. When asked what issues they should report to teachers, parents, or external bodies – none of the children had an understanding that they 'should' report if something was to upset**



them or to put them at risk. The general sentiment was that this should be dealt with amongst friends or in extreme circumstances with the school, but they had never been told they should report or given a place to go.

### **Ghana Education Service**

When asked further about education and delivery in school the respondents identified the Ghana Education Service (GES) as the institution that should provide greater support for online safety education to be provided in schools.

Most of the young people were familiar with the GES and its role which they saw as providing schools with guidance and educational resources and they spoke confidently about how it was the role of the GES to make sure they could learn about online safety. They felt quite strongly that the GES needed to help provide schools with labs (computer rooms) where children could access the internet at school to talk them through how to learn to be safe. Whilst it was identified and agreed in the discussion that most images sent by young people are taken and sent on phones rather than from computers/laptops, the respondents were clear that they needed lessons in schools with the teacher to guide them.

*"They should provide labs for the school so that they can learn about the internet." Boy, 17*

### **The role of parents, guardians or carers**

Following this discussion, the groups were asked about the role of parents in educating and protecting their children (and also about whether education in schools could also educate and support parents in understanding and responding to online safety issues). The respondents indicated that they felt the knowledge and understanding gap between themselves, and their parents were significant – but they were unsure how to breach this, and unconvinced that this could occur through a school-based programme.

*"I think parents should learn about what we are doing [online] but I don't know who would teach them." Boy, 16*

Many of the children struggled to conceive of a digital parenting role for their parents. It was evident from the respondents that their parents or carers such as 'aunties' scarcely engaged with their digital lives in any meaningful way. It was clear from conversations with the school authorities that even the engagement between parents or carers and schools was extremely limited as a result of these adults' extended working hours. However, some respondents did feel that if their parents or carers had greater understanding, they would be able to support them in their online lives:

*"They would advise you if parents had more education. Parents need more education on this."  
Boy, 15*

*"They could set rules for when using the net. They should advise you to be careful about posting." Boy, 15*

*"There should be a set of rules and regulations on how to use the internet safely. They [parents] need to learn this so they can tell us." Boy, 13*

### **Social Media companies**

**Some of the respondents felt social media companies should take some responsibility for the sending of 'self-generated' indecent images and use technical means to prevent their proliferation online.**

*"They could remove the naked picture from the internet." Boy, 14*

*"Maybe TikTok, Instagram and Facebook should block those images. They know when it is a child who is naked. They know! They have ways to tell. So this picture should be taken down. So it never happens." Girl, 14*

**They also felt there was a role for companies in raising awareness of users of the risks and negative impact through campaigns:**

*"They could post images and information about side effects to deter you and stop you from posting again." Boy, 15*

**The girls, more than the boys, felt there was a role for social media companies in leading prevention efforts due to their understanding of the issues and their ability to reach and influence young people. The girls felt strongly that there needed to be more warnings given to children and young people when they were in online spaces to help remind them of the consequences of sharing indecent images. They also felt that influencers or young Ghanaians on popular platforms could post more videos about this issue, to help young people understand the risk and support them to say no.**

*"The companies like Facebook, TikTok and Instagram should run education videos for children and also their parents, we would listen to them." Girl, 15*

*"I would listen to someone like me on TikTok." Girl, 16*

### **How to improve the support available**

**A significant part of the discussion with children was centred around developing and defining the kinds of response that children affected by these issues might want and need.**

A key theme that arose repeatedly in discussions was about the need to change the culture of shame around sending indecent images.

*"It is important to change the shame culture. This is the most important change that needs to happen" Girl, 16*

The children discussed how the lack of confidentiality was a barrier to help-seeking. They explained that at present, if children tell an adult they have no choice or control over what happens to the information. They felt that reporting an image would increase their exposure.

*"Children cannot tell someone without saying their name - this will mean they cannot tell - because the family would be shamed. Girl, 16*

*"Many adults in authority are not discreet in Ghana. They will tell others who you are and what you have done." Girl, 14*

The children and young people felt it would be useful to have a confidential reporting service online and via helplines but pointed out that since the internet is not accessible to all, there would ideally need to be places children could physically visit.

*"I don't have a phone. I can only use my parent's phone. How would I call the number without my parents knowing?" Boy, 17*

They wanted somewhere where they could talk about these issues without shame and access support and guidance to help navigate difficult situations online.

*"The best thing the Government could do is to provide all children with a free support service to talk and report these issues. It is important that this is not just on the phone or online, it also needs to be a place children can go. Maybe this would be good in every community or school" Boy, 16*

Young people also indicated that they wanted a clearer and more standardised approach so they would know what would happen to their information if they reported or shared what had happened to them. This included knowing that there was a pathway of information sharing but that it was not simply shared with everyone across their communities. They also wanted adults to be well informed about the issues and focused on understanding children's needs and supporting them. Children felt that the lack of support available for children in difficulties was unfair:

*"Lots of people can help. It's not the young person's fault. They shouldn't be punished for this."*

## 6.2 Ghana: Reflections from professionals

In each country where participatory work with children was undertaken, a small number of interviews with adult professionals were also conducted to gain their insights into these issues and to understand some of the wider policy and practice context.<sup>79</sup>

In Ghana, the project team met with key educational staff from the schools and with officials from the Ministry of Education. These professionals shared their own experiences and perceptions of children's internet use and 'self-generated' image sharing, as well as of professional responses and the ways that Ghanaian society and culture influenced these issues. This is shared here to offer context to the discussions and responses from children.

The professionals explained that many of Ghana's children are living in poverty (especially in rural areas) and that often the basic needs of many of the children at their school were not met. In Accra, they explained that around 50% of the children in the school were not living with parents as they had come from poorer regions around Ghana and had been sent by parents to live with guardians (often not known to them or their parents) to go to school in Accra. There was no formal arrangement or paperwork that accompanied this situation, and children often had to fend for themselves in a household in which the guardian worked long hours and was rarely home. The children in this study talked of food poverty and sanitation needs not always being met.

Those who were living with family also often had a low level of support. In both the schools in this study, the level of engagement with the school from the parents was reported to be low due to the necessity of parents spending their time working to earn and not having capacity to actively engage with school. It was explained that many of the Ghanaian parents of the children we spoke to were not in a position to offer their children much in the way of guidance or support in their online lives:

*"Those with parents, you have a little bit of parental guidance, so their lifestyle is checked. But some with parents also lack this parental guidance. The parents leave at dawn in the morning and come back late in the night, so the child is all alone. They say to us "I watch what I want to watch. I browse the sites I want to browse. I do whatever I want to do, by the time my parents come, I am asleep." Ministry of Education official*

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<sup>79</sup> It should be acknowledged that due to the time and resource constraints of the study the research team were only able to carry out a small number of these interviews and did not have the opportunity to speak to a wide range of officials from different ministries. It is also a limitation that the team were not able to interview the relevant national police authorities.

The professionals identified that the sending of 'self-generated' images was a big problem in many schools and in the wider community linked to the vulnerability of the children to commercial sexual exploitation.

*Here, everything you have to do here, in the schools, going to school, coming back, eating and everything, you have to use money. So, once they are out there and they are not able to do what their friends are doing because they don't have enough money. So, they would rather want to do something that will gain them more money."* Ministry of Education official

When asked about peer-on-peer interactions – they felt this happened but was a less significant or prevalent issue:

*"Yes, they do, they do it. But it's not regular as like those older men who are outside the school. That's a great issue here."* Ministry of Education Official

The professionals we interviewed identified shame within the family and community as the biggest driver for not reporting issues relating to 'self-generated' sexual material, in common with any issues relating to sexual abuse or exploitation. They described cases when children as young as 14 had dropped out of school as a consequence of being exploited online and subsequently shamed in the wider community. They felt it was common for children not to speak out to get help for fear of the consequences to them and the fact they would be blamed. They pointed out that children living in fostering arrangements would likely be sent back to where they came from. They also pointed out that children were often actively silenced by their parents:

*"Formally when those issues happen and the child wants to report, some parents even shut him or her down, in our language they say "Ye dinn" meaning you should keep quiet, you are trying to tarnish the image of an adult."*

Some professionals felt that the consequences were particularly severe for girls, with girls more likely to be banished from their family or to drop out of school. However, they also identified that this exploitation affected boys too.

Going to the police as a solution was met with a high level of scepticism among the professionals. The view was shared that if a proper process is followed, it is likely that instead of prosecution (in the case of abuse) the perpetrator would pay the family rather than suffer the shame of seeing the case go through the courts.

*"They have a desk for Child Protection. You go there and it's like, this one knows this person, there's an issue, calls are made, and the issue is dropped."*

There was also discussion that the police would not have the proper processes or understanding of 'self-generated' sexual material to deal with these issues appropriately. It would also be too public for many families:

*"Most of them do not like going to the police station. Everybody will hear that you've been to the police station."*

**These professionals wanted greater access to social justice on behalf of children:**

*"For now, it is gradually changing as education is going on and you hope in some years to come, that even the child will be able to stand up and say that you know this was wrong and something should be done right."*

The professionals discussed the need for more guidance for the education sector (alongside other professional groups) on this issue across Ghana with models of best practice responses offered for different kinds of cases. It was acknowledged that currently there is no standardised response or set of responses for different kinds of cases, and no overarching guidance to help determine practice. Currently reporting processes are not managed from a local authority level, rather by individual schools - and the Ministry of Education indicated that this required an improved focus in policy and guidance. Other professionals also raised the lack of education on these issues in schools.

*"No, it is not part of the subjects that are taught in the schools. Children get information about this from elsewhere it is not in classrooms - these things are not discussed. In our culture, it is not easy for a grown-up person to discuss sex even with the children in the house. It is not done but because our children have access to social media, they get those things even before their parents tell them."*

*Headteacher, Ghana*

**Another teacher also discussed the challenges of offering sex education to the children in his care:**

*"This issue of sex education within our culture we don't have...we don't have families sit with their children and giving them such education and what's normal to go about their days. That has been the trend... the intention was to incorporate it into curriculum however we have these social groups that have raised serious objections to it that it is going to exploit them, and encourage certain behaviours which our culture does not permit... I think it was the conversation behind it, I think it was taken out of the curriculum." Deputy Headteacher, Ghana*

**This teacher went on to argue that the education needed to be provided in school to ensure that it is reasonable quality and to ensure that they support children and young people:**

*"I think we have the responsibility as they bring their children to us, we have a responsibility then we also have a civic responsibility as a culture because if it is not happening somewhere in the school it is happening somewhere else. As a country as a whole, we need to talk about it, because we are supposed to be using technology to improve our lives but it's been used for much worse things."*

*Deputy Headteacher, Ghana*

### **Shared access to devices**

Not all of the children in this study had their own mobile device, and it was common for the children we spoke with to share phones within a peer group and take turns in their use. The professionals spoke about the ways that this sharing of devices could enhance the risk to children by taking away the full choice provided by having a personal device. There was more risk that children would leave texts and images available for their peer group to see because they did not have sole access to their device. It was also suggested that in some cases having more limited access to devices potentially also intensifies the desire to perform acts that will impress others or make them feel included and accepted online.





## 6.3 Ghana: Summary of findings

### ***Motivations for sharing***

When asked openly about children's motivations for sharing self-generated material (whether coerced or voluntarily shared) the children were able to come up with a good range of reasons why children might share for fun or as a positive part of relationships, alongside persuasion or pressure. However, the groups of children that we spoke to were clear that they thought that the key reason for boys and girls in sharing these images in Ghana was exploitation for money and they spoke about this repeatedly.

### ***Silencing and shame***

The conversations with children in Ghana appeared to find that many of their experiences of being online, and particularly in dealing with issues relating to 'self-generated' images, appeared to clash with the traditional cultures and structures in which they live. It was striking that there is a generational gap in terms of online experiences, with children and young people relaying that they would like to be supported by their parents, but unsure if this could realistically happen given the generational divide between themselves and their parents in relation to internet use. The structural issues relating to parents' socio-economic situation were also flagged by professionals as an essential barrier to parents being able to provide support.

### ***Reporting***

The children talked about their reluctance to report issues relating to 'self-generated' images because of the consequences of wider exposure and the lack of confidentiality and control of information within existing systems. Professionals also relayed that they struggled to get authorities to take forward child sexual exploitation cases and to get justice for children. This is despite the ongoing work in Ghana to seek to improve the child protection system and access to justice for victims and survivors (see Annex 3).<sup>80</sup>

### ***Identifying solutions and improvements***

When working with children and young people to identify solutions they came up with many ideas and suggestions. The children and young people wanted a more relevant and up to date education to be available to them in schools – with teachers that they liked and trusted educated to deliver this. They wanted better information to be provided to them on social media platforms that they used as well as better technical responses to the spread of 'self-generated' sexual material from the platforms themselves. They also wanted access to confidential support.

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<sup>80</sup> [www.unicef.org/ghana/prevention-violence-and-abuse-against-children](http://www.unicef.org/ghana/prevention-violence-and-abuse-against-children)

# 7. Thailand

In Thailand we engaged with:

- 33 children between the ages of 13-17 from a large international school in the centre of Bangkok. These engagements were led in English. The children were primarily Thai children who could speak English from higher income Thai families, some were from a Thai/ expatriate mixed home, and some of these children were from families who had emigrated to Thailand.
- 40 children between the ages of 13-17 from a government school in a suburb of Bangkok. These engagements were led by the research team working closely with a team of translators who were experienced in working with children and who had been trained on the research methodology and purpose.

These groups were split by age into groups of 13-15-year-olds and 16-17-year-olds and further divided by gender so that we spoke to boys and girls separately.

## 7.1 Thailand: Views of children and young people

The children studying in these two schools were from very different social groups. The children attending the international school were from higher-income families and appeared to have a high level of digital access in their home lives. The school itself had a comprehensive digital literacy programme.

The Government school was run by the Ministry of Interior. Many of the children at the school were the children of migrant workers who had moved to Bangkok for work from the rural regions around the city. These were children of lower-income Thai families with parents working long hours in construction or other low paying jobs. Most of the children we engaged with in this school, worked long hours in employment following their work during the school day.

### 7.1.1 Motivations for sharing 'self-generated' sexual material

We discovered that children in the Thai international school referred to 'nudes' or 'sexting' to cover generically the sharing of all forms of sexual content. The Thai speaking children in the Thai Government school tended to use a Thai term which translated literally as 'sexy photos', but which covered photos and videos where children are naked.

Children in all of our Thai groups were familiar with the sharing of 'self-generated' sexual material and talked about sharing images in relationships as relatively commonplace and children engaging in and taking a risk with this because they trusted their partner not to share their image on without consent.

*"I think this happens a lot in relationships in Thailand." Girl, 14, International School<sup>81</sup>*

The motivations they discussed included young people's desire to have fun and to flirt, the impact of peer pressure and being seen to be doing what others are doing, as well as the need for affirmation and validation from others.<sup>82</sup>

*"They might send them to others to get attention. Or even perhaps for more followers on social media, or more likes." Girl, 14, International School*

*"To increase self-confidence when people give compliments." Girl, 14, Government School*

They also discussed the impact of the immediacy of the technology encouraging decisions in the moment:

*"Social media is a fast platform where people do not wait to decide. It can be a sudden unthoughtful action but as soon as images are shared, they can be distributed and shared on quickly. This happens a lot in Thailand." Boy, 16, Government School*

The children and young people also identified the ways in which children and young people might feel pressure in their relationships, and how it is possible to be taken advantage of:

*"People might feel pressured to do it...The communities that people are surrounded by could pressure them. Their friends or people around them." Girl, 13, International School*

*"They send pornographic photos to please their friends. Sometimes you can be secretly shot and filmed." Girl, 14, Government School*

Some Thai children also recognised genuine feeling of excitement, pleasure, and connection:

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<sup>81</sup> Due to the significant differences in background between the children at the two schools we have indicated whether children are from the International school or from the Government school in this section.

<sup>82</sup> Our discussions with the children in Thailand aligned reasonably well with the recent data on sexting from the Disrupting Harm Thailand country study. This found that 9% of internet-using children in Thailand reported having shared their naked images or videos online in the last year. Those that had shared their images or videos provided a range of reasons for doing this including: worry that they would lose a relationship (28%); being in love (23%); trusting the other person (23%); and being threatened (17%).

*"Sometimes it's an emotional in the moment feeling – sometimes they just send them because they want to send them, and it feels good. At other times they might feel compelled to do it. We cannot tell anyone else." Girl, 15, Government School*

*"They want to try a new thing because they want to feel like this and try it to see what it feels like." Boy, 14, Government School*

**One young person described the normalisation of sending these images for a lot of Thai children and young people:**

*"Often children send photos because in their environment it feels normal to send them. Normal to send a nude image because of the environment they have grown up in. The sender has sent nude pictures of themselves, and others and they do not feel guilty." Girl, 15, Government School*

**The young people were familiar with the issue of abuse and having their images leaked:**

*"I have direct experience through my cousin who found a picture of herself being shared on social media after having sent it to a boy. It was very upsetting." Girl, 13, Government School*

**They also discussed how sometimes unawareness that privacy or safety settings can be overridden can contribute to this:**

*"Sometimes you can send an image from Snapchat, you think it will be opened and gone, but people screenshot, and they also can zoom in on your photo and use another phone, or Photo Booth to still take an image of the photo." Girl, 16, International School*

**They also understood that it was common for this practice to be linked to commercial sexual exploitation and grooming:**

*"The sender can feel compelled to send the images sometimes. We cannot tell anyone else. It's common for children to be compelled by strangers. on the internet." Girl, 14, Government School*

**In these two schools, the children overall placed less emphasis on commercial exploitation than the young people in the two schools in Ghana – although there was a clear awareness of this happening, and significant emphasis placed by the boys in the Government school. However, it was not linked by any of the children to parental involvement.**

*"Some people make money from selling them on social media to strangers who are interested in buying nude photos." Boy, 17, Government School*

*"Sending a clip or image and selling it on Only Fans. So many people do this. People aged 15 are doing this." Boy, 14, Government School*

**This was again different at the international school:**

*"In the international school, most of us are wealthy, so money wouldn't be the driving factor, it's more for validation." Boy, 16, International School*

### **The impact of gender**

**A theme which emerged particularly from the conversations with girls in the international school was around the currency for boys in terms of obtaining or collecting images from girls.**

*"[Girls are] discussed in group chats, especially the boys group chats - even if they do not say that you sent a photo, they may hint at it to receive praise from other boys." Girl, 16, International School*

**The groups of older girls in the international school had a particularly extended discussion about how they felt gender and double standards impacted on these issues and outcomes. The girls in these groups identified a double standard where stigma and shame affect girls, and pointed out that they face pressure and negative judgement whether they share or not.**

*"It's a no-win situation - if you do not send the nude, you are a prude, if you do send it then you are sexualised.... You could be stereotyped as someone who is overly sexual, or someone who would have sex before marriage, even though sharing a photo doesn't mean that you are sexually active." Girl, 17, International School*

**There was also a discussion about how the broader media contributes to this pressure to share but also the negative judgement either way.**

*"There is pressure to be seen as attractive and to meet expectations. There is a view that you are valued for your body these days - especially in the media - you're either a whore or a housewife." Girl, 16, International School*

**At the same time, some of these girls were keen to draw a distinction between the act of sharing the images - and its subsequent misuse.**

*"Is [sexting] really a problem?" Girl 16 to peers "Sometimes it's not as bad as you think it is, it's about what happens to the images [afterwards] that is bad" Girl, 16*

**These conversations about pressure and gender difference were not replicated to the same degree in the other groups. The older girls were able to reflect and wanted to articulate this aspect that they felt was unfair. They also agreed with one another that there was a difference between the act itself which some felt brought positives, and the subsequent negative consequences of having images shared or leaked.**

## 7.1.2 Potential consequences of sharing 'self-generated' sexual material

All of the young people we spoke to were very aware of the different ways sharing nude images could go wrong and the subsequent consequences of this. They were very aware of bullying where images were shared onwards and indicated that images were often quickly reshared in order to bully others. The young people talked mainly about negative consequences in terms of the impact that negative comments about the image or behaviour could have on children and young people's self-esteem and mental health. The children in all of these groups talked repeatedly about the consequences of 'gossip' and the impact on reputation.

*"Gossip and word of mouth will spread this. People will talk about it and spread rumours. This happens a lot." Boy, 13, Government School*

*"This issue can cause mental health issues, stress and anxiety, even suicide. Suicide in Thailand has been an issue in the past caused by stress and anxiety."  
Boy, 17, Government School*

The children and young people described the impact of gossip in contributing to individual children's shame and distress. This was described as being not only oppressive in a school context but also spreading beyond specific schools via parents and other social groups. The young people also felt it was unfair that the shaming was so focused on the sender, rather than on those that receive and then leak the images. As per the discussion above girls raised that the shame was more likely to fall on girls, whilst boys were more likely to be the ones to leak the images:

*"There is an unfair disproportionate negative impact on, and consequences for, the person who shares the image, vs the people who pressured them into taking it and sharing it without their permission." Girl, 16, Government School*



## 7.1.3 Difficulties seeking support and reporting

### Parents, guardians and carers

The young people indicated that their parents and carers do not tend to understand their online lives and tend to be hostile to technology. They therefore are not in a position to guide and support children in their online use. The children in the independent school in particular expressed frustration about this and indicated that they would be unlikely to seek support from parents or carers because they had no understanding of their children's digital lives, interest or priorities.

*"Parents need to see the positive side of tech and then trust us." Boy, 13, International School*

*"Because of the age gap, this generation wouldn't understand. Thai parents tend to be older, so they don't get it." Boy, 13, International School*

*"They always blame your phone for everything bad that happens. You're on your phone too much or drink some water is the answer to everything." Girl, 17, International School*

The young people explained that they would be particularly unlikely to seek the support of parents or carers to resolve issues arising from 'self-generated' image sharing. This was partly because of a disconnect around all aspects of their digital lives but also because 'self-generated' images were not something it would be possible to talk about openly. They explained that:

*"Surrounding people – especially their aunt or uncle and family will judge. In our culture people are not open about sex so when they share images – they won't have confidence to talk about it when things go wrong." Girl, 14, Government School*

*"I would never go to my parents. Parents would make me feel ashamed and would be angry. They would not comfort me." Girl, 15, Government School*

The young people described how these kinds of behaviours on the internet clashed with the cultural ideals of Thailand. They were aware of this disconnect:

*"Ideally, Thai people are expected to be very reserved and behave themselves. It would also cause a bad reputation to the school." Boy, 14, Government School*

*"It is against the moral ethics in Asian culture." Boy, 13, Government School*

This linked to shame and reputation for the whole family:



*"They don't tell parents because they are scared of rejection and neglect from parents and families, particularly where families may own successful businesses that the child may inherit in the future." Girl, 15, International School*

*"Thai society and Asian parenting may make it tough for young people to tell anyone. They don't talk about these things, and they don't want to disappoint their parents." Girl, 15, International School*

**It was also felt that parents and carers would not support them, and asking for help with these issues would cause conflict:**

*"People don't tell because they feel embarrassed and feel that it is their own fault, so they won't open up to family... They are scared that their parents won't understand and will scold them and hit them." Girl, 15, Government School*

**Although there was consensus among all the groups we spoke to that they would be unlikely to turn to their parents or carers and that they would need to seek support elsewhere – the children and young people did want this to change and wanted to be able to speak to their parents or carers:**

*"If I tell them they will cause conflict. It would cause rages in the family, and it would cause a lot of stress...The family environment is very important. Please try to make sure that families become more of a safe zone so that children can share their problems." Girl, 15, Government school*

*"My sister would be a better person to tell if it happened because she's of the same generation. She may have already experienced this issue and so she could help." Girl, 14, International School*

**One of the reasons that parents and family did not represent a safe space for the children and young people to share issues or problems around 'self-generated' image sharing was because of the impact this behaviour would be perceived to have on their families' own reputation. Sadly, this was felt to be the main driver to care giver responses to these issues rather than concerns about their children's justice, safety or wellbeing. It also prevented children from reporting in the first place, or telling their parents or carers, and if they did tell it was felt that many would be likely to shame or silence children rather than seek outside help as reporting the problem externally would make it known to others and bring greater shame on the family.**

*"Sometimes parents care more about their reputation than the child and the child will feel that they are all alone." Boy, 16, Government school*

**This was a very common feeling among the groups we spoke with, however, the young people recognised that there were differences between families:**

*"It really depends on the individual families. Some are very conservative families. Some parents could understand their children, others don't." Boy, 17, Government School*

## **Police**

**The children in both groups were very unlikely to report issues to the police as they felt police were not trustworthy and were often uninformed.**

*"They are most likely not to help you. If you report the problem, they would ignore it, unless you pay them money." Girl, 13, International School*

*"The police, to me, isn't really a source of help when I think of finding support or guidance on this issue. I feel like they wouldn't understand and fully comprehend the situation with little to no knowledge about mental health or wellbeing." Girl, 13, International school*

*"We wouldn't go to the police. We have a big problem because there isn't any trust and we are afraid of them." Boy, 16, International School*

**The children and young people were generally aware that 'self-generated' images were illegal in Thailand and so that any involvement with indecent images was illegal. They were aware that they could be criminalised even if they were a victim of grooming or harmful onward sharing. This meant that police involvement risked escalating the issues and making them worse (due to the strict laws on explicit content).**

*"It is illegal to send these types of images in Thailand. The police would cause more problems than they would solve. They are also conservative, and they may even charge you if you reported." Girl, 15, International School*

*"Teachers would have an obligation to go to the police about this. Sometimes there are situations when a teacher won't go to the police because they don't want to ruin the reputation of the school. They fear they may be blamed for the child's actions." Boy, 14, Government School*

**The children and young people at both schools felt it was unfair that police processes potentially blamed and criminalised child victims. They also thought the police would act corruptly.**

*"We are afraid of consequences of reporting to the police because in Thailand, it's illegal to send any nude photo. There was a case last year of some boys being arrested for sending a video but also the girl in the video was arrested which is really unfair... In [dealings with the police] it's not about who is in the wrong, it's who has the most money." Boy, 16, International School*

## 7.1.4 Solutions and improvements

The young people in both school settings identified that they would welcome a more comprehensive educational offer about online safety and online issues. In the independent school, the high expectations of parents and carers, and pressure on the school to ensure academic success meant there was very little in the curriculum that covered these issues – especially in the later years of school. In both schools the pupils identified that the relationship they had with their teachers was mainly based around their academic progress and that the sources of social or mental health support that were available in school were not seen as approachable for this issue.<sup>83</sup>

They felt it would be helpful to have more education on online safety provided in schools as part of the curriculum:

*“They should set up courses to teach children different common issues in teenagers lives including online issues they are facing.” Girl, 13, International school*

*“They should provide lessons about online safety in the form of open discussion about issues. These harms need to be destigmatised.” Boy, 16, International School*

*“I feel like a lot of online safety information at school is out of date.” Boy, 14, International School*

**As part of this some young people identified that they wanted support from peers and from other young people as this would be more likely to be effective and helpful:**

*“Young people, educating each other informally could really help, in a space that allows for conversation. The gender of groups should be the same so children can speak openly.” Boy, 16, International School*

*“Governments do not understand young people’s experiences. Young people understand other young people better. We might be able to help each other more.”  
Boy, 17, International School*

The children and young people in the Government school also wanted more understanding and responsivity from the Education system. Some of these pupils said they would seek support from teachers they liked and trusted, but the limitations of the education within the school programme was evident:

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<sup>83</sup> We worked in schools where there were clear routes to further social and emotional support for children but they relayed that they would be unlikely to use them to report this issue.

*"For the school programme we don't get education on this - but in our class the teacher printed out some information on being safe online and it was printed out and put at the front of our classroom so that we can read it." Girl, 14 , Government school*

**In a similar way to the children in Ghana, the children identified that they wanted more education and information to be available within and via schools. They saw the school system as the key place to provide education for them as civil society organisations were mostly 'too far away from us' and they respected their schools and teachers.**

**The children and young people wanted their parents and carers to receive this education too, so that they could understand the benefits of the internet and also have a more open mind about what children do online and help them with some of its the challenges. They wanted parents and carers to know and understand more about their online lives - including a greater understanding of the pressures and motivations behind 'self-generated' image sharing so they could support them if things went wrong.**

**There were lots of comments about educating parents:**

*"Parents need to use apps and socials to understand what we are going through. They need to get some knowledge about how we use tech to help support us." Girl, 16, Government School*

*"They need to find a way to talk about the issue rather than just punishing [children]... Educate parents on how this problem can really affect their child's feelings and to understand more about the child's perspective." Girl, 15 Independent School*

**The young people also wanted support in schools for when things went wrong and stronger parameters around confidentiality. Currently, they stated they would be unlikely to seek external help due to the gossip and rumour spreading that occurs in schools when their information is shared. The independent school had a school counselling service, but the young people felt that although this was intended to be confidential their information was shared unnecessarily. The young people felt strongly that there needed to be an emphasis on confidentiality of support spaces before young people would feel that they could report.**

*"We repeatedly say that please keep the information I tell you confidential [but it is still shared]." Girl, 15, International School*

*"In school I signed a confidentiality agreement with a counsellor and the next thing, my friends and others know." Boy, 16, International School*

**There were similar feelings about the lack of confidentiality at the Government school:**

*"Teachers will gossip amongst other teachers and tell our parents, we might get expelled. They will never think of us in the same way again." Boy, 13, Government School*

*"Ethically, there is confidentiality from counsellors, but actually there is none. They are very similar to teachers. They give counselling but don't keep it private. That's why there's no trust there." Boy, 14, Government School*

### **Online support**

Many of the children spoke about wanting more education and support from social media platforms and online services so that they could learn within the online environment. Some expressed that they thought this was the most realistic and effective way of educating their generation. They wanted to be able to easily seek advice and knowledge on this issue online on platforms. They also felt that a website or phonline could be helpful, but it would need to be well advertised.

*"Lots of people would use TikTok to learn about this issue and like to be learning from other people my age." Girl, 14, International School*

In contrast to this they were negative about reporting leaked images to platforms and felt that platforms needed to be more responsive.

*"Some platforms use AI systems, and they don't really respond to the needs of the situation. Really multiple people need to make a report for something to be done by the platform. Mainly they will ignore the report." Girl, 16, International School*

### **A more child-centred approach**

In general, the young people wanted a more child centric and supportive response to the issues and to challenge the humiliation and shame culture:

*"I think the surrounding people – the family and friends should try to accept them and be willing and ready to help rather than humiliate them more. I think personally that those who send images should receive help and not face the humiliation and shame that they do."*

*Girl, 14, Government school*

*"[Parents and carers] need to be more empathetic and less demanding and listen to their children before making a judgement and understand the world is moving forward. They had a very different childhood to us." Girl, 17, International School*

The children wanted a more empathetic, thoughtful, and responsive approach with less victim-blaming. It was striking that the young people wanted to be able to talk through these issues and seek help from the adults in their lives without overwhelmingly negative consequences as a result. In Thailand, the children felt there were a range of negative and harmful consequences those who may have created or shared a sexual image, and that help seeking could make this worse.

## **Legal and police reform**

Linked to the above, the young people in the international school felt that the current Thai laws on children sending images should be reformed – and that there should be an emphasis on supporting victims:

*“They should deregulate harsh laws and consequences that are really unnecessary and change the law on pornography and nudes.” Boy, 16, International School*

*“The laws need to be changed so that children are not charged for these things as though it’s a crime.” Girl, 17, International School*

One group also mentioned they wanted an improved police response with parts of the police that were child friendly where children could get informal advice and guidance about their situation without the risk of being criminalised or worrying about being criminalised.

*“Make sections of the police force that are more accessible, especially for youth.” Girl, 16, International School*

*“Educate police on the issue and change the mindsets of the police to more open-minded - so children can consult with them on their opinions and share worries freely.” Girl, 15, Government school*





## 7.2 Thailand: Reflections from professionals

In addition to speaking to the children, a small number of professional interviews were conducted. These included interviews with key staff from both schools as well as professionals from relevant NGOs based in Thailand.

### **School staff**

It was explained to us that the children at the independent school tended to exist within quite a closed social context. This could mean that if something happened to a child, a lot of people would know or find out quickly within their networks. They explained that the children had a high level of digital access due to being able to easily afford devices, combined with a lack of boundaries around digital use at home. Often, the children came from families with reportedly few rules and restrictions in relation to their digital use and some naivety in relation to digital parenting which the school tried to compensate for within its digital curriculum.

In line with the accounts from the children, the teacher explained that there was often a reluctance to allow outside support or investigation because of the focus on the reputation of the family:

*“So the big thing, in Asian culture and for certain in Thai culture is this idea of “loss of face” and bringing shame on to the family. So, anything you get wrong, as a child even, if it then goes outside of the family network is bringing shame on to the family. So, a child who does this, and then its, you know, the parents are called in to talk to me, even though it’s safeguarding or whatever, even though we’re acting to support and protect the child, the initial barrier that you’ve got to get through is winning that trust and the fact that we’re, you know, we’re trying to limit the damage, the initial response would be that the kid has made a mistake and we within the family should deal with it, you shouldn’t.”*

This resulted in a lack of focus on supporting the child and meeting their needs as well as a failure to potentially prevent future incidents. This was regarded as a feature of Thai responses to child sexual exploitation – in that it still carried significant shame for the victim as well as the perpetrator.



**Another teacher that we interviewed explained to us:**

*"We had a student in the school, who told us that her guitar teacher was sexually abusing her while he was teaching her. She told us at school. We told the parents and then they did nothing about it because they had been recommended this guitar teacher, who was quite well known, by their next-door neighbour. So, if they did something, it would look bad on them and on their neighbour... Our recommendation clearly was to take this to the police, um, nothing happened... or at least, they were not prepared to tell me what they would do about it. It would have been dealt with probably by saying it was no longer convenient to continue the lessons, maybe..."*

**There was also frustration about the quality of the response when things were reported:**

*"I suppose there's... in terms of reporting that's a frustration for, you know, for our role, safeguarding role, and confidence in the policing or social services which is pretty low."*

The teachers in both schools confirmed what the children and young people had raised about both the generational gap in digital use creating barriers for families to support their children with online issues, as well as the fact that sexual issues were not talked about in Thai families. In the Government school, teachers pointed out that structural barriers that existed too, with many of the parents having few resources and working long hours which made them unable to provide mediation or support.

### ***Professionals working on child sexual abuse in Thailand***

Professionals from NGO's were also asked about how the issues relating to 'self-generated' sexual material manifested in Thailand. One interviewee explained that he thought that the impact of peer pressure on children and young people's involvement in 'self-generated' image sharing was heightened in a Thai context – the conformity in Thai society leading children to want to conform to peer pressure. They described a conformity culture where children and young people were keen to fit in and accept 'sexting' because it is so commonplace.

By contrast, these professionals described children and young people not reporting because reporting would lead to escalation and an increase in the number of people finding out in a context where there is still a great deal of shame and gossip which can negatively impact their lives. They felt that it is particularly difficult for children because reporting may not have a positive outcome other than simply more people knowing what has happened:

*"The biggest problem is that, you know, nobody reports it because children do not believe that anything will improve if they report it. Most of the time, to be honest it's very hard to convince them otherwise, because with the Thai system you know it can become worse."*

*Safeguarding professional (NGO)*

The professionals expressed scepticism about children reporting these issues in Thailand and receiving an appropriate police response. They pointed out that 'self-generated' images are illegal in Thailand and so there is a potential criminal sanction, but the likelihood of any appearance through the court system was in their experience extremely unlikely.

These professionals described education and prevention as an essential part of the response and something which should be core to the offer in schools. However, the curriculums could vary:

*"At the moment it is totally discretionary for schools whether or not to teach sex education or digital issues."*

The professionals discussed the need for education to be skills based. In line with what the children were saying, they explained that current responses such as telling children not to turn their camera on or contact others online or simply providing a list of rules does not tend to work. There was an emphasis on the need to nurture key social and emotional skills and self-awareness, such as impulse control:

*"We need to be teaching digital fitness, how to deal with and manage panic and how to ground yourself in a crisis... They need skills in self-control and responding to the environment."  
Safeguarding professional (NGO)*



## 7.3 Thailand: Summary of findings

### ***Motivations for sharing***

In Thailand, children reported that 'sexting' was a common part of the pressures and expectations of online relationships. We had some nuanced conversations about sexting which suggested that it could be potentially positive and fun in the moment, but also that it posed considerable risks from onward sharing and loss of control. Children explained that they thought there could be a lot of pressure to engage but also that many chose to do it for validation and affirmation. It was interesting that despite the significant difference in the backgrounds of the children at the two different schools – there tended to be similarities in how the children and young people understood this issue and felt about it, suggesting children and young people are facing similar online pressures and challenges regardless of differences in their offline lives. In Thailand, the children suggested that most of the issues affecting children in their communities related to the voluntary sharing of self-generated material between peers (albeit this included pressures and expectations within relationships) rather than sexual exploitation by adults which was only discussed as one possible aspect of this issue.

### ***Silencing and shame***

A striking aspect of the accounts from Thailand was the clash between perceived cultural ideals of how children and young people should behave and the practice of 'sexting', which meant it would be shameful if anyone found out. This was despite the fact that professionals reported image sharing was perceived as a commonplace activity, including among many adults.

### ***Reporting***

It was clear that the shaming of victims and gossip about their situation hindered help-seeking by children and was a barrier to reporting and investigation of exploitation cases, even when adults were involved as perpetrators. All of the children were mindful of the illegality of explicit material, which meant that they could be criminalized by the police even if they were a victim and none of the children said that they trusted the police to do the right thing.

### ***Identifying solutions and improvements***

The children wanted improved support both from their parents and from educators. The children described dealing with the experiences of being online in isolation from support from their parents, or their schools. The children related that their parents did not understand their digital worlds and were generally hostile to many aspects of online activity. They described their parents as conservative and unable to help guide them to navigate sexual encounters or risks.

In the Thai Government school, in particular, children explained that there was a lack of educational content addressing children and young people's online experiences. The only examples of online safety education provided to the researchers was a list of rules that were provided in one classroom that explained what children should or should not do online. The international school children also felt the school does not provide them with the kinds of educational approaches they needed to navigate the real online challenges they were facing, and that there was little opportunity for group discussions or to work through issues with peers.

# 8. Ireland

In Ireland we engaged with children from three different schools:

- 8 Girls from a Catholic School in the City of Dublin
- 23 Girls and boys from a community school in the suburbs of Dublin
- 10 Boys from a community school in the suburbs of Dublin

These schools were all comprehensive schools from middle income areas of Dublin or its suburbs. These groups were split by age into groups of 13–15-year-olds and 16–17-year-olds and further divided by gender so that we spoke to boys and girls separately.

## 8.1 Ireland: Views of children and young people

Groups in Ireland were unfamiliar with the term ‘self-generated’ sexual material and tended to talk about ‘sexting’ or ‘nudes’. These terms were often used to encompass the phenomenon of sending video content too, but sometimes they distinguished between the sending of images or video.

In Ireland, the children and young people were very explicit about ‘sexting’ as a standard part of intimacy, online interaction, and sexual relationships. They also discussed with us some of the pressured and transactional aspects of image sending. All groups described ‘sexting’ as normalised – although they expressed slightly different views about how normal it was among their friends and peer groups, with the girls keener than boys to identify that they knew about it or heard about it from others.

### 8.1.1 Motivations for sharing ‘self-generated’ sexual material

In the Irish focus groups, there were some very distinct differences between what girls shared about motivations and the views and perspectives of boys. The views of boys and girls are therefore described in turn in this section.

#### *The views of boys on motivations*

The boys expressed the view that ‘sending nudes’ was really common among children and young people in Ireland. The main reason they thought young people did this was because they would become excited and ‘turned on’ when they were online and having a sexual interaction with other young people of the same age. They also spoke quite openly about

**the sending of nudes being transactional and how sending an image to girls might be done in the hope that the girl would send one back. They were divided on whether this was more common for people in relationships or just people flirting.**

*"When you're feeling happy, horny, or wanting to send them, you do it in the moment." Boy, 16*

*"You tell them 'You're sexy' to make them feel good. So, you would send something so that they would send something back." Boy, 16*

**Expectations and relationships pressures came up a lot:**

*"It's really common in a new relationship. If you've got a four-day streak<sup>84</sup> with someone, then you're expected to send a nude. It doesn't have to be someone you know – they can add you from other platforms and then share." Boy, 16*

**One young boy explained the pressure to placate a partner and stay within a relationship for social status:**

*"They could be getting threatened to send one within a relationship or else the other person may break up with them. Some people might feel pressured to get with someone or else get slagged<sup>85</sup> by their friends, so they do it to fit in." Boy, 13*

**The boys described some image exchange that was manipulative and non-consensual and removed from relationships, intimacy or connection:**

*"People do it live... It's a transaction, you send one to receive one. But some people take a screen shot, so you wouldn't know that they have done it. Some people even set up fake accounts to trick you. They might send you one to trick you into sending one back... Some people just 'nyash and dash'. This means they get an image and then they immediately block the person. All they wanted was the image. This is common in Ireland." Boy, 16*

*"It's not difficult to trick someone into sharing an image. Girls would do this to impress others, it's not really that hard to get one. Time is a big factor though; night-time is the time. It's common for this to happen in the night." Boy, 16*

*"Friends might take a photo of you on purpose to share onwards. That's why the school bans phones in school because of this sort of issue. Especially in the toilets." Boy, 16*

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<sup>84</sup> A streak is a feature on Snapchat which is popular with children. When children send each other messages every day this represents a streak and children often like to keep a streak going for as long as possible with their friends.

<sup>85</sup> Slang term for criticising someone harshly

The boys relayed that image and video can get shared onwards outside of the initial exchange to show off, or sometimes because the people in the video want to impress and get affirmation:

*"If you're young and you're doing it [having sex] you want to show the lads what you're doing."  
Boy, 15*

*"Someone might feel invisible, so they do it to be noticed. Perhaps they feel insecure, so they want to do it to build confidence. But it's not just nudes, it's also sex videos of actual sexual intercourse. This is really common." Boy, 16*

The boys also discussed and agreed that sometimes girls' images could be shared and leaked deliberately as part of a post break-up conflicts.

*"It might happen when you're in a relationship and then you break up. You might be feeling emotionally angry, so you send it to the ma or da<sup>86</sup> of the person for revenge. This happens a lot – it's common here. And if they were cheating with another fella, then you would be angry so want revenge." Boy, 15*

The boys also described the ways in which they were influenced by pornographic content which they frequently accessed. These boys between the ages of 13 and 17 all spoke about the easy access they had to hardcore and explicit pornographic images and videos and how often this was often the first understanding of sexuality and sexual relationships:

*"My parents and the school don't talk about sex and things like that, we learn about it from each other and from looking at porn sites – we share links and then talk about them. It's normal in pornos for men to share pictures of themselves to women and they seem to like it so..." Boy, 14*

*"We have been growing up with seeing nude images and pornography online and that means there is the expectation to be sexual. Porn is partly responsible for more people sharing nude images". Boy, 14*

*"It's so easy to look at pornographic pictures and we are so used to seeing them on websites. We see porn and feel we need to set the same standards and want to copy it." Boy, 13*

It was clear that the boys we spoke to used online pornography, as well as social media platforms, to educate themselves. They also compared what they saw online with their real life. The boys had an understanding that this was harmful for them and for the girls in their lives:

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<sup>86</sup> Irish slang for mum or dad

*"Some boys look at porn and see these people and they feel they need to maintain the same standards. They feel ashamed and body shamed – both boys and girls. Girls feel they have to look a certain way for men and boys to like them." Boy, 13*

**The boys also relayed and recognised that the consequences of sending images could be worse for girls:**

*"If girls do it, then people think they are a slut. But it's different for boys." Boy, 15*

### **The views of girls on motivations**

In contrast to the boys the girls talked a lot about the pressures that they felt girls disproportionately faced to send images of themselves, as well as the ways as the ways girls were more likely to receive images from boys that they did not want. For some of the girls there was a reluctance to accept that it was 'normal' quite as readily as the boys we spoke to. Some girls were keen to identify that 'sexting' tended to occur in 'toxic' relationships – and the younger girls in particular represented 'sexting' as a mainly coercive practice.

*"You may feel threatened to send the image, maybe you're in a toxic relationship and you feel pressured to send the photo." Girl, 13*

**The girls we spoke to felt that some boys they knew would just see 'self-generated' image sharing as transactional rather than related to intimacy or connection in relationships.**

*"Some boys just see us as objects, to be looked at sexually, rather than understand who we are actually." Girl, 14*

**Many of the girls told us that receiving unsolicited nude images was commonplace and that they would often feel pressured to then send them back.**

*"There's a lot of pressure if you say no, they might get angry so just in the end I'd just give in cause it might just be easier to do it." Girl, 14*

*"It shouldn't be expected but if it's toxic you might have no choice." Girl, 14*

*"Girls don't really want pictures from boys, but they get them anyway." Girl, 15*

**These girls were strongly aware of negative consequences:**

*"It could be shared and sent to other people, people can be twofaced, the trust can go wrong so easy and then there are mixed feelings and people can back away from you... You could be isolated by your friends." Girl, 14*



The older girls in particular talked in the group about the reasons for sharing even though they knew they could be leaked. They talked about the desire for validation, but also the pressure and the inequality in this dynamic that girls faced compared to boys. They explained that boys benefitted from the social status of getting an image through the kudos from friends, whereas girls could too often be tricked and manipulated and then shamed as a result:

*"Some girls share their images because they want and feel they need attention and validation. They want attention from boys and feel they need boys to tell them they are pretty. They don't feel pretty unless boys say so." Girl, 17*

*"Girls can get a name and boys don't. Girls get called a slut, guys get a pat on the back for it. It's happening a lot." Girl, 16*

Similarly, to the boys the girls talked about the pressures created by online images and content. This was partly in relation to pornography but also discussed more widely in relation to the heavily sexualised content on mainstream sites contributing to pressure to look and represent yourself a certain way:

*"They do expect you to look like that. Like something from porn." Girl, 17*

*"Boys see those videos and then expect girls to do that and look like that. That's the pressure." Girl, 16*

There was also a perception among the girls that this sexualisation was becoming more extreme among the younger age groups. One group discussed some of the girls they knew starting secondary school at eleven years old with their appearance influenced by the sexualised online media they were consuming.

*"They are all looking older in first year. They don't look their ages... They all look older. There is now such an expectation to look older. You see them coming in at 11, and they are starting to look like they are 15. They have their eyebrows done, and make-up is copied from what they have seen on the Internet. When I was 11, I had a high ponytail and nothing else. Now girls obsess about wanting a look that they have seen online." Girl, 16*

## 8.1.2 Potential consequences of sharing 'self-generated' sexual material

Although the sending of images was very normalised within their social groups, the boys in the Irish focus groups expressed that the consequences of sharing could have negative repercussions for them. The boys explained that image exchange was messy, with risks of having images 'leaked' and the possible damage to their reputation within their schools and communities. They understood both that they could be blamed as perpetrators for asking for images, but also that they could be shamed if their own were sent and leaked.

The boys were familiar with a range of negative consequences, including illegality and prosecution, as well as the fact that their own images could be circulated within sex offender communities:

*"They might not know the person and it ends up in the hands of a predator. It might then attract attention from other paedophiles." Boy, 13*

*"The image could be put on a porno website. This happens in Ireland, without the person's consent. It's basically impossible to take them down and really difficult to delete." Boy, 14*

The boys also expressed shame and anxiety about their parents finding out:

*"It could get sent to family. You sent it some someone and it gets sent around and ends up with your parents or family. That's the worse one."*

The girls were also negative about the issue around 'self-generated' material, the benefits of sharing were seen as short lived and the consequences of having images leaked difficult to deal with.

*"It knocks your self-esteem and can really affect your mental health and how you are doing at school." Girl, 16*

*"The image can be spread around a lot and you can feel overwhelmed. It affects you everywhere and your reputation is ruined." Girl, 14*

## 8.1.3 Difficulties seeking support and reporting

Both boys and girls felt there was a vacuum of information, learning and support in Ireland. Parents and carers were viewed to be from a different generation with no understanding of teenagers online romantic or sexual relationships and how and why young people might send an image or video. The feeling was that parents and carers would be angry with a child rather than supportive though a few felt they might be able to talk to their parents or

carers. There was an agreement across both genders that you might bring shame on your family if it was discovered that you had done this. The boys in particular described not having anywhere to go if they needed to deal with the fallout from these issues – explaining that parents would not understand.

*“There’s ultimately nowhere to go because no matter what happens, it’s going to end up back with your parents and that’s the worst that could happen.” Boy, 15*

**This was similar for girls who felt that parents and carers would not understand the behaviour because they do not understand the technology:**

*“I feel like I’d be worried to tell a parent... it might damage our relationship. Some parents don’t understand, and they’d probably take your phone away. I’d be so anxious if my phone was taken away.” Girl, 13*

## **Police**

**We asked the groups about how they felt about police involvement. The children were all adamant that they would not proactively seek support or involvement from the police even if they had been a victim of having images coerced from them or non-consensually shared. The young people felt the response would not be understanding or supportive. Some expressed a fear of police involvement:**

*“It’s illegal to send nudes so you’ll get in trouble with the Garda. Also, you could say the wrong thing and get into even more trouble and perhaps they will use words you don’t understand.” Boy, 17*

**It was evident from some of the accounts that the relationship between the boys and the Garda was a challenging one. They described a risk that they would be accused unfairly if they asked for help and stereotyped and discriminated against as teenage boys. The boys relayed that there was very little trust between themselves and the police:**

*“That would be the last place you would go for support. They don’t think young people’s problems are a useful use of their resources so they just wouldn’t turn up or help... if there was no other option, you would go there. They are not trusted, not even our parents trust them.” Boy, 14*

*“The Garda needs to just stop stereotyping young people, particularly young boys. If we go to them for help, they just accuse us of lying or assume we have done something wrong.” Boy, 14*

## **Help-seeking**

These boys were very sceptical about seeking help from adults as they felt they would have no privacy or control around how their information was dealt with or how support was received. They described their parents as not really understanding their needs either:

*"If you tell your parents, they'll tell the Garda. If you tell the Garda, they would tell your parents. If you tell a teacher, they will tell your parents. If you tell a school councillor, they will tell everyone. [When they tell parents] there would just be disappointment and embarrassment. And it's 'the talk' we would have to have afterwards. They would want to sit at the kitchen table and talk about it, and that's just awful." Boy, 17*

*"They just won't understand. They need to learn to accept and understand." Boy, 15*

## **8.1.4 Solutions and improvements**

### **Education for parents**

The young people described a lack of understanding from their parents and carers which meant in turn that they did not seek help from them on these issues. They felt that their parents just simply did not relate to the experience and pressures of being online. For the boys, this appeared to translate into a loss of opportunity for parents to discuss, support and guide them in a way that might have helped. It is also possible that this might have countered some of the more problematic attitudes and behaviours that the boys were themselves expressing and relaying. The children mostly would have welcomed discussing these issues with parents if parents had understood the online environment and could connect with them:

*"They need to know and understand the child's point of view, but this might only happen with time. When our generation grow up and become parents, we will understand the situation more and will be able to be more understanding." Boy, 17*

*"They [our parents] need to think about what it's really like for kids in our generation growing up online. They need to put themselves in our shoes. They need to be calmer and listen to us."  
Boy, 13*

Young people wanted there to be better education and information so that parents and carers understood the context of their online lives:

*"They need to know the facts and understand it all to be able to help us. They need to know where to get this sort of information from." Boy, 14*

**Similarly, the girls also felt that their parents and carers had no understanding of their worlds because they 'didn't grow up with phones.' Some of the girls built on this conversation saying that they felt that their parents would benefit from learning from the online environment too in terms of how to approach these issues with their children:**

*"They should watch videos that make them understand why people our age would do it. Like on Instagram and TikTok. There's a dad on TikTok aimed at parents explaining scenarios in kids' lives like 'sexting' issues, and then sharing with them how to respond better." Girl, 17*

*"It helps if they listen but can also understand the context to why we have done what we have done." Girl, 16*

### **Education in schools**

**The boys also reflected that the educational inputs available to them were poor and did not really meet their needs or address broader pressures they were facing:**

*"My parents complain about the sex education they had when they were young where they were just told not to have sex. We are getting the same education about this, just being told not to send them. It's the same problem." Boy, 17*

*"Teachers just don't know what's happening and there is no lesson on consent for this issue." Boy, 15*

*"The school don't talk to us about sexual stuff no, apart from you know, how you do it, but no, not about how you feel or what you should and shouldn't do. I find that stuff out online." Boy, 13*

**The girls also reported that they received no support on how to deal with these issues in school. Several discussed finding information from online creators if they wanted information:**

*"We just seem to talk about mental health in wellbeing classes or do colouring in. They don't use them to help us with things we are actually experiencing or to talk about sexuality or relationships. It would be the perfect time for help with sending nudes or getting them, but they just don't have the knowledge or the stuff to work with us on it." Girl, 15*

**Girls described turning to the online environment for information instead:**

*"Sometimes people come in, but they only really talk to us about mental health... if I wanted information on this, I would go on TikTok. You can see it all on TikTok and also as friends we try and work this stuff out." Girl, 15*

They felt that as girls they were able to support one another in their peer groups to an extent as they could discuss issues they faced together. The girls felt this was different for boys who they thought were much less likely to have access to support and discussion from peers where they could talk through issues.

*“The boys... they don’t get support... They keep it in. They are meant to act tough and keep emotions in, and just deal with it. Over time I think boys just feel they can’t talk about things...” Girl, 16*

The younger boys also expressed a sense of frustration that there was no interest in their school or space for them to talk about these issues. There was a sense that they wanted to share problems and receive understanding from others.

*“Schools just can’t get rid of the student when things go wrong, they need to address the problem head on. There is a reason kids do this, so they need to help with that, not punish the child.” Boy, 14*

The boys were wanted confidential space to discuss these issues in school – rather than just to receive information. They told us that they do not have the opportunity to discuss these issues or learn about it from each other.

*“Schools don’t really talk to us about this. We have wellbeing lessons, but they only talk about things vaguely. You don’t really get a chance to discuss this issue. They just tell us but don’t allow us to talk about it.” Boy, 13*

Overall, it was striking from our conversations that there was a sense of anger and sadness on the part of the boys that there was nowhere to go to talk through issues or get support. They expressed some bitterness about the lack of empathy for them alongside the assumption they would be perpetrators and would do something wrong. They felt they faced fear and suspicion from adults:

*“We know that adult often think that we all watch videos of Andrew Tate<sup>87</sup> and then expect that that’s what we want to act like. But we don’t. A lot of us know that that isn’t how you should be.” Boy, 13*

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<sup>87</sup> Andrew Tate is a controversial social media personality famous for his misogynistic views. He was arrested in late 2022 for sexual offences.



## **Responsibilities and opportunities for technology companies**

The children and young people in Ireland all felt there was more that technology companies should do to combat these issues and had a number of ideas and suggestions:

*"You could ban porn on platforms, make it more difficult to send images (so you make it so that people can't upload explicit images)." Boy, 13*

*"They need to be faster in deleting 18+ videos so younger kids don't see them." Boy, 14*

*"ID required on apps and if a person is over 18 adds an under 18 old, the under 18 old knows their age and can consent to it." Boy, 16*

*"Technology companies should have more security on their platforms to prevent these images being seen and shared by under 18s." Girl, 14*





## 8.2 Ireland: Reflections from professionals

In Ireland, professional interviews took place with a small number of educators, NGO leads and policymakers to ask them about 'self-generated' sexual material and the policy and practice context from their perspective. The professionals talked about 'sexting' pressures and expectations affecting the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland, but explained that there was a taboo around the issues which meant that difficulties did not always translate into help seeking behaviours on the part of children. Some felt that it was particularly vulnerable girls who were unprotected in their peer relationships and vulnerable to broader sexual exploitation that suffered the most. However, one professional also talked about how the practice of 'sexting' and the existence of sexualized content online created a broader context of expectations and pressure for children, especially for girls growing up, even if they were not engaging in 'sexting' themselves:

*"I do think that there's a huge amount of pressure there for them, whether they identify that or not, but subconsciously, definitely, it is there. It's in terms of, like, pressures in terms of how to dress, and how to behave, and how to act, and how to present yourself online... There are huge pressures there, and I don't think... I think that that sadness is definitely there... but perhaps there isn't the support there to necessarily talk about it, certainly not at the younger age of it."*

Professionals were asked if they felt Ireland faced any culturally specific challenges and the issues was raised in relation to the influence of religion on individual school management boards. They explained that this meant that, in their experience, the sexual health curriculum is often taught in a relatively conservative manner in many schools and does not address sex, sexuality, consent, and a range of online sexual health risks in any detail. This conservatism was felt to hamper the ability to give children a broad based and effective education in schools, and contributes to the fact that they turn to the online environment and pornography for information.

The sexual health curriculum has recently been reviewed and there is now a revised version which better reflects the digital environment and specifically covers issues relating to 'sexting', as well as pornography. Professionals felt that the new revised curriculum was urgently needed as, in line with this project's findings, children are learning from the online environment with an absence of any quality control:

*"Online - that's where they were getting their sexuality and relationship education from. It's online. They are having to decide for them between what is good advice, what was is bad advice. And this meant huge issues around, I suppose, the gender issue in terms of how - and we would hear this through our service as well - girls, I suppose, in particular, the expectations that would be put on them from boys having watched it, watched pornographic material. Girls then feeling that they would have to live up to it in some circumstances."*

Despite a very positive view about the revised curriculum and a strong support for its roll-out, concerns were raised about whether the time allocation to deliver the new curriculum would be sufficient to really spend time working with children in depth in the ways they needed. Again, it was raised that the influence of religion on individual school management boards could be unhelpful:

*"The patronage [of the catholic church] issue is a big thing in terms of how sexuality, relationships, and sexuality education have been addressed, and the associated matters have been addressed in schools. For instance, I'll just give you one kind of example where we have an anti-bullying programme, and one module of it was around looking at homophobic bullying. One of the schools then that I was due to give it in, we did a pre-meeting beforehand and were told straight out, "You can cover everything else, but you can't cover this particular issue. There's no way the Board of Management would sign off on it."*

Professionals talked about the kinds of education that they felt children and young needed to be offered and the complexities of this. It was raised that some children and young people know the risks and are aware of the consequences of sending sexual pictures of themselves but send them anyway and that some of these groups needed more in depth support than curriculum time and resources currently allow. The professionals were thoughtful about the approaches they felt tended to work best:

*"The whole issue of peer pressure, relationship pressure, all that, wanting to fit in, maybe not knowing how to say no confidently, is something we are keen, in our resources, to teach young people how to be able to take control, that it's okay to say no, it's okay to hear no as well, so pressuring somebody into sending a picture as well is not ok. We need to support assertive communication, sort of... We also need to help parents instill those values, that self-confidence and what to do if somebody asks you for something. This is something we can do from a very young age and build up, so by the time they're coming to a stage where it might be a thing, they are ready for it... And it's also understanding that not everyone's doing it..."*

The respondents that we spoke to in Ireland were aware of the gaps in knowledge and experience of the online environment between parents and their children and the difficulties that this created in terms of the parents being able to guide and support their children. There was some frustration in terms of educating parents about some basic risks of social media being an online public space where a huge range of content is shared, and contacts are available.

*"What we try to do, especially with the parents of younger children, is that we always say to them, like, 'You must, you have to, try and find some way that's going to break into that and start those conversations, just something,' because when an issue arrives – and something is going to arise, because there's no divide anymore – then your child has to have confidence in you being able to help them with this issue. They're not going to have confidence in you if you don't even know basic things, like how to turn on your iPhone, how to know the apps that they're on, understand to some extent the dynamics of those apps."*

Finally, the professionals were unsure about the validity and usefulness of the term 'self-generated' sexual material. A number of respondents pointed out that the term 'self-generated' puts too much emphasis on the agency of the child or young person given the range of scenarios which include coercion. One person working directly on these issues relayed that he felt the term was awkward:

*"I think the use of the word 'self' in there was kind of like, "Oh, the child is responsible for creating their own image."... I remember seeing that and being kind of like, "What is that term?" I didn't really get when I should use it because I don't... You know look at an image and it's like, "How do I know if this is 'self-generated' or not?" Then you kind of have to make an informed decision, I suppose. There could be someone standing behind the camera, coercing the child physically, I suppose. You never really know but you just, kind of, have to make that judgement. Then again, 'self-generated', if there is coercion involved it's not really 'self-generated'..."*

There was also concern that this was not the term that children and young people were using and therefore not necessarily helpful in encouraging children to talk about the issues:

*"I mean we're so not in the conversation if we're not even using the same language."*



## 8.3 Ireland: Summary of findings

### ***Motivations***

The focus groups with children and young people in Ireland included significant discussion about sexual image exchange both within and outside of relationships. The children talked about the desire for validation and approval as well as the impact of pressure and expectations in online interactions that can be hard to resist. They also spoke about the impact and consequences (especially for girls) of having images leaked and the barriers to discussion and support. The boys and girls gave different accounts of the extent to which different groups were engaging in 'sexting' but it was perceived as relatively commonplace

### ***Lack of support or education***

The children and young people told us that they received no support for these issues in school. The groups described how their schools would get involved if there was an individual case that was clearly causing disruption or having an impact on school life – but that they were not offered anything proactive in relation to education or support to help them navigate these issues. They wanted the opportunity to unpack issues and share opinions and views with other children and young people.

It was striking when speaking to the boys that they voiced both some problematic attitudes and behaviours they engaged in, while at the same time acknowledging that some of these were not ideal – in particular learning and benchmarking expectations against online pornography. There was also some bitterness among the boys about the lack of empathy and support they received in dealing with online pressures. They understood that they were influenced by porn and knew this had a negative impact. They expressed that they wanted to be able to speak to adults about these issues, and they felt that this was not possible.

### ***Reporting***

The children in Ireland relayed a lack of trust and confidence in the police, and a belief that if they reported they would be blamed and even potentially face criminalization. The boys in particular felt they faced stereotyping by police and would not be listened to. The children felt there was nowhere that they could report to that would keep their information confidential and they feared blame and exposure.

### ***Identifying solutions***

In common with the accounts from other countries, the children, and young people in Ireland did see school as a good potential place to learn about these issues and wanted to be offered education in schools. They also wanted their parents to have a better understanding of the issues so that they would be able to support them.

# 9. Key Findings and Recommendations



This research focused on listening to children’s views on the issue of ‘self-generated’ material in three diverse country contexts. Below are some of the identified shared themes in conjunction with findings that were specific to the individual countries and contexts.

## 9.1 Key findings from children’s engagement groups

**1 Children expressed that the creation and sharing of ‘self-generated’ sexual material among children and young people is common, with gender playing a key role in experiences.**

In Ghana, Ireland and Thailand, children described the sharing and receiving of ‘self-generated’ images as relatively common. The receiving and viewing of sexual content (images and video) when online was considered routine. Many of the children perceived the practice of creating and sharing ‘self-generated’ sexual material to be common among their peers. The children talked with greater familiarity about the sharing of sexual images than they talked about sharing video content, but they were familiar with both. It was clear that children were highly aware of the issues in all three locations, and that it shaped their understanding of online norms.

It was clear from the discussions that girls are seen to be disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of ‘self-generated’ sexual material and this gender difference came up particularly strongly in our conversations in Thailand and Ireland. These conversations suggested that girls were placed under greater pressure to get involved, and more likely to be judged whether they participated or not.

**2. Children described a range of motivations for engaging in ‘self-generated’ sexual material, from excitement and connection to pressure, coercion, and financial exploitation. Children’s evident concern about a range of the negative experiences and consequences came through clearly in the data.**

We found overall less emphasis from children on excitement or fulfilment or connection surrounding the sharing of ‘self-generated’ material than the less positive motivations

and reasons for doing so<sup>88</sup>. This was not universal – one female respondent in Thailand explained to us that it was “not as bad as you think it is, it’s about what happens to the images that is bad” – arguing it is the leaking of images that was damaging not the adolescent sexual interest or sexuality or body confidence that ‘sexting’ itself expresses. The boys in Thailand and Ireland also talked about it in a way that suggested an element of enjoyment and excitement.

### **3. The children described a complex mix of motivations and drivers including pressure and expectations in relationships, the influence of social media, and a desire for affirmation and self-esteem.**

Many children understood the risks of onward sharing but felt that it was normal to engage in it anyway. When asked why this was, the concept of unwanted pressure came through strongly and consistently, with some seeing this framing of expectations to send an image as part of a relationship commitment as a “toxic” but common aspect of relationships. Some children shared that it could be difficult for children to resist these kinds of pressures and expectations which were shaped both by interpersonal relationships but also by broader media culture and social norms (e.g. children in Thailand highlighting pressure to conform in peer groups). We also heard that many children were motivated to share because they wanted or needed to feel validated.

### **4. Children, especially girls, expressed that the content and architecture of social media environments drives and facilitates the creation and sharing of ‘self-generated’ sexual material.**

We heard from children about the influences and expectations created by social media content. The girls in Ireland talked about how the media set up expectations of the way a person should look and a normalisation of trying to achieve and share an idealised look in return for positive feedback. The girls in Thailand also talked about how, for them, there was a prevalent expectation coming from their immersion in social media that they would be objectified, rated on their looks, and sexualised. Sending images in this context was partly seen to be about trying to live up to these expectations and representations of being normal and successful online.

The children also talked about the affordances and ease of sharing images and how this led to image sharing getting out of hand. Young people referred to ‘fast’ technology which precluded thinking or judgement time before sending an image. Young people in Ireland talked about the ease of creating vast networks through adding friends of friends, and girls talked about routinely receiving unwanted sexual material from strangers or from bots.

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<sup>88</sup> In the research, we spoke to children in small same-sex groups rather than individually and this may have contributed to some of the negative framing that we heard from children. The stigma that we learned about that attached to ‘self-generated’ material may have made some children reluctant to speak about the positives, even when asked, in small groups with peers.

**5. In Ghana children talked about sharing of images in relationships which showed many similarities to Thailand and Ireland, but the main reason they thought children engaged in sharing 'self-generated' sexual material was because they were exploited for money.**

In Ghana, the motivation to sell indecent images for money was described as overwhelming for many poor children in both the city and rural school. In this country, this was the subject that dominated the conversation from the outset, the biggest reason that children and young people came up with and the one they kept returning to. The selling of images for money to 'white foreign men' and to local men was described as commonplace and children and young people told us that the most important response to 'sexting' in Ghana was to address poverty and the lack of economic opportunities. The children indicated that in some cases parents even encouraged children to send 'self-generated' sexual material in order to bring money into the household. This account that children gave of commercial sexual exploitation was also supported by the professionals in the study who described this as a significant issue facing their schools and communities in Ghana. The professionals said they struggled to get social workers and police to engage.

**6. There is widespread shame and stigma around 'self-generated' sexual material when this circulates having been shared or leaked without consent. This appears to partly be linked to a cultural divide between the norms and expectations children encounter online and the traditional cultures of their offline lives.**

Much of the testimony of the children we spoke to reflects a clash between their online experiences and the conservative values and attitudes that were still prevalent in their offline social lives. Adults were seen as having little understanding or interest in their online lives. Across all the locations of the research, the shame and stigma of having an image shared and having been known to share an image was felt to be significant despite the normalisation of sexual content in their online lives. In Ghana, professionals reported that the stigma around this issue was related to a strong and conservative set of traditional religious values in which the moral behaviour of children and young people is seen to impact on the social standing of the family and sex before marriage is discouraged. The contrast in Ghana between sexualised popular culture online and the continued importance of traditional conservative institutions, tribe and church in their offline lives came across in the children's testimonies. The children conveyed a strong sense that they were trying to navigate and make sense of this cultural divide, largely unsupported by adults around them.

The children in Thailand also pointed to the clash between online cultures and traditional Thai values. This clash of values was also exacerbated in Thailand by the overarching value of conformity which made children want to conform to peer pressure online but which also intensified the fear of shame and gossip on the part of families and teachers if images were leaked, making it hard for children to seek adult support. The children and young people in the Thai groups also explained that their parents did not discuss sexual issues with their children and would consider it shameful to do so. For this reason, many of the children in Thailand relayed that they would be unlikely to ever tell their families about difficult



'sexting' experiences, shared images, or even exploitation.

The children and young people in Ireland also talked about shame in relation to the consequences of image sharing, although this tended to be more related to the consequences of bullying by peers or within school communities.

**7. Children and young people felt that the shame and stigma relating to self-generated sexual material was unhelpful and needs to change. They felt it creates barriers to help seeking and contributes to bullying and poor mental health outcomes.**

The children and young people were concerned about the ways in which stigma and shame relating to self-generated sexual material created barriers to the help that children needed particularly when images are leaked.<sup>89</sup> Children and young people in Ghana and Thailand talked about the impact shame and related bullying could have on mental health, and in all three countries they mentioned the potential for self-harm and suicide as a consequence of shame and isolation.

**8. Children felt they could not or would not report to the police or seek help from the police, due to both the specific risks of criminalisation as well as a general fear that the police would be hostile and make their situation worse.**

The children relayed that they would be extremely unlikely to seek support from the police for this issue. One reason for this was the legal position with children aware of the risks of being criminalised in Thailand and Ghana. The children in Thailand in particular were very aware that they could be criminalised even if they were a victim of exploitation due to the strict laws on explicit content, and this meant that any police involvement risked escalating the issues and making them worse. The children disagreed with this legal position and saw it as unhelpful, disproportionate, and wrong.

It was also striking that across all three countries the children were vehement in their view that the police were not capable or trustworthy and that they were hostile to children. They felt that the police would dismiss their accounts and blame them even in situations where they were the victims. Suggestions were made by some young people including wanting sections of the police that were accessible, 'child friendly' and which could communicate supportively with children.

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<sup>89</sup> They also felt it was unfair that the blame should attach to the person whose images were sent and shared rather than the person who had leaked the material or pressured them to send it.

**9. Children want, but do not currently have access to, confidential support when it comes to dealing with issues relating to all aspects of 'self-generated' sexual material. This is particularly the case where children have lost control of their material and want support.**

Linked to the above all children wanted to get advice and guidance from adults without the risks of negative consequences and blame. Children wanted somewhere to go where they could get support from adults and where their information would be kept confidential but where they could benefit from advice and guidance.

Across all three countries, the children were sceptical about reporting to school counselling services, safeguarding leads, hotlines or other adults due to concerns about confidentiality. They feared that reporting would in various ways make life worse, either through increasing the exposure of the images, increasing knowledge of what they had done and their exposure to shame (and their family's shame) or because they would be blamed and punished.

**10. Children report a significant generational divide between themselves and their parents in relation to internet use.**

The children in all three countries described a generational divide between themselves and their parents/guardians and said that their parents generally lacked an understanding of their online lives. Discussions in Ghana and in Thailand with children and professionals suggested significant structural barriers to parental or carer involvement in their children's digital lives – in particular family poverty and needing to work long hours. The idea that parents and carers can and should shape and guide their children's online lives may be a socially and culturally specific one in so far as it requires parents and children to have sufficient shared leisure time alongside shared perspectives and technical understanding to share and discuss online experiences. In Ghana and Thailand, the issues were not only structural but cultural too with traditional values and approaches to parenting also creating barriers to digital parenting.

In Ireland the barriers between children and parents were less structural than cultural and generational differences, linked mainly to differences in technology understanding and use. However, children not feeling able to turn to their parents or carers was a common element across all three countries. Many of the children in this study would have liked to turn to their parents and carers for support and guidance but felt the gap in understanding was too substantial for them to do so.

## **11. Children wanted better information and education from schools to deal with 'self-generated' sexual material as well as improved online safety and sex and relationships education more generally.**

The children across all three countries wanted more education and support on these issues from their schools. The children and young people in each country felt a more appropriate, up to date, and responsive education in schools would help them understand and navigate issues of online safety - including the sharing of sexual material. In all locations the children appeared to have rapport with their teachers and felt safe in school contexts and wanted education to be provided in school settings. However, schools were seen as currently overwhelmingly academically focused and any education about online safety that was currently received in schools was seen as generic and not specific enough to current issues such as 'sexting' with some children reporting that they had received no education on online safety at all. Those that did receive education in schools described the content as largely out of date, irrelevant or overly instructional (e.g. a list of instructions telling them what to do or not do). They did not see this as something they could use to navigate the challenges they faced online. The children described wanting more informed education but delivered in a way that also gave them the opportunities to talk through a range of real-life scenarios in groups and benefit from advice from peers who were facing similar situations or pressures.

## **12. The absence of education in schools means that children are learning about sexual issues from social media or in some cases from pornography.**

For most of the children across all three countries the lack of education and information about these issues in schools and the lack of advice and guidance from adults meant that the information gap was filled by social media. Most of the children we spoke to told us that they sought information about these topics directly from online influencers. They told us that they followed creators who created relevant content directly about these topics. Whilst this can clearly be a useful source of information for children there is no quality control for this information or balance between this and what they are receiving offline. Alongside social media influencers some of the children in Ireland in particular spoke about being influenced by and learning from pornography.



**13. A number of boys' groups expressed feeling particularly isolated as they felt it was less culturally acceptable for them as boys to talk with their peers about feelings and emotions.**

In Ireland and Thailand, it was identified that boys felt particularly isolated in dealing with online pressures as their peer culture made them less able to talk about the impact of emotions, feelings, and expectations than girls. Girls were identified as better able to support one another and girls raised this difference between themselves and the boys too. Boys also relayed feeling negatively stereotyped and dismissed, but also unsupported.

**14. Children felt that technology companies can provide useful resources for them, but also that they should do more to manage content and behaviour on their services.**

The children in all three countries had quite strong views on what technology companies could do to support with these issues. They explained that they currently relied on online platforms for learning as well as advice and information on social issues and that they currently turn to apps and platforms to get information. The children talked about having more creators specifically paid to provide educational videos and information that they wanted this for themselves, and some also felt that targeted online information could be useful for their parents too.

The children emphasised that they wanted platforms to do more to reduce risks and the spread of 'self-generated' sexual material, and to deal with offenders making unwanted advances or sending sexual content. They felt improved technical measures should be used to help find and remove self-generated sexual content. The children in Ireland particularly emphasised the importance of the rapid identification and removal of images from online environments, as well as age verification and restricting the access to adult pornography.

**15. The language of 'self-generated' sexual material is abstract to children and generally unhelpful.**

None of the children in this project used the phrase 'self-generated' sexual material. They used terms such as 'sexy selfies', 'sexting', 'nudes' or 'sexy photos' to encompass 'self-generated' sexual material. The language of 'self-generated' material was broadly understood by the professionals we spoke with once the definitions were shared but overall did not appear to support the effective framing of these issues. The way in which 'self-generated' covers both aspects of child sexual exploitation and consensual sharing between peers creates difficulty in the breadth of different dynamics it is trying to cover in one term. It was pointed out that in many of the exploitative and coercive contexts, especially where older adult perpetrators are involved, the material was not truly 'self-generated' and a different term altogether would be more appropriate.

## 9.2 Recommendations

Although the fieldwork for this research was conducted in Ghana, Thailand, and Ireland, there are clear implications for the global response to the issue of 'self-generated' sexual material. The recommendations below derive from direct suggestions from children in this study and are based on their key messages. In our recommendations we have sought to identify the actions that would help to realise the changes that children and young people wanted.

### Recommendations based on key messages:

#### *Improved education*

**1. Governments and school authorities should review their educational responses to these issues in the light of the key findings above and consider whether their approach is likely to meet the needs that children have outlined in this study.**

We found that children wanted modern and responsive educational interventions to address this issue including specific lessons in schools that addressed this subject, and for their teachers to be trained and equipped to deliver education on this topic alongside other aspects of online safety education. In relation to educational input from schools they also wanted:

- Educational interventions that are realistic to their digital lives, and which acknowledge the complexities and pressures of the scenarios that they face online.
- Interventions that were discussion based rather than purely instructional.
- The opportunity to receive educational input from other children who had faced the similar issues and pressures.

#### *Non-judgemental support*

**2. Governments should make provisions to educate and inform parents and carers.**

We found that children wanted more support and understanding from their parents and carers and to be able to seek their help on these issues. They wanted educational initiatives to target parents and carers to improve their understanding of the pressures in their digital lives and information that would enable them to be a source of support and help. In line with the complexities of the parenting relationships articulated in our findings - approaches to this issue may benefit from inclusion within broad ranging parental support programmes.

**3. Governments and civil society organisations should seek to increase public awareness that encountering these issues online is commonplace for children.**

Children felt that this would help to counter the extent of shame and stigma in relation to these issues and mean that adults are better able to support them. We found that children wanted the opportunities to talk safely to adults about issues facing them online including 'self-generated' sexual material.

**4. Governments, schools and civil society organisations should provide children with confidential support from trained adults where they could get advice and guidance when things have gone wrong without blame or making their situation worse.**

Children wanted to know what was likely to happen to their information when they reported and currently lacked confidence that there would be discretion, consistency or understanding from adults to whom they reported. This suggests the need for clear and consistent best practice guidance for professionals including law enforcement, social workers and educators on 'self-generated' sexual material so that responses are standardised and reliable and children know what will happen to their information. These responses should also promote access to confidential support.

***Structural and institutional change***

**5. Legal reforms are needed that ensure that children are not criminalised for the possession or sharing of their own images either where they are a victim, or where they were engaging in in a normal and consensual way with another child or young person.**

Children told us that the existence of criminal sanctions was unhelpful, disproportionate and wrong and acted as a barrier to help seeking.

**6. Governments and those working in the criminal justice system should consider how to ensure children have opportunities to engage with the police as victims or witnesses without encountering scepticism, judgement or blame.**

Children recounted their hostility to the police and explained that they would not turn to the police, for fear of being blamed, shamed, or criminalised. Children told us that they wanted an improved police response that was supportive and sympathetic. Some children suggested a specialist section of the police service focused on, or available to children.

## **7. Governments should prioritise tackling sexual exploitation of children and their images/videos.**

The children in Ghana wanted their government to do more to tackle sexual exploitation faced by children in Ghana and it was clear that they felt some children in their community were trapped in this situation due to poverty. Approaches should align with the multi sectoral approach of the National Model Response<sup>90</sup> and include education and support for children facing this situation, targeted intervention with their families, support services for children and support from the child protection workforce as well as law enforcement action pursuing successful investigations and convictions.

## **8. Technology companies should do more to support children on this issue, including providing high quality information from online influencers and educators from whom they are currently seeking help.**

Relevant apps and platforms could consider sponsoring content (created by experts and children) that gives children information about how to respond to concerns around 'self-generated' sexual material.

## **9. Technology companies should invest in technical solutions to respond to the circulation of 'self-generated' sexual material.**

Children told us that they wanted social media companies to do more to prevent the sharing and circulation of self-generated images using technical solutions and controls on their platforms. One approach would be for technology companies to work in partnership with children and experts to provide tools that anonymously remove such as Report Remove in the UK<sup>91</sup> and the 'Take it Down' service set up by NCMEC<sup>92</sup>.

## **Language**

### **10. Relevant and effective language should be used when talking about 'self-generated' sexual material online.**

This study found that the term 'self-generated' sexual material was not understood or utilised by children themselves, or their educators. Any resources aimed at children on the topic of online safety should be presented in terms that have relevance to children and young people. A review of the term 'self-generated' sexual material should also be conducted for practitioners, given not all content is 'generated' or shared consensually.

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.weprotect.org/model-national-response/>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.iwf.org.uk/our-technology/report-remove/> This is a partnership between the NSPCC, the IWF and YOTI to support young people to get their sexual images or material removed from the internet if they know they have been shared.

<sup>92</sup> <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org/> This service hosted by NCMEC allows under 18s anywhere in the world to apply to have sexual images removed from participating platforms.



# Annex 1: Methodology

This research included the following elements:

- Qualitative data gathering in the form of small focus groups with children aged 13–17 in three countries (Ghana, Thailand and Ireland) to discuss and explore the issue. These sessions were facilitated by members of the research team, and the children were divided into different groups according to age (with separate sessions for 13–15-year-olds and 16–17-year-olds) and gender with boys and girls engaged with separately. The sessions encouraged children to share their thoughts about how and why self-generated image sharing happened, and their ideas on how responses to the issue could be improved.
- A targeted literature review of existing research on key trends around child ‘self-generated’ sexual material, including a review of key drivers and risks. The literature review searched for literature on ‘self-generated’ sexual material as well as for relevant recent research on ‘sexting’. In addition to exploring what is known about the prevalence of self-generated sexual material (both voluntary which would include ‘sexting’ and coerced self-generated material) we reviewed literature which explores which children are most affected and how, as well as evidence around effective interventions and responses. A caveat of this literature review is that it was only conducted in English.
- Qualitative data gathering in the form of a small number of semi-structured interviews with school-based education staff, as well as NGO staff and government policy makers in the three countries to discuss and explore the issue.<sup>93</sup>

The research has been guided by an Expert Advisory Group [see Acknowledgements] to provide expertise and insights into the methodology and final deliverables.

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<sup>93</sup> Originally our methodology also included a short survey for professionals (informed by the literature review) to gauge their views of these issues. However, unfortunately we did not receive back sufficient complete responses to be able to discuss and validate the findings, so they are not included in this report.

## **Participatory approach with children**

To deliver our participatory research, extended workshops were facilitated in each country, each for 10-15 participants split by gender and age groups. Overall, we spoke to 211 children across the different schools and sites as well as a small number of relevant professionals in each country.

Ghana	Thailand	Ireland
Fieldwork October 2022	Fieldwork November 2022	Fieldwork January 2023
97 participants	73 participants	41 participants
Two schools: Urban state school and rural state school	Two schools: International private school and Government state school.	Three schools: Two non-denominational state schools and one faith-based state school
6 professional interviews	5 professional interviews	6 professional interviews

Our workshops with children were designed to provide an opportunity to explore their views, opinions and perceptions of 'self-generated' sexual material. The research sought to encourage children to work alongside the researchers to directly define, frame and explore the topic from their own point of view.

The toolkit we used included a set of engaging, interactive age-appropriate activities and tasks and asked children to complete written and verbal exercises around a range of themes/prompts. These themes included exploring with children how they used the internet generally, whether they were familiar with 'self-generated' image sharing as an issue, what they thought the motivations were for sharing, what young people liked and disliked about this practice, what (if any) issues it created, and how in general children could seek support. The toolkit also provided a series of exercises that prompted discovery of the kinds of information and support that children would appreciate receiving. The toolkit used generalised case studies and prompts that encouraged children to offer opinions on the issue rather than share personal experience.

Children were engaged in both individual, small group and whole group discussions, to encourage active engagement during data generation. The sessions were facilitated in a way that allowed the discussions to flow freely from an initial introduction of a question or topic (as outlined above) which was usually accompanied by a short-written exercise. Children were not pushed to answer questions or come up with responses on any given

discussion topic and children in the sessions could choose whether to write down answers, engage in the group discussions, or just listen. The contributions from children reflected the free flow of discussion and ideas that came out in the sessions.

The workshops were conducted in English, except in Thailand where some were conducted in Thai using translators who had been trained to understand and help deliver the research methodology and approach. Children participated in the workshops with other young participants within the same age range and of the same gender and completed the activities individually, in pairs and in small groups. Children and young people completed worksheets designed for each of the activities to facilitate accurate data capture.

The research team prioritised creating a safe and inclusive environment for the participants. The facilitators establish clear expectations for safe engagement at the outset and ensured that the participants had a good understanding of what was involved before sessions started. Additionally, the team offered participants the option to opt-out or disengage from activities at any time for any reason. The materials the team used were carefully planned and designed so that they would not be triggering or leading. To support with this the research team's clinical child psychologist Dr Elly Hanson informed the development and design of materials and provided training for the team on trauma informed practice.

Sessions started by introducing the phrase 'self-generated sexual material' and asking children if they were familiar with this issue. Context and terminology setting were essential at the start of the workshop to ensure that children were familiar with the issues and that the engagement would not run the risk of introducing new concepts to children. Having identified that children were familiar with this issue, the team then asked them to explain and frame the phenomena in their own words and describe how they think it happened in their country. The context setting session enabled the research team to make the duration of the session culturally relevant and to ensure that the conversation and discussions could be framed and referenced in ways that made sense to the children and young people.

This workshop approach generated a huge amount of raw data, from written materials and through detailed notes taken by the research team during group exercises and discussion. These were written up, categorised and coded following the sessions. We then undertook a thematic analysis of the data generated, coding the different themes and issues that emerged in the data to identify dominant themes and subthemes and to help us to identify the key findings as well as similarities and differences across the research sites.

### ***Interviews with professionals***

In addition to speaking to children our research also included conducting a number of interviews with professionals in the countries we visited. These professionals included safeguarding leads and relevant teachers working in the schools where we worked with children, and some wider professionals working on issues relating to child protection or

self-generated images in the countries we visited. We found that this small number of interviews provided some useful additional context and insight often reinforcing points made by children, but also reflecting on some of the challenges they faced from their own point of view. Professionals that worked directly with children were asked about their experience of dealing with the issue of 'self-generated' image and how they felt these issues impacted children in their care, as well as the different kinds of cases they had come across and how effectively they felt these were dealt with. Professionals working on policy were asked to give their view of the strategic and policy work on these issues in their country, the role of different agencies, and they were also asked what they thought was working well and what could work better. Both sets of professionals were asked if they thought that they faced specific issues in their country or location that shaped the experience or the response.

### ***Ethics and safeguarding***

The engagement methodology that we describe above was strongly informed by our approach to safeguarding. This was integral to our design of the sessions with children and the reason that our engagements were focused on activities that elevated and surfaced children's views, ideas, thoughts and opinions – rather than asking about personal experiences. During the sessions, the researchers actively avoided prompting children to share directly personal lived experiences or difficulties relating to 'self-generated' material that they may not have had the opportunity to process privately.

Our safeguarding approach also included significant background work in each country which influenced the selection of schools we chose to work with. We identified appropriate partner schools and organisations that had clear safeguarding processes in place and professional leads with a clear understanding of the issues and who were able to offer appropriate follow up. Our work included working with partners to identify a choice of viable routes of support for children should they need them. Before starting the sessions, we talked with the children and young people about safe spaces, how to create one and ensuring that the space remained one, and what to do if they did not feel safe. We made sure that children had recourse to support – and had options available to seek support following the session.

Throughout our research our team were mindful of the intention to discuss with children and young people themes that may relate to personal experiences that might have had a direct impact on their safety and wellbeing. For example, when discussing their views and opinions in relation to child 'self-generated' sexual material, children may have shared personal information, or made disclosures about incidents of coercion or abuse.

In the event of disclosure, all facilitators were fully briefed and trained on how to respond and given clear guidance via the written safeguarding protocol on how to make safeguarding referrals through the school. This process was agreed with the schools and settings in advance. As a further safeguard to the methodology, engagement materials and

safeguarding protocols were reviewed and informed by the child psychologist attached to the research team and all materials and methodological approaches were approved by an independent ethics panel.

We heard in the shared accounts from children some quite difficult issues around shame, isolation, stigma, distress, sexual exploitation, and suicide. However, these comments were not made in the context of individual experience but were about children's perceptions of the issues and problems created within their environments. We found that in the delivery of our research none of the children we engaged with disclosed to us about specific incidents and there was no individual follow up through the child protection system in relation to any individual child. We think it is possible that the fact that children did not disclose to us directly is likely to be linked to the broad disincentives that many of them described in our research in terms of help seeking for these issues.

Given the strength of some of the issues that were raised collectively in some schools we debriefed on the themes raised with safeguarding leads in each school and helped them to reflect on support that could be provided for some of these issues generally and think through potential follow up support that could be offered to groups of children where appropriate. We also offered follow up support to the schools through Praesidio in some cases. In Ghana in particular (due to the strength of some of the issues raised) there was a face to face debrief with both schools in the weeks following the research. The schools were offered support through further guidance and information that could be cascaded to all staff on the specific topic (rather than just counsellors/leads).



# Annex 2: Further research on 'self-generated' sexual material - risks and responses

## Research on the impact of online services and digital design

There is evidence to suggest that one of the drivers to sexual image exchange among children is their exposure to sexual content and sexualised interactions when they are online, and its relative normalisation in their online lives. Studies have suggested that children and young people's exposure to sexualised and pornographic imagery from a relatively young age may shape and interlink with adolescent developmental norms and drive toward risk taking.<sup>94</sup> A study of Dutch adolescents and young adults found that adolescent girls who uploaded sexualised pictures of themselves on social media were more likely to engage in 'sexting'<sup>95</sup>. Research suggests that some image sharing may represent a child or young person's way of responding to the pressures and expectations of being online, related to their sexual self-concept and linked to the volume of social media they consume.<sup>96</sup>

Recent studies have also shed light upon young people's early and widespread exposure to pornography both through social media and pornography sites<sup>97</sup>, showing the ways in which this shapes children and young people's attitudes and expectations and fosters aggressive and coercive attitudes towards women and girls in their sexual relationships. The widespread exposure to adult pornography appears to normalise and desensitise children and young people to harmful sexual practices, with girls disproportionately being the victim of receiving unwanted 'self-generated' sexual material. Research suggests that this contributes to the normalisation and desensitisation to harmful sexual practices such as routinely receiving unsolicited sexual images.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Rhyner KJ, Uhl CA, Terrance CA. Are Teens Being Unfairly Punished? Applying the Dual Systems Model of Adolescent Risk-Taking to 'sexting' Among Adolescents. *Youth Justice*. 2018;18(1):52-66. doi:10.1177/1473225417741227

<sup>95</sup> van Oosten, J. M. F., & Vandenbosch, L. (2017). Sexy online self-presentation on social network sites and the willingness to engage in 'sexting': A comparison of gender and age. *Journal of Adolescence*, 54, 42-50. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.11.006

<sup>96</sup> Piotr S. Bobkowski, Autumn Shafer, Rebecca R. Ortiz, Sexual intensity of adolescents' online self-presentations: Joint contribution of identity, media consumption, and extraversion, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 58, 2016, Pages 64-74, ISSN 0747-5632, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.009>.

<sup>97</sup> 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' Young People and pornography Children's Commissioner for England 2023

<sup>98</sup> Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva (2022) Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations.



An important UK study on digital design explores how the deliberate design of major social platforms shapes children’s consumption of content when they are online<sup>99</sup>. The research found that children’s accounts can receive sexual and harmful content (and requests for adult contact) within hours of being online, despite being registered as children. The authors describe this in the following ways:

*“The interviews with design professionals reveal the commercial objectives that put innovators under pressure to produce features that maximise time spent, maximise reach and maximise activity. These features shape children’s behaviour. They make it hard for children to put down their devices (“I kept turning it off and then going back and still using it” – Lara, 13). They push network growth to the extent that children find themselves introduced to inappropriate adults, often with provocative or sexual content (“Old men and that sort of thing” – James, 14). And they encourage children to post, share and enhance to such a degree that many children feel that their ‘real selves’ are inadequate (“All my photos have filters...they make you look prettier” – Carrie, 17).”*

One consequence of the fact that commercially driven platforms are structured to reward the engagement of users, is that certain kinds of behaviours are rewarded more than others e.g. ‘sexy’ content gets more views, shares and likes.<sup>100</sup> This can shape children’s decision making and self-understanding about how they are valued and how they should value themselves. A clear risk is that this can play into how sex offenders seek to groom and manipulate children online – offering praise and attention to children as part of the grooming process.

## Professional and educational responses

### **Confusion around assessment and appropriate response.**

Whilst there is increasing clarity and understanding about the serious nature of online child sexual exploitation and how it should be managed, research suggests that police, social work, and educational responses to the harmful onward sharing of consensually produced images can be patchy and inconsistent. This continues to create resource challenges for law enforcement and other professionals while there is a lack of clarity around what a proportionate legal, educational or child protection response looks like for these activities.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Pathways How Digital Design puts Children at Risk (5Rights Foundation)

<sup>100</sup> [www.weprotect.org/blog/self-generated-sexual-content-involving-young-people-demands-understanding-and-nuance/](http://www.weprotect.org/blog/self-generated-sexual-content-involving-young-people-demands-understanding-and-nuance/)

<sup>101</sup> Ethel Quayle, Laura Cariola, Management of non-consensually shared youth-produced sexual images: A Delphi study with adolescents as experts, Child Abuse & Neglect, Volume 95, 2019, 104064, ISSN 0145-2134, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104064>.



Within research that has explored this topic there is recognition of the importance of working with children to define appropriate responses. One UK study exploring this concluded that children want protection and non-judgemental support, reassurance and privacy for the victim, and discussion of bullying and disrespectful behaviour with the perpetrator. This was felt to rely on a greater shared understanding between children and adults so that that interventions were non-judgemental and non-blaming toward the victim and would not result in their punishment or having their phone taken away.<sup>102</sup>

A further complexity for interventions is determining what behaviours are truly 'voluntary' between peers, and much of the research on "sexting" challenges this binary in terms of the level of consent that exists in relationships where unequal power relations are being used to apply pressure or expectation as part of an intimate relationship, with some vulnerable adolescents not necessarily able or willing to identify unhealthy relationships or relate to the behaviour as coercive. It is also the case that some online sexual behaviours such as persistent 'sexting' may not be coerced by another person but can be the result of harmful experiences or previous trauma – with those involved still needing intervention or support.

<sup>103</sup>

### ***Professional uncertainty***

A recent Canadian study looked at how 'youth-produced sexual imagery' is a complex social phenomenon that can be difficult to fit within existing professional expertise.<sup>104</sup> The study explores these issues with professionals working on child sexual abuse, from law enforcement, child protection and mental health, and it found that professionals struggled to identify where specific support or legal intervention was appropriate given the changing nature of children's sexual agency in the online environment, and broader cultural shifts and generational differences. There was also a lack of clarity around the roles of different practitioners, who should lead, what resources should be used, and how to help young people navigate this aspect of their adolescence. In general, there was a view there was too much police involvement and an assumption that policing should lead the response was harmful in diverting time that could be spent tackling serious adult offenders. There was also a potential misunderstanding that 'technical expertise' should be a requirement to deal with casework leading some professionals to distance themselves from involvement.

### ***Criminalisation risks***

It is important to note that there is a growing international consensus on the need to avoid the criminalisation of children and young people for sharing their own images or sexual

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid*

<sup>103</sup> The Risk of Online Sexual Abuse (ROSA) Project By Nina Vaswani, Lindsay Mullen, Erifili Efthymiadou and Stuart Allardyce June 2022

<sup>104</sup> Andrea Slane, Jennifer Martin & Jonah R. Rimer (2021) Views and Attitudes about Youth Self-Produced Sexual Images among Professionals with Expertise in Child Sexual Abuse, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 30:2, 207-229

material depicting themselves. In 2019 the Council of Europe Lanzarote Committee published an opinion on '*child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children.*'<sup>105</sup> This opinion identified that children should not be convicted for possession or voluntary sharing of sexual images and should only be criminally prosecuted as a last resort - with priority given to measures to deal with the harmful behaviour such as educational or therapeutic support. The opinion aimed to persuade countries not to prosecute children when they were sharing their own explicit images.

UNICEF's 2022 review *Legislating for the Digital Age* also identifies that the criminalisation of children for their private use of images should be avoided, and prosecution should only be considered in exceptional circumstances where children are clearly blackmailing or coercing other children or sharing their images onwards without consent. The UNICEF review outlines that such prosecutions should only ever occur within the children's justice system according to child-friendly justice principles, *and*, as per the Lanzarote convention - as a last resort. This is described in the report as follows:

*Under international and regional standards, child recipients of 'self-generated' sexual content by other children may be prosecuted for offences relating to child sexual abuse material in certain circumstances provided that the child is handled in the child justice system according to child-friendly justice principles (see further below on the child justice system)<sup>106</sup>. These circumstances include the following:*

- *The child coerces, blackmails or otherwise places undue pressure on another child to produce or share 'self-generated' sexual content;*
- *The child, with knowledge and intention, procures or obtains access to 'self-generated' sexual content by another child beyond or without the volition and consent of the child who is the subject of the material;*
- *The child shares (for example, distributes, disseminates, exports, offers or sells) 'self-generated' sexual content of another child.*

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<sup>105</sup> Lanzarote Committee COE opinion from 2019: Opinion on child sexually suggestive or explicit images and/or videos generated, shared and received by children The opinion aims at encouraging countries not to prosecute children when sharing their own explicit images.

<sup>106</sup> *Legislating for the Digital Age (2022) Global Guide on improving legislative frameworks to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse* <https://www.unicef.org/reports/legislating-digital-age> (p66)

## The report goes on to note:

*This is a complex area, with international and regional standards aiming to strike a balance between the evolving capacities of the child and the protection of children from exploitation and abuse. In sum, as a general rule, children should not be prosecuted for offences related to 'self-generated' sexual images. However, in the circumstances outlined above, prosecution may be permitted where other alternative measures are not appropriate, in line with international child justice standards (see further below on the minimum standards concerning the child justice system).*

Some studies make the case that all exchange between peers (including non-consensual exchange) should be decriminalised with criminalisation only applying to adults. Reviews of professional perspectives tend to show a preference for deterrence, education, and awareness rather than legal means to deal with the issues<sup>107</sup>. There is also evidence of success for diversionary approaches.<sup>108</sup>

## Global evidence of effective approaches to prevention and risk reduction

### **Framing 'sexting' in education responses**

The research on 'sexting' reflects some division over the degree to which 'sexting' is part of normal sexual development and sexual practices and the degree to which it is a negative or dangerous behaviour.<sup>109</sup> This has been described as the 'deviancy discourse' as opposed to the 'normalcy' discourse in which 'sexting' is part of legitimate sexual relationships.<sup>110</sup> Some researchers argue that 'sexting', like other risky behaviours, can play a legitimate role in adolescent development and allow adolescents to fulfil certain developmental tasks.<sup>111</sup> However, a number of studies have also explored in greater depth some of the potential inequalities of experience that children face in the power dynamics of image exchange and question the extent to which we should allow this practice to be regarded as harmless 'flirting' even if for some children it creates no obvious negative consequences and might even enhance the wellbeing of some individuals.<sup>112</sup> Thinking about the role of 'sexting' in creating problematic volumes of child sexual abuse material also underlines many of the harm aspects.

However, understanding children and young people's motivations for engaging in 'sexting' is an important starting point in encouraging them to engage in behaviours that will help to

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<sup>109</sup> See Yara Barrenese-Dias et al, 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid Doring (2014)

<sup>111</sup> Van Ouytsel, Joris, et al. "'sexting': Adolescents' perceptions of the applications used for, motives for, and consequences of 'sexting'." *Journal of Youth Studies* 20.4 (2017): 446-470.

<sup>112</sup> Revealing Reality (2022) Not Just Flirting The unequal experiences and consequences of nude image sharing by young people, See also Reed et al (2020)

keep them healthy and safe. A number of studies have often been critical of the focus of educational initiatives as victim-blaming<sup>113</sup>, and argue that this exacerbates the barriers for children and young people to disclose or seek help.<sup>114</sup>

Research suggests that although professionals may regard 'sexting' as a problematic behaviour in many contexts, there is value in avoiding a blame and shame dynamic and prioritising safety over insisting on abstinence. An overview study of 'sexting' risk prevention approaches found that in an analysis of 10 online educational campaigns (from Australia, the US and Europe), such campaigns typically rely on scare scenarios, emphasise the risk of bullying and criminal prosecution, engage in female victim-blaming, and recommend complete abstinence from 'sexting'.<sup>115</sup> This study looks at the increased prevalence and normalisation of 'sexting' from a meta-analysis of 50 studies and advocates for a safer sex approach which *"a) fosters adolescents' individual skills of resisting peer pressure and making conscious decisions about if, when, how, and with whom to have sex and/or to 'sex' consensually and responsibly, and b) builds a safer environment by taking more effective anti-bullying measures at the school and community levels, and by avoiding punishment and stigmatization for consensual age-appropriate sexual exploration"*.

This study also points out that many adolescents who already know about possible negative outcomes still engage in 'sexting', and that teenagers themselves exchange safer 'sexting' tips (e.g., use of anonymised pictures; or using apps that automatically delete pictures after a couple of seconds). These technical measures can be helpful but have limits (e.g., some "deleted" photos can be retrieved and screenshots can be made). The research demonstrates that youth do themselves engage in moral discourses about consensual and ethical 'sexting' practices (e.g. protection of the 'sexting' partner's privacy) and educational campaigns would have more success if they engaged with young people's own conversations. Other studies also highlight the importance of covering consent and relationship pressure issues in school sex and education classes, emphasising the value of open discussion with children and young people – including exploring relationship dynamics with as much focus on those asking for or demanding images as those sharing them.<sup>116</sup>

Evidence that suggests many young people are aware of the risks of 'sexting' but engage in it anyway aligns with wider research on online safety education which suggests the need to go beyond simply explaining or pointing out online risks to children, and to instead offer

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<sup>113</sup> Beatrice Sciacca, Angela Mazzone, James O'Higgins Norman, Mairéad Foody, Blame and responsibility in the context of youth produced sexual imagery: The role of teacher empathy and rape myth acceptance, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Volume 103, 2021, 103354,

<sup>114</sup> D. Allnock et al. 'Snitches get stitches': School-specific barriers to victim disclosure and peer reporting of sexual harm committed by young people in school contexts. *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2019)

<sup>115</sup> Consensual 'sexting' among adolescents: Risk prevention through abstinence education or safer 'sexting'? - Nicola Döring (2014) *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 8(1), article 9.

<sup>116</sup> Sending One's Own Intimate Image: 'sexting' Among Middle-School Teens - Yara Barrenese-Dias, Lorraine Chok, Sophie Stadelmann, Andre Berchtold, and Joan-Carles Suris (2022) *Journal of School Health*, 92(4), 353-360.

broad based and consistent safety programmes that include online safety with a strong social and emotional skills component. Research suggests these should seek to enable children to resist pressure, empathise, master emotions and improve healthy and safe decision-making.<sup>117</sup>

Current best practice is recognised to include helping children and young people to build positive healthy relations and identify and challenge harmful relationships or behaviours.<sup>118</sup> This includes helping children and young people to identify and act in line with their core values, act as a positive bystander in 'sexting' situations, and to challenge harmful gender norms.

### ***Adolescent resistance strategies***

Efforts to strengthen educational approaches may also be aided by our understanding of how adolescents respond to implicit and explicit pressure to 'sex' and what counter strategies they use if they do not want to engage in 'sexting'.<sup>119</sup> A recent study carried out with Swedish adolescents identified a wide range of situations in which adolescents report that they can feel under pressure to 'sex' including unexpected requests or unsolicited images being sent to them alongside more obvious pressure such as nagging and threats. The study found that, even if some dynamics do not include overt acts of pressure or coercion, these can be experienced as pressurising. The research stated that some children were able to say no and to 'stand up' for themselves, whilst for others saying no was not an obvious way out but a skill that could be developed over time. Sometimes the ability to say no was innate, and sometimes it was supported by children's knowledge and belief in their own bodily integrity. Some resistance strategies included making threats back or using humour to diffuse the situation. Another core strategy was blocking and knowledge of how to block other users which some adolescents did routinely.<sup>120</sup>

Overall, research appears to show that adolescents do feel pressure within contexts that do not explicitly appear coercive and that many of them already use concrete strategies for saying no which can be built on by educational strategies. These of course are likely to be impacted by specifics of the relationship dynamics and harmful gender norms they experience.

<sup>117</sup> Finkelhor, D. et, al, (2020) Youth Internet Safety Education: Aligning Programmes With the Evidence Base (unh.edu) Trauma, Violence and Abuse (2020).

<sup>118</sup> Building healthy relationships and creating positive cultures a CEOP resource developed in association with clinical psychologist Dr Elly Hanson with <https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/professionals/resources/respecting-me-you-us/>

<sup>119</sup> Lunde, C. & Joelby, M. (2022) Being under pressure to 'sex': Adolescents Experiences, Reactions and Counter Strategies. Journal of Research on Adolescence

<sup>120</sup> This finding aligns with the recent Thorn survey which found that children prefer to block other users than seek offline support. Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspective on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking in 2021, Thorn's research found that Blocking tools remain kids' most used online safety feature in controlling potentially harmful online interactions. 68% of kids in their survey of 1141 9-17-year-olds blocked users when experiencing potentially harmful online interactions, while 50% used a reporting feature, 23% muted the users, and just 15% ignored them.

## Caregiver responses

Recent research underscores the value of educating and informing parents so that they can contribute to the prevention and safety responses to this issue.<sup>121</sup> A recent study which surveyed 2,000 US caregivers to explore their role in supporting and improving the resilience of children and young people to deal with 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material<sup>122</sup> found that caregivers tend to generalise talks about online safety with their kids at the expense of explicit discussions that can help kids recognise and navigate the distinct risks and pathways of grooming and 'sharing nudes'. It found that while two in three caregivers had talked with their child about social media and digital safety, fewer than one in three caregivers had talked with their child specifically about 'self-generated' child sexual abuse material. Other key findings include that parents perceived girls to be more at risk but also bearing more responsibility if things go wrong and parents were more likely to blame girls if their images are leaked than they are to blame boys. It also found that parents often perceived their own children would never engage with 'self-generated' sexual material or were too young to do so. Alongside this, parents and caregiver responses indicated that their own lack of knowledge would often inhibit them from talking directly about these issues with their children. Importantly, the study noted that not all children have access to engaged and informed caregivers who can help protect them from these risks.

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<sup>121</sup> The Role of Caregivers: Safeguarding & Enhancing Youth Resilience Against Harmful Sexual Encounters Online Findings from qualitative and quantitative SG-CSAM research among parents and guardians in 2021

<sup>122</sup> This is defined as explicit imagery of a child that appears to have been taken by the child in the image. This imagery can result from both consensual or coercive experiences

# Annex 3: Ghana

## background information

### The legal and policy environment

#### Legislation

In Ghana the recent Cybersecurity Act 2020 (Act 1038) includes a number of provisions that protect children from online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The Act criminalises child abuse online, including the production, viewing and distribution of child sexual abuse materials, online grooming of children, cyberstalking of a child and sexual extortion. Upon conviction, the Act penalises such offences for up to 25 years.<sup>123</sup> The Cybersecurity Act 2020 also introduces notice and takedown procedures for Child Sexual Abuse Material.<sup>124</sup> Ghana does not have its own INHOPE<sup>125</sup> member hotline but does have a reporting portal provided by the IWF in the UK.<sup>126</sup>

#### Law enforcement

A government review in 2016 identified improvements that needed to be made in dealing with cases of child protection<sup>127</sup>:

- There is a need to develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the Ghana Police Service to effectively and uniformly manage cases involving children who come into contact with the law, including victims, witnesses and alleged offenders.
- It is also important to develop a child protection curriculum for police officers, with corresponding initial and specialised training toolkits to incorporate regular, mandatory training for all new recruits and all specialised officers.
- It is recommended that there be a trained cadre of police officers from all the police training schools across the country, and within the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the police and the Anti Human Trafficking Unit, with the capacity to roll

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<sup>123</sup> <https://csdsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cybersecurity-Act-2020-Act-1038.pdf>

<sup>124</sup> More about Ghana's legal framework can be found in our report, Legislating for the digital age [https://www.unicef.org/media/120386/file/Legislating%20for%20the%20digital%20age\\_Global%20Guide.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/120386/file/Legislating%20for%20the%20digital%20age_Global%20Guide.pdf)

<sup>125</sup> INHOPE is the membership organisation for the hotlines around the world to report Child Abuse Material

<sup>126</sup> <https://report.iwf.org.uk/gh/report>

<sup>127</sup> Integrating Child Friendly Policing into the Ghana Police Service Mapping Report 2016



out and integrate child protection training into police training schools and training for specialised officers.

- Finally, there is the need to improve national level statistics by designing a data collection and management system using smart solutions to record, collect and analyse data on cases involving children with the aim to improve analysis and strategic planning for children's access to justice. These recommendations remain key drivers for change.

The Ghana Police Service signed a letter of agreement in October 2019 with UNICEF to pave the way for the setting up of Ghana's first ever Child Protection Digital Forensic Laboratory (CP-DFL).<sup>128</sup> The primary purpose of the Lab is to equip the Ghana Police Service with the tools to prevent and respond to cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, bullying, child trafficking, sexual extortion and 'cyberstalking'.<sup>129</sup>

### **Child protection policy and challenges**

Ghana has a comprehensive child protection policy authored in 2014.<sup>130</sup> The policy identifies a 'comprehensive legal framework for child protection', guided by the Constitution and the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560) but acknowledges that in practice there are a number of areas that need development and work including sharing information, co-ordination between key actors as well as resourcing and keeping the focus on the needs of children. The policy document states:

*"For children and families, the main entry points into the existing Child and Family Welfare System are the police and social welfare agencies; but these institutions are hampered by a general lack of financial and human resources to effectively deliver services. Community structures - mostly led by family heads, religious leaders, chiefs, queen-mothers and assembly members - often emphasise compensation, reconciliation and restoring harmony in the family and community over the needs of the child who has been harmed."*

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<sup>128</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/ghana/press-releases/combating-online-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-ghana>

<sup>129</sup> More information about this unit and how it was set up can be found here

<https://www.unicef.org/media/113731/file/Ending%20Online%20Sexual%20Exploitation%20and%20Abuse.pdf>

<sup>130</sup> <https://www.mogcsp.gov.gh/policies/> Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection - Child and Family Welfare Policy.

In relation to this specialist area of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, a recent review of the Model National Response in 42 countries found that Ghana is seeking to create integrated case management system with a standard operating procedure for the Child and Family Welfare system. This outlines the referral pathways, standards for multi-sector case management and specific guidance for child sexual exploitation and abuse cases. A Directory of Social Services is provided for the 260 districts in the country to encourage referrals and integrated case management.<sup>131</sup>

A recent report by UNICEF identifies three pathways to change that will improve the protective environment for children in Ghana.<sup>132</sup> These include addressing sexual violence towards children online:

- Increase budget allocations to metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies to improve birth registration and strengthen the prevention of and response to sexual violence, child labour and adolescent pregnancies.
- Enhance the capacity of the social welfare, justice and birth registration workforce to provide accessible and responsive services to children and families.
- Facilitate a better understanding of violence against and abuse of children within families, especially sexual violence and sexual violence online, and encourage communities and businesses to prevent and address child rights risks.

UNICEF reported in 2022 that it was using support from the Fund to End Violence Against Children to develop a National Plan of Action to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Ghana.<sup>133</sup> This involved working closely with the National Cybersecurity Crime Centre to integrate online child protections into the country's national cybersecurity strategy.

## **Education**

The recent evaluation of the NMR in 42 countries found that in Ghana the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Communications and Digitalisation have developed a digital literacy package to equip children with digital literacy skills and support online safety in schools. In addition, there have been two national campaigns – A Safer Digital Ghana and Ghanaians Against Child Abuse – that address online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Both target children and parents.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Framing the Future: How the Model National Response framework is supporting national efforts to end child sexual exploitation and abuse online We Protect Global Alliance and UNICEF 2022

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/ghana/reports/fulfilling-commitment-child-protection-ghana>

<sup>133</sup> [www.end-violence.org/grants/unicef-ghana](http://www.end-violence.org/grants/unicef-ghana)

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. Framing the Future.

## Recent research and data from Ghana

### *Children's online activity in Ghana*

An extensive study on children and young people's internet use was conducted in Ghana in 2017 with the support of UNICEF. It is important to recognise that this study is now over five years old so may not represent the current context in Ghana. Nonetheless the research provides an interesting picture of children's internet use from 2017. The study looked at children's risk taking, and opportunities related to child online practices. Researchers interviewed 2,000 child respondents and 1,000 adults, including parents and carers, policymakers, government, and civil society leaders.<sup>135</sup> The study found strong evidence of risk reporting with three in 10 saying they had experienced something that bothered or upset them while online and four out of 10 said they had seen sexual images whilst online. Two in 10 children said that they had been treated in a harmful way or a way which they didn't like online. The study notes these were mainly older children and boys from urban areas. Group discussions showed that the most common things bothering children online were online pornographic images, sharing of violent images, fraud, money scams, and emotional harm from negative comments and misuse of posted pictures in a way that is demeaning.

In relation to risky practices, the study found that four in 10 children said that they had contacted someone on the internet that they had never met face to face before and two in 10 children had met with someone that they first got to know on the internet. The study also provided a detailed breakdown on the sending and receiving of sexual messages and images. It found that 22% of 9-17-year-olds had received sexual messages with words, pictures, or videos. This was more common among boys (26%) than girls (18%). Instances of youths who ever sent, shared, or posted sexual messages were fewer but more common among boys (7%) than girls (5%). (9%) were aged 15-17 years. (4%) were aged 12-14 years and (3%) were aged 9-11 years.

This report found that five in 10 children who had experienced something that upset or bothered them online would talk to a friend of the same age. Only two in 10 would talk to a parent or sibling and one in 10 would not talk to anyone. The study found that children in Ghana talked to each other about their internet use to work through issues. The study also spoke to parents and found that largely parents reported they were not confident to support their children online – only about three in 10 parents felt they could offer support to their children online and only two in 10 parents felt confident that their child would cope with upsetting things online. Less than half the children surveyed felt that parents supported and guided them online to explore and learn, and the majority of parents

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<sup>135</sup> Risks and Opportunities Related to Child Online Practices Ghana Country Report 2017 (UNICEF, Global Kids Online, Ministry of Communications Ghana) <http://globalkidsonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/FINAL-factsheet.pdf> and <http://globalkidsonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/child-online-practices-Full-report-Final-Sept-10.pdf>

reported that they restrict or monitor what their children are doing online.

### ***Out of the Shadows Assessment 2022***

The Out of the Shadows Index is a global index that aims to benchmark how 60 countries are responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse. Ghana scored 47.9 out of 100 on this Index (where 0 equates to the worst environment for children and 100 represents the best). The index does not measure the scale of child sexual abuse in each county but provides an assessment of how well stakeholders are approaching the problem at a national level. When compared to Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana scores higher than the region. A strength identified in Ghana is the justice process. Reported weaknesses by comparison include support services and recovery, and prevention.



# Annex 4: Thailand

## background information

### The legal and policy environment

#### Legislation

The main legislation addressing offences relating to child sexual exploitation and abuse in Thailand is the Thai Penal Code (1956). In addition, a few relevant provisions are included in the Child Protection Act (2003), the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (2008) and the computer-Related Crime Act (2007). The Thai Penal Code provides a quite comprehensive definition of child sexual abuse material and criminalises certain acts associated with it. It also criminalises obscene material in general; some provisions that apply to pornographic material in general also apply to child sexual abuse material. The Child Protection Act criminalises the acts of forcing, threatening, inducing, instigating, encouraging, or allowing a child to perform or act in a “pornographic manner”, irrespective of the intention behind these acts. However, the Child Protection Act does not explicitly indicate whether this conduct could refer to “performances” shared online or live streamed. Under the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, “exploitation” relates to seeking benefits from the production or distribution of pornographic material. The computer-related Crime Act criminalises the download of any data of pornographic nature to a computer system that is publicly accessible but does not define what constitutes data of a pornographic nature. It has been noted that neither the Thai Penal Code nor any other law, explicitly criminalise ‘cybersex trafficking’ (the live-streaming of child sexual abuse), online grooming, and sexual extortion.<sup>136</sup>

#### Law enforcement

Law enforcement action on child sexual abuse online is split between the Department of Special Investigations, under the Ministry of Justice of the Royal Thai Government, and the Thailand Internet Crimes Against Children task force (TICAC) it is comprised of approximately 220 police officers.<sup>137</sup> Comprehensive national data is not available to differentiate all law enforcement action. Criminal offences in Thailand are reported to local police stations in the first instance, the different policing structures have different investigative priorities. There is overlap and duplication between all levels of policing.

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<sup>136</sup> [https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH\\_Thailand\\_ONLINE\\_final.pdf](https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH_Thailand_ONLINE_final.pdf)

<sup>137</sup> [https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH\\_Thailand\\_ONLINE\\_final.pdf](https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH_Thailand_ONLINE_final.pdf)

## **Child Protection System**

The recent ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Disrupting Harm study in Thailand noted that the Thai government had established multidisciplinary One-Stop Crisis Centres (OSCC) in 2013, which offer coordinated medical, legal, and counselling services for child and adult victims of violence, including sexual violence. These have been developed through cooperation between the Royal Thai Police, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Labour. Although the quality of services and staff capacity may vary by location, One-Stop Crisis Centres are a key component of the child protection system.

Overall, the Disrupting Harm study suggests however that access to support for victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse is likely to be limited. OSCC's which provide child friendly interviewing, help through the criminal justice system, preparation for court and access to social support are available online to children who are in the care of the hospital. In general, awareness of and access to support from social workers is very limited with social workers not necessarily professionally trained or having an awareness or understanding of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

There are a number of hotlines in Thailand to facilitate reporting including the Thai hotline, National Helpline, and Thai Childline. However, the Disrupting Harm research found reports of child sexual abuse to these to be very low. Few children report cases of child sexual abuse online to formal reporting mechanisms such as the police or helplines. Similarly, the report found that the majority of caregivers would hesitate to report to the police if their child experienced sexual harassment, abuse, or exploitation. Only 16% said that they would tell the police if their child was subjected to these forms of abuse. The reasons for this appear to relate to community stigma and the belief that nothing would change as a result of reporting, or that it might even have negative consequences.

## **Education**

The Disrupting Harm report identified that stakeholders from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, and the Ministry of Public Health were considering developing a curriculum with the aim to educate and inform young people on how to protect themselves from cybercrimes. The aim would be to distribute the curriculum to elementary and secondary schools throughout the country to help guide students and teachers on how to deal with online safety.

The Disrupting Harm report recommends that Thailand create a Government body to centralise leadership on online CSEA and prevention. They recommend that this include a dedicated law enforcement unit with specialist multi agency staff working within it. The report also recommends efforts to destigmatise conversations about sex and adapting existing educational programmes around sexual exploitation to make them more inclusive of online issues.



## Recent relevant research and data from Thailand

### *Children online*

The aforementioned Disrupting Harm study in Thailand provided important data on internet use and online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Thailand.<sup>138</sup> This study found that internet use was widespread among children and adolescents in Thailand with an estimated 94% of 12–17-year-olds being internet users. Almost all internet-using children in Thailand go online at least once per day. Like children in other parts of the world, smartphones are by far the most popular devices used to go online among 12–17-year-olds. Fifty-five percent of children can go online whenever they want or need, without facing any barriers. For the children who do face barriers, adults restricting their internet access is most common, while a smaller group of children experience slow connection or poor signal where they live. The most popular online activities among 12–17-year olds in Thailand were said to be entertainment or social activities, primarily watching videos, using social media, and instant messaging. Educational activities, such as using the internet for schoolwork or searching for new information, were also very common.

### *Experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online*

The study found that experiences of child sexual abuse online were relatively common in Thailand:

- At least 9% of internet-using children aged 12–17 (approximately 400,000 children) were victims of ‘grave instances’ of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year alone. ‘Grave instances’ included blackmailing children to engage in sexual activities, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts.
- 7% of 12–17-year-old internet users in Thailand were offered money or gifts to engage in a sexual activity in person over the past year. Among the children who received such offers, 76% said they were contacted via social media, most commonly on Twitter followed by Facebook and TikTok.
- 7% had been offered money or gifts for sexual images in the past year.
- 10% were asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when they did not want to in the last year. 70% of these children reported negative feelings about this experience, the most common being feeling guilty, scared, annoyed and distressed.

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<sup>138</sup> [https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH\\_Thailand\\_ONLINE\\_final.pdf](https://www.end-violence.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/DH_Thailand_ONLINE_final.pdf)



- Offenders are most often people already known to the child. Individuals, unknown to the child, accounted for around one-fifth of cases.

The Disrupting Harm study also found some detailed evidence around the prevalence of and motivations for engaging in sexting in Thailand. The study found that 9% of internet-using children in Thailand had shared their naked images or videos online in the last year. Those that had shared their images or videos provided a range of reasons for doing this including: worry that they would lose a relationship (28%); being in love (23%); trusting the other person (23%); and being threatened (17%).

### ***Out of the Shadows Index***

Thailand scored 58.7 out of 100 (where 0 is worst and 100 is the best) on the Out of the Shadows Global Index. The Global Index assessed the strength of stakeholder prevention and response to child sexual abuse.<sup>139</sup> Strengths in Thailand were identified as including Initial responses to victims, civil support and activism and adoption of the WeProtect Global Alliance National Response framework. Perceived weaknesses included age of consent legislation, marriage laws, laws supporting victims, long term support, justice process and the lack of national plans, policies, or strategies to combat child sexual abuse.

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<sup>139</sup> <https://outoftheshadows.global/> For Thailand see <https://outoftheshadows.global/data/east-asia-and-pacific/thailand>



# Annex 5: Ireland

## background information

### The legal and policy environment

#### **Legislation**

Ireland has a proactive and strong legal policy environment around online harms. Ireland has recently passed an Online Safety and Media Regulation Act in late 2022 which introduces an executive commission model regulator with an executive chairperson, and then individual commissioners, including an online safety commissioner, who will be responsible for the online safety framework. The Act addresses content moderation and content delivery on platforms and defines 42 types of harmful online content (including illegal content which it will address). The newly established regulator will also have a role in education, awareness, and co-ordination of online issues, providing information and educational materials.

In Ireland, the sexual abuse, sexual coercion and sexual exploitation of children are offences under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 as amended by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 and are often referred to by the legal term "child pornography". There has been a second reading of the Child Trafficking and Child Sexual Exploitation Material in February (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage, which proposes a change to the term 'child pornography'.

Ireland also recently introduced the Harmful, Harassment Communications and Offences Act in 2020. This includes a specific law for the non-consensual sharing of intimate image or intimate image abuse. This is mainly focused on adults but could be relevant for the sharing of images of under 18s if they did not meet the legal threshold of child abuse images.

#### **Law enforcement**

An Garda Síochána, Ireland's national police service and specifically the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau (GNCCB) deals with criminal investigations relating to child sexual abuse. Improved cooperation between Hotline.ie and industry for taking down child abuse and other illegal material has been the focus of recent policy through the development of an enhanced Code of Practice and Ethics. Hotline.ie, part of the Safer Internet Centre, works in collaboration with An Garda Síochána. It deals with reports referring to suspected

illegal content encountered on the internet.<sup>140</sup>

Fighting against child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation is an area where there are well-established collaborative partnerships in place between government, law enforcement and industry. Complementary roles include NGOs such as the ISPC, Barnardos and CARI which provide a range of support to victims of online abuse; industry which plays a critical role in taking down and removing child sexual abuse material from its services; and a number of research centres that focus on supporting research and training in the area of preventing cybercrime and child sexual exploitation.

### ***Child Protection policy and online safety***

Ireland has a robust child protection system and clear policy and procedures which outline the roles of the main statutory bodies involved in child welfare and protection, specifically Tusla - Child and Family Agency, and An Garda Síochána.<sup>141</sup> The Children First Act 2015 has also placed a number of statutory obligations on specific groups of professionals and on particular organisations providing services to children around the mandatory reporting of child abuse where they suspect *'knowledge, belief or reasonable suspicion that a child has been harmed, is being harmed, or is at risk of being harmed.'*

In relation to online safety specifically, Ireland has a Safer Internet Centre providing education, awareness materials, helplines and a hotline to report child abuse material, funded by the Department of Education and the European Commission. There is established multi-agency involvement in online safety policy initiatives including from a range of academics and NGOs. The National Advisory Council for Online Safety<sup>142</sup> sits within the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and provides a forum for NGOs, academics and industry stakeholders to advise Government on online safety issues, supporting new research and guidance as needed. The Council was formed as part of the 2018-19 Action Plan for Online Safety.

The Better Internet for Kids (BIK) Policy Map is a tool used to compare and exchange knowledge on policy making and implementation in EU Member States on the themes and recommendations of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children (or BIK Strategy).<sup>143</sup> The BIK policy Map country profile explains the evolution of the policy landscape in Ireland with the Action Plan for Online Safety 2018-19<sup>144</sup> building on the earlier Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, with a range of actions aimed at stronger protection, support, evidence and influencing policy and regulation in the online space.

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<sup>140</sup> [www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/6823249/Ireland+-+BIK+Policy+Map+Infosheet+-+FINAL.pdf/c9040e7b-2143-ec2a-d089-722b8c771306?t=1622798025631](http://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/6823249/Ireland+-+BIK+Policy+Map+Infosheet+-+FINAL.pdf/c9040e7b-2143-ec2a-d089-722b8c771306?t=1622798025631)

<sup>141</sup> [www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children\\_First\\_National\\_Guidance\\_2017.pdf](http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children_First_National_Guidance_2017.pdf)

<sup>142</sup> [www.gov.ie/en/publication/ebe58-national-advisory-council-for-online-safety-nacos/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ebe58-national-advisory-council-for-online-safety-nacos/)

<sup>143</sup> [www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/6823249/Ireland+-+BIK+Policy+Map+Infosheet+-+FINAL.pdf/c9040e7b-2143-ec2a-d089-722b8c771306?t=1622798025631](http://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/documents/167024/6823249/Ireland+-+BIK+Policy+Map+Infosheet+-+FINAL.pdf/c9040e7b-2143-ec2a-d089-722b8c771306?t=1622798025631)

<sup>144</sup> [www.gov.ie/en/publication/77f39d-action-plan-for-online-safety-2018-2019/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/77f39d-action-plan-for-online-safety-2018-2019/)

## Education

There are a number of educational campaigns and resources available for children in Ireland. Currently it is mandatory to teach children Social Personal and Health Education as part of the school curriculum, but it is not a requirement to teach children about online sexual interactions.<sup>145</sup> However, the curriculum is currently being reviewed and it is expected the new version will include online relationships as part of the content. At present there are a number of optional resources available to schools. Resources exploring peer to peer 'sexting' and online grooming and exploitation include Lockers which is an information and education resource, which assists schools in coping with and preventing the sharing of explicit 'self-generated' images of children. Lessons explore the legal implications of non-consensual sharing of intimate images, consent, peer pressure, victim-blaming, gender stereotypes, media influence and help-seeking.<sup>146</sup>

## Recent relevant research and data from Ireland

### Children Online

The EU Kids Online team in Ireland, in conjunction with Ireland's National Advisory Council for Online Safety, has published findings of a national survey of children, their parents and adults regarding online safety. The study was published in 2021 with fieldwork carried out between December 2019 and October 2020).<sup>147</sup> This research provided a comprehensive overview of how people in Ireland, particularly children, aged 9 -17, accessed and used the internet, and mapped their online practices, skills, online risks and opportunities.

#### Key findings:

- Most children are positive about the Internet and say there are good elements for their age. 44% say this is very true and 39% say it is fairly true.
- 62% of children and young people, aged 9-17 year, use social media. This rises from a quarter of 9-10-year-olds to nearly 90% of 15-17-year-olds.
- People being nasty to each other (24%) and bullying (22%) stand out as the most mentioned issues that upset young people. A quarter of all girls (26%) listed people being nasty to each other as the issue that most frequently upsets them.

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<sup>145</sup> <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Social,-Personal-and-Health-Education/>

<sup>146</sup> <https://www.webwise.ie/lockers/>

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1f19b-report-of-a-national-survey-of-children-their-parents-and-adults-regarding-online-safety/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/onlinesafetyreport/>

- Children and their parents or carers have different perceptions of children's experiences. For example, 53% of parents say they help their child when something bothers them on the Internet. This contrasts with 19% of children who report telling a parent about issues that have upset them online.
- 82% of parents or carers say that they would most prefer to receive online safety information from the child's school with 60% currently receiving information this way.
- For adults, being contacted by strangers or someone they didn't know is the most reported problem encountered online. This is reported by 13% of adults overall. 8% say this happens at least every month and 3% at least every week.

The study found that relatively small percentages said they had received sexual messages - 8% overall, which includes 6% of boys and 9% of girls reported receiving sexual messages. The numbers vary significantly by age with the finding that just 1% of 11-12-year-olds report receiving sexual messages, rising to 9% for 13-14-year-olds and 15% for 16-17-year-olds. When participants were asked if they had ever sent or posted sexual images the numbers were very small - in response to this item, just 1% of the total reported having sent or posted sexual messages. Respondents were in the older teenage bracket, but the numbers involved were too small for statistical analysis.

The survey also asked children if they had received unwanted requests for sexual information. The survey found that 5% of children reported receiving such requests - including 6% of girls once or a few times in the past year. However, 1% of girls reported receiving these requests frequently or at least once a month.

### ***Experiences of 'self-generated' images in Ireland***

A study from Dublin City University, which included a survey of 185 young people and 10 focus groups with 60 young people aged 15-17 in 2021, found the pressure to send nude images as well as the receiving of unsolicited sexual images becoming normalised for secondary students.<sup>148</sup> The study found that girls experienced more online harms and digital harassment of a sexual nature than boys, while LGBTQ+ students experienced more online harms than heterosexual students including a heightened experience since Covid-19. Roughly twice as many girls (33.3%) as boys (17.4%) received unwanted sexual photos from friends, adult strangers, and people they know only online.

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<sup>148</sup> Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva (2022) Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Young-Peoples-Experiences.pdf>



The study found that 15.1% of boys and 32.2% of girls were asked to send sexual photos or videos of themselves online, and 36.7% of girls and 20% of boys said this increased since COVID-19 started. Significantly more girls (18.8%) than boys (1.2%) said they were pressured to send sexually explicit photos or videos of themselves pre-COVID. While post-COVID, that behaviour increased by 40% for girls. For boys it increased by 7.1%. The recommendations of the study included improvements to the RSE curriculum to include children's digital experiences, relatable interactive content, digital rights and ethics, and information about consent, gender-based sexual abuse and harassment, including how these issues affect LGBTQ+ individuals.

### **Hotline Reporting - Online CSEA demographics**

Hotline.ie is the Irish national reporting centre where members of the public can anonymously and confidentially report suspected illegal content online, especially child sexual abuse content and activities relating to online child sexual exploitation. It works in partnership with An Garda Síochána.

Key insights from the 2021 Report reveal:<sup>149</sup>

- 29,794 publicly sourced reports, as many reports as the previous three years combined.
- 14,772 child sexual abuse material reports; 1 in 4 reports were found to contain images/videos which appeared to have been generated by children themselves.

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<sup>149</sup> Hotline.ie Annual report 2021 People not Pixels Real People Real Harm Your report Matters Hotline.ie-AR21-webready.pdf

