

# DISRUPTING HARM CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUNG SURVIVORS

About Online Child Sexual  
Exploitation and Abuse



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**Warning:**

*Disrupting Harm* addresses the complex and sensitive topic of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

This report is based on conversations with young people about their experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Their anonymised accounts reflect on what they went through. Many of these young people spontaneously welcomed the opportunity to take part in the conversations in the hope that they may help others. This report hopes to pay respect to their accounts.

Some readers may find parts of the report challenging to read. You are encouraged to monitor your responses and engage with the report in ways that are comfortable. Please seek psychological support for acute distress.

While the Disrupting Harm project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, authorship of this publication is attributed to ECPAT. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the other two organisations, individually or as a collaborative group.

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## Background

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) has received increasing attention, particularly as our lives – and those of children and young people – shifted further online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, detailed research is sorely needed to fully understand and appropriately counter OCSEA. *Disrupting Harm*, which specifically focuses on lower- and middle-income countries in Southeast Asia and Southern and East Africa, is the largest scale comprehensive research study ever undertaken on this topic, and it represents a substantial contribution to global evidence.

Research that centres on the perspectives of children and young people subjected to OCSEA remains limited. This is understandable given that OCSEA is diverse in form and changes rapidly as technology evolves and advances. Another key challenge is the ethical considerations when researching the sexual exploitation of children and young people, and the risk of causing further distress or harm to those who have already been through such difficult experiences. Yet children and young people have a right to express their perspectives on all things that affect them. It is essential that their voices are amongst the discourse on this topic, and that they are ultimately part of the solution.

ECPAT International developed the ‘survivor conversations’ approach for the purpose of ensuring young people are active participants in research on OCSEA. Using this approach, participation can be managed in an ethically mindful, psychologically safe, respectful, and dignified way. The ‘survivor conversations’ approach allows for a two-way ‘conversation’ on this sensitive topic rather than more traditional research approaches. It centres the young person rather than the researcher or the research methodology. It is built on the principle that participants have, and understand themselves to have, significant control over the process, including decisions concerning what they choose to share and not share.

Thirty-three conversations were held with female and male young people who had been subjected to OCSEA in Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, Malaysia and Cambodia. All were aged between 16 and 23 years old during the conversations, but were aged between 9 and 17 years old when they were subjected to OCSEA. Their accounts are insightful and crucial. These young people welcomed the opportunity to engage in conversations about their experiences, the gaps and the solutions in the hope of helping others, and this report hopes to pay respect to their accounts.

**Key messages from young people**

**Prevention**

**HELP ME UNDERSTAND MYSELF**

: Adolescence is a period of physiological, emotional and cognitive transition in which the importance of finding a place in social groups is ever present. The need to belong, be accepted and be admired by other adolescents sits alongside the expectations that other people, often adults (including caregivers), have of young people. For this reason, young people need to be offered age-appropriate education about setting healthy boundaries, their sexual development, sexual rights and desires and how to manage these in the context of respectful relationships. When children do not know these things, it enables offenders to take advantage of them. Many of the young people in this study had not received information about sexual rights, sexual health or sexual well-being. This left them vulnerable and made it much more difficult to disclose and seek help when things went wrong and in the aftermath, a period which may have included psychological distress, pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

**ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION DOES NOT TAKE PLACE IN ISOLATION**

: Labelling child sexual exploitation and abuse as exclusively 'online' or 'offline' does not help us to understand, prevent or respond to the issue. In fact, the ways in which children and young people are subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse are complex and nuanced and tend to involve interactions of online and in-person harm that see technology misused at different points during the continuum of abuse. The experiences recounted in the conversations captured in this report often involve sequences or combinations of online and offline elements. The internet seems to expand offenders' resources. For example, children and young people can be deceived into sharing self-generated sexual images that are then used to coerce them into in-person sexual abuse. Digital technology can also be misused as a tool to record and share in-person sexual exploitation and abuse. Responses to these harms must account for these blurred conceptual boundaries.

**HELP ME UNDERSTAND THE INTERNET'S RULES**

: Young people did not expect trusted adults to be experts about social media or other online platforms, but they valued support in terms of setting up and managing their accounts rather than information that simply banned or discouraged their use. Restricting use can leave young people at a disadvantage and increases the likelihood of secrecy. None of the young people had been given advice about privacy and safety settings, how to report problems or the nature of online risks and how they may lead to harm. These young people also wanted and expected reasonable limits to be set.

**BE AVAILABLE  
TO TALK  
ABOUT MY  
ONLINE  
WORLD**

: Young people wanted trusted adults to be interested in their digital life and to recognise how important it is to them. This was also the case in relation to sexuality and early sexual relationships. Sometimes, young people felt that there were double standards whereby it was accepted that adults could do things that they could not, but more usually, there was a feeling that the only input from trusted adults was an admonition not to engage with people online. Young people need an environment in which they are comfortable to have conversations about sex or ask adults for advice. Norms that result in discomfort, shame or embarrassment regarding sex can make it more difficult for children and young people to report and seek help when experiencing sexual exploitation or abuse.

**HELP WHEN  
THINGS GO  
WRONG**

: The young people felt vulnerable, scared, embarrassed or upset, but when disclosures were made (to both caregivers and others – including social support services), they felt that they were blamed for what had happened, which added to the blame they already placed on themselves. A message to adults seems to be that, first of all, they should be good listeners, then ask questions and focus on solutions.

**TRUST ME**

: The young people we had conversations with all talked about trusting others. Much of the OCSEA happened because they had never been helped to navigate decisions about trusting others. They were also sexually curious. What they seemed to be asking for was supported autonomy, which requires caregivers to trust them while still being available to help them understand and negotiate what the motivations of others might be and when people can be trusted.

**RESPECT  
MY PRIVACY**

: Young people also spoke about trust – a lack of trust from adults around them and an assumption that young people are ‘up to no good’, which promoted a need for secrets in order to protect themselves from the consequences of others knowing what they were doing. The cycle could then lead to caregivers focusing on restrictions and penalising children. Of course, there is a need to strike a balance between a young person’s expectation of privacy and ensuring that they are safe.

**Response**

**UNDERSTAND  
MY SOCIAL LIFE  
AND NEEDS**

: There is a need for adults to show sensitivity to the social and personal needs of young people. This is true for both professionals and caregivers. In their conversations, the young people expressed that they felt that caregivers did not understand the social pressures they faced to ‘be online’, and to receive positive comments and ‘likes’. This became more problematic in early romantic or sexual relationships, especially where there was pressure to share sexual content and potentially misplaced assumptions that this was ‘the norm’.

## AT A GLANCE

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### **MAKE CLEAR WHERE I CAN GET HELP**

: The roles of caregivers, social support workers and legal professionals were not clear to young people who couldn't tell who could help, and what protection and support could be sought. Too often, young people were positioned as being responsible for what had happened to them. This was particularly true for those exposed to transactional exploitation in which adults were less likely to perceive them, the young people, as 'victims'.

### **DO NOT JUDGE ME**

: Young people overwhelmingly blamed themselves for what had happened and sometimes this was heightened by responses from others when they did disclose and seek support. It is crucial that caregivers and involved professionals be sensitive to the potential shame and humiliation felt by the child.

### **BE THERE WHEN I AM READY TO TALK**

: A proportion of the young people we had conversations with did not disclose what had happened to them because they felt that it was too early or might destroy the relationships that they valued. They did not discount their need for help – but did not feel ready. However, this did not mean that they wanted caregivers to ignore or edit out what had happened. In cases involving transactional exploitation, young people still hoped for a different future in which they could support themselves or their families in different ways; however, for some, there was a sense that this may not be available to them now.



# INTRODUCTION

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**The existing literature on child sexual exploitation and abuse is characterised by an over-representation of studies from high-income countries, with far fewer studies having been completed in low- and middle-income countries. When exploring the way technology interacts with this topic, this unevenness is even more pronounced. Consequently, the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, through its Safe Online initiative, funded *Disrupting Harm* – a large-scale research project about online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) in 13 countries in Southeast Asia and Eastern and Southern Africa.**

As a partnership between ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, *Disrupting Harm* gathered data in up to eight different research activities in each country. The final country reports bring together data from sources including a population representative household survey of children and caregivers, crime data supplied by national police, a survey of frontline workers, interviews with justice professionals and young people who sought justice.

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

**The thirteen country reports can be found [here](#).**

## **The ‘survivor conversations’ approach**

Adjacent to the country-specific research activities that form the evidence base for the *Disrupting Harm* national reports, this stand-alone research activity was conducted. The ‘survivor conversations’ were intended to firmly centre the perspectives of young people who had been subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse amongst the wealth of *Disrupting Harm* data. The conversations focus on understanding and interpreting what these young people were subjected to, as well as their ideas concerning the best solutions.

Engaging survivors of child sexual exploitation in research requires substantial care to accommodate a range of ethical considerations.<sup>1</sup> Yet survivors also have a right to participate in discourse on an issue that impacts them so significantly: *“Research involving children in these contexts can realise their right to participation by providing a way to amplify children’s voices, challenge the culture of silence in which abuse thrives – if it is done carefully to ensure that children don’t experience harm.”*<sup>2</sup>

This activity was, therefore, purposely planned as ‘survivor conversations’ rather than a traditional form of research interview. The conversations were explicitly designed to be trauma-informed and to give the young people full control over what was discussed. This meant that young people could start their story at whatever point they wished to and were given space to talk about what they felt was important. While the primary focus of the conversations was to understand survivors’ experiences of OCSEA with an emphasis on pivotal turning points, there was no pressure to talk about any one area within their unfolding narratives. While many young people gave some detail of the abuse they were subjected to, this was not expected or required.

Two senior experts with specialised skills in working with boy and girl survivors of abuse were recruited, with the intention that they co-facilitate all conversations with local practitioners. When the COVID-19 pandemic restricted global travel, senior social workers and psychologists in selected target countries for *Disrupting Harm* were recruited to take on a greater role.

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

## INTRODUCTION

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These local experts worked with the senior experts over a number of months to refine the methodology and prepare to then conduct the conversations with survivors one-on-one. The survivor conversations model was designed as a 'gold standard' example of how to ethically engage young survivors, and it is hoped that the model is replicated in future research.

Initially, up to 80 survivor conversations with young people aged 16 to 24 who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood were planned in eight of the *Disrupting Harm* target countries.<sup>3</sup> Countries were selected based on a number of factors, including the legal circumstances surrounding OCSEA. Specifically, a sample of male survivors was not sought in countries where same-sex sexual contact is illegal, as boys disclosing abuse by a male offender could face prosecution for such a disclosure, even as victims (this excluded us from seeking male samples in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Namibia, Ethiopia and Malaysia).

Implementation of this research activity, as well as recruitment of participants, was challenged by the movement restrictions in place in countries as a result of COVID-19. To ensure trauma-informed practice, face-to-face contact was non-negotiable so that bodily cues were noticeable to facilitators and to enable psychological safety could be prioritised. The team accommodated movement restrictions and distancing requirements to enable this, postponing activities when movement rules required. Efforts to conduct survivor conversations in Philippines were eventually abandoned as a result of continuing restrictions.

In addition, sample identification was also impacted by the fact that organisations through which potential participants may be invited were sometimes reluctant to support the recruitment of young people because they felt uncertain whether they met the criteria for the study or as a result of concerns that young people may experience further harm by talking about their experiences.<sup>4</sup>

While the design stipulated that gender non-binary young people could certainly participate, none were identified in the sampling process for inclusion.

The final sample for this activity comprised 33 conversations with young people from five countries who had experienced abuse at an age of between 9 and 17 years old. A summary is provided in the table below.

Country	Male	Female
Kenya	0	9
South Africa	1	0
Namibia	0	7
Malaysia	0	4
Cambodia	5	7

**A detailed description of the method can be found in [Annex 1](#).**

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3. Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines.

4. Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Hanson, E., Whittle, H., Alves-Costa, F., & Beech, A. (2020). [Technology assisted child sexual abuse in the UK: Young people's views on the impact of online sexual abuse](#). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119, 105451-.

# SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RESEARCHING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

## Differentiating 'risk' from 'harm'

Much of the existing research related to OCSEA measures risk rather than evidence of harm.<sup>5</sup> However, these concepts should be differentiated. Children may be exposed to risks that never eventuate into harm. For example, sharing personal information with an unknown person online may result in harm if that person is an offender, but if not, it may have no harmful consequences whatsoever.

Two of the largest survey datasets (the Third Youth Internet Safety Survey -YISS-3- and EU Kids Online) that do define harm specifically, do this in different ways, making comparisons difficult. For example, in the EU Kids Online survey, children were asked if a specific experience had bothered them without assuming that it had been problematic (experienced as harmful) for all children.<sup>6</sup> 'Bothered' was defined as: "for example, [something that] made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or feel that you shouldn't have seen it." In contrast, the YISS studies defined harm in the context of distress: distressing sexual solicitations and harassment were episodes where children rated themselves as being very or extremely upset or afraid as a result of the incident.<sup>7</sup>

Other researchers have suggested that harm is related to risk, which can be seen to predict the probability but not the certainty of harm.<sup>8</sup> What further complicates our understanding of harm relates to agency, as in many studies, children are asked questions that relate to events that they did not want to happen (such as exposure to pornographic or violent content, or platforms which might be associated with predatory sexual behaviour). This raises questions as to whether intentional acts (such as talking to an adult online about sex) should be seen as problematic when the child does not judge these as 'unwanted'.

Measuring both risks and harms will help us understand the threat of OCSEA. Risks indicate potential instances of OCSEA, whereas harms are evidence of these crimes. *Disrupting Harm* undertook to separately measure risks and harms and takes care to present this data as such without conflation. For example, in the household survey, risky behaviours that are potential indications of OCSEA (such as being asked to talk about sex when they did not want to) are reported separately from actual instances of OCSEA (such as accepting money or gifts in exchange for sex).

For this reason, the survivor conversations in this research activity were intentionally aimed at young people who had categorically experienced harm from OCSEA in order to carefully examine how this harm came about, what were the impacts and what the young people see as the solutions.

The research team were aware that identifying young people who could take part in the conversations via existing support services would mean that the sample was limited to young people who had either sought help or had been identified as in need of help. This may mean that the experiences of these young people are more likely to fit the common perceptions of OCSEA, and 'severe' or 'harmful' examples of OCSEA. This bias in our sampling meant that the stories heard do not necessarily reflect, or align with, the much wider range of OCSEA evidenced in the other *Disrupting Harm* research activities. Many of the young people had experienced early challenges in life that they believed had impacted on them and left them vulnerable, but this was not the cause of what followed, and this was also not the case for all. What was evidenced in the conversations was the role that digital devices and apps had played in providing information about these children, access to them, and opportunities to create and share explicit sexual content, which could be used to threaten or coerce young people and which, for some, led to contact offences against them.

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

6. Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., Görzig, A., & Olafsson, K. (2011). [Risks and safety on the internet. Perspective of European children: The perspective of European children](#). London: EU Kids Online, LSE.

7. Mitchell, K.J., Finkelhor, D., Jones, L.M. & Wolak, J. (2014). [Trends in unwanted online experiences and sexting: Final report](#). *Crimes against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire: Durham, NH*.

8. Staksrud, E., Ólafsson, K., & Livingstone, S. (2013). [Does the use of social networking sites increase children's risk of harm?](#) *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(1), 40–50.

## Interactions with gender

It is important to note that a gender asymmetry exists in the availability of evidence regarding OCSEA from population-based studies. One study of young people in sub-Saharan Africa found that boys are often excluded from victimisation studies because of the problematically gendered terminology used to describe instances of sex in exchange for money.<sup>9</sup> Others have noted that many children and young people (of all genders, but more so for boys) often do not see various situations as 'sexual exploitation' from a misguided sense that the situations are a result of their behaviours.<sup>10,11</sup> Across Nordic countries and U.S. population-based research, more boys than girls are recorded exchanging sex for compensation, and, in a study of Swedish youths, there was a gender difference in the motives for exchanging sex – with more boys indicating that it was done for pleasure with no underlying motive.<sup>12</sup>

European and US studies consistently report that girls are significantly more likely to be victims of OCSEA than boys,<sup>13,14,15,16,17</sup> yet this gender trend is not as marked in samples of children in Asia,<sup>18,19,20</sup> and was certainly not evident in *Disrupting Harm* surveys of children in which gender differences were not frequently indicated.<sup>21</sup>



If I were a boy, it is not going to be easy to tell my family, or even to talk or to open up to anybody because it's like you are a man, you are supposed to stand up for yourself... a boy would expect a lot of criticism, more than the girl.

NA-06



Different instances of OCSEA exhibit some variation. In a Spanish study, girls were significantly more likely to be victims of online grooming (24.2% as opposed to 9.4%) and sexual pressure online, but there were no gender differences in exposure to sexual content or sexual coercion.<sup>22</sup> However, another Spanish study found no significant gender differences in online grooming in which the offender tried to get the child to talk about sex, but girls were more likely to be victims of grooming when they initiated sexual talk about themselves.<sup>23</sup> In a recent Swedish study of 5,175 adolescents, 5.8% of participants had had sexual experiences online with a person they had only met online, and of those, 9.7% reported that they had been persuaded, pressed or coerced.<sup>24</sup>

9. Adjei, J. & Saewyc, E. (2017). [Boys are not exempt: Sexual exploitation of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 65, 14–23.
10. Edinburgh, L., Pape-Blabolil, J., Harpin, S., & Saewyc, E. (2015). [Assessing exploitation experiences of girls and boys seen at a child advocacy center](#). *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 46, 47.
11. ECPAT International. (2021). [Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys](#).
12. Fredlund, Dahlström, Svedin, Wadsby, Jonsson, & Priebe. (2018). [Adolescents' motives for selling sex in a welfare state – A Swedish national study](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 81, 286–295.
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14. Davidson, J., DeMarco, J., Bifulco, A., Bogaerts, S., Caretti, V., Aiken, M and Puccia, A. (2016). [Enhancing police and industry practice](#). *Project Report*. Middlesex University.
15. de Santisteban, P., & Gámez-Guadix, M. (2018). [Prevalence and Risk Factors Among Minors for Online Sexual Solicitations and Interactions With Adults](#). *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(7), 939–950.
16. Helweg-Larsen, K., Schütt, N., and Larsen, H. (2012). [Predictors and protective factors for adolescent internet victimization: Results from a 2008 nationwide Danish youth survey](#). *Acta Paediatrica*, 101(5), 533–539.
17. Mitchell, K., Jones, L., Finkelhor, D. and Wolak, J. (2013). [Understanding the decline in unwanted online sexual solicitations for U.S. youth 2000–2010: Findings from three Youth internet Safety Surveys](#). *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 37(12), 1225–1236.
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20. Ji, Finkelhor, & Dunne. (2013). [Child sexual abuse in China: A meta-analysis of 27 studies](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(9), 613–622.
21. 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*.
22. Montiel, L., Carbonell, E., and Pereda, N. (2016). [Multiple online victimization of Spanish adolescents: Results from a community sample](#). *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 52, 123–134.
23. Villacampa, C. and Gómez, M. (2017). [Online child sexual grooming: Empirical findings on victimisation and perspectives on legal requirements](#). *International Review of Victimology*, 23(2), 105–121.
24. Jonsson LS, Fredlund C, Priebe G, Wadsby M, Svedin CG. (2019). [Online sexual abuse of adolescents by a perpetrator met online: a cross-sectional study](#). *Child Adolescent Psychiatric Mental Health*. 24; 13:32.

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*Disrupting Harm* survey data showed no consistent patterns with respect to gender or age differences in the 13 countries in which this research was conducted. An extensive statistical analysis found that neither age nor gender predicted children's experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This suggests that children of all ages, boys and girls, are potentially at risk of experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse, and need to be included in prevention efforts.

Rather than focusing on age or gender as a key determinant of risk, the *Disrupting Harm* analysis consistently found that children's experience of other forms of violence was the strongest predictor of online sexual exploitation and abuse. For prevention, this means that children already in vulnerable situations are at a higher risk of online sexual exploitation and abuse and may benefit from additional support.

However, the public perception that girls were more likely to be impacted was clearly observed during the *Disrupting Harm* data collection – it was present among perspectives of government representatives, frontline workers and caregivers. Some young people explored the impact of these public perceptions in their conversations. They explained that while male and female young people could potentially be victimised, that males were much less likely to disclose and seek help because of public perceptions: *"It's not easy for boys to open up. Not unless they trust the person a lot."* (KY-09), and *"if I were a boy, it is not going to be easy to tell my family, or even to talk or to open up to anybody because it's like you are a man, you are supposed to stand up for yourself... a boy would expect a lot of criticism, more than the girl."* (NA-06).

It was also assumed that boys would be less likely to be offered help:

**“ I think it's one of those stereotypes, I don't know the correct word, or maybe it's taboo. If a man seeks help, they are being judged, they are being stigmatised, but if a woman seeks help, then it will be accepted. ”** (NA-04)

These common perceptions also impacted the sampling process for the survivor conversations, with boys being substantially harder to identify and incorporate into the study. Six young men did take part in the conversations; however, while this research activity intended to explore the intersections between gender and harm from OCSEA more deeply with participants, very few conclusions could be drawn given the limited sample of boys.

There are many possible reasons for boys not wanting to disclose OCSEA or as to why it is not discovered.<sup>25,26</sup> For example, a systematic review of the literature established that gendered perceptions of child sexual exploitation tend to obscure it, even from the view of trained support workers, and can result in circumstances that, although not intentional, discourage boys from disclosing.<sup>27</sup> A pervasive belief that males have more agency in the choices they make in sexual encounters can also result in assumptions that when subjected to sexual exploitation, they are somehow willing participants.<sup>28,29</sup>

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25. Cockbain, E., Ashby, M. & Brayley, H. (2017). Immaterial Boys? A Large-Scale Exploration of Gender-Based Differences in Child Sexual Exploitation Service Users. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 29(7), 658–684.

26. Josenhans, V., Kavenagh, M., Smith, S., & Wekerle, C. (2020). Gender, rights and responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 110(1), 104291–104291.

27. ECPAT International. (2021). Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

28. Mitchell, Moynihan, Pitcher, Francis, English, & Saewyc. (2017). Rethinking research on sexual exploitation of boys: Methodological challenges and recommendations to optimize future knowledge generation. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 66, 142–151.

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### Online and in-person child sexual exploitation and abuse

There is a growing interest in the consequences of OCSEA for young people. While OCSEA and in-person abuse are frequently entangled, those abused through the use of technology may experience additional consequences to those who experience in-person abuse. These include anxiety that people would think that they were willing participants or fear of being recognised from the materials produced and ongoing vulnerability.<sup>30</sup> OCSEA has been shown to result in substantial self-blame and self-criticism,<sup>31,32</sup> findings that were replicated across the numerous *Disrupting Harm* activities and are explored in depth in this report.

Feelings of self-blame are often made worse by fears of being exposed (such as from threats to reshare sexual content), which in turn reduces the possibility of young people seeking help.<sup>33</sup> Research indicates that the psychological consequences for children subjected to OCSEA may also include depression, self-harm, anxiety, symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder, perceived identity changes and trust issues,<sup>34,35</sup> many of which are of course similarly experienced from in-person abuse.

Importantly, there is often a limited understanding by professionals of the risks associated with OCSEA and the specific, consequential harm for the young people involved.<sup>36</sup> This may potentially lead to young people remaining at risk, with professionals failing to offer protection or referral to appropriate interventions.

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

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# FINDINGS

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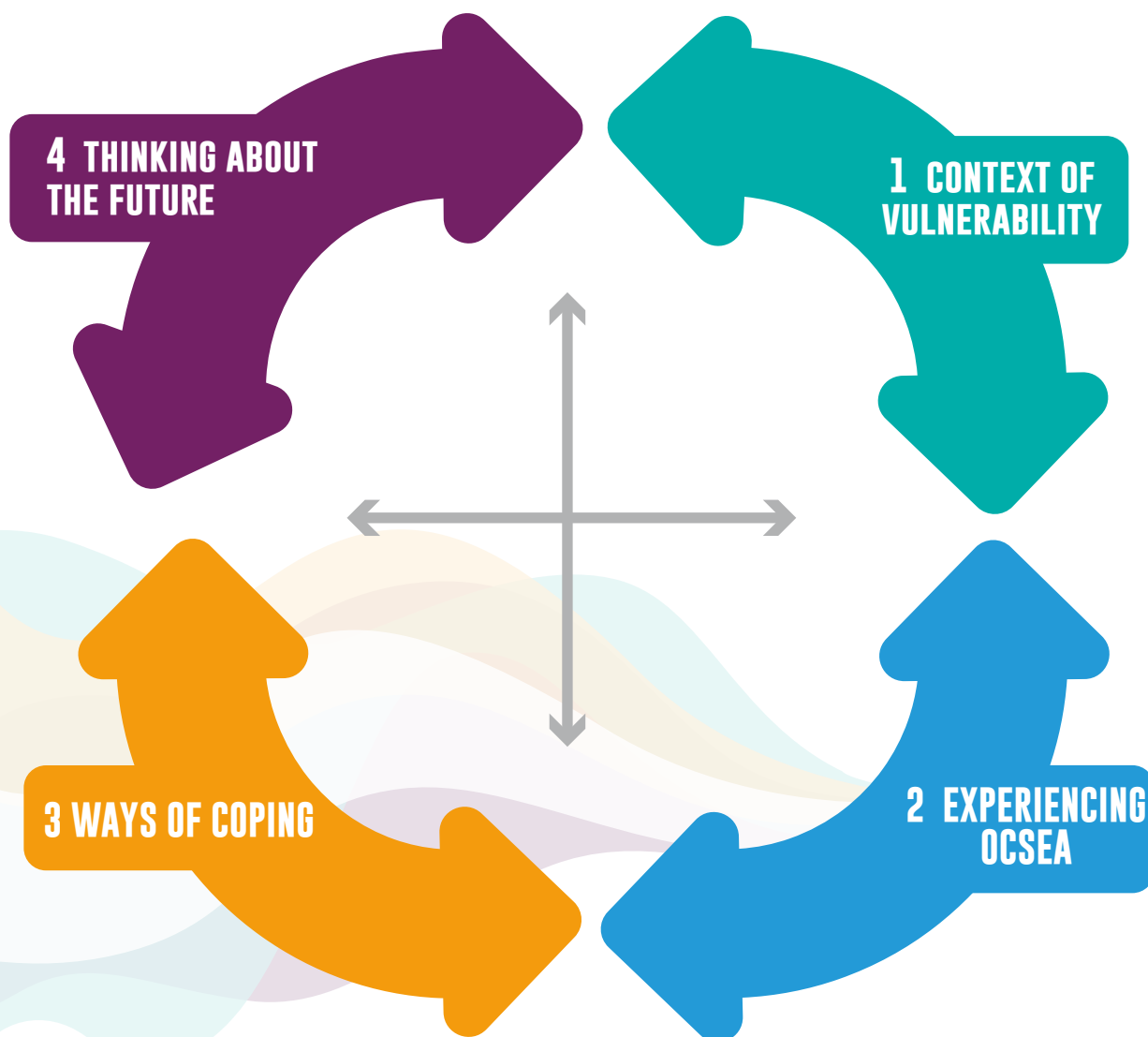
# APPROACH TO THEMATIC ANALYSIS

## Four themes

The themes identified in the conversations, like most narratives, have aspects that are linear: vulnerability to OCSEA from the larger social context, experiencing OCSEA, ways of coping with the OCSEA and thoughts about the future. However, the stories were not always told in a linear fashion, with some young people starting in the past and others choosing to talk about their current feelings or future hopes.

While spontaneous accounts of OCSEA dominated many of the narratives, this was not the case for all, and for some young people, there were cycles of abuse occurring throughout their lives of which OCSEA was seen as just one of many bad things. The findings draw heavily on these narratives as they were told, as the researchers wanted to hear the young people directly, rather than an interpretation of what they had said. Inevitably, this involved interpretation in the sense that the researchers looked within and across the narratives to make sense of, and structure, key parts of these accounts.

Figure 1: Themes across the narratives.





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## Identifying turning points

Throughout the analysis of the narratives, the researchers looked for turning points that altered the narratives' directions – positively or negatively – for the young people subjected to OCSEA. An analysis of the turning points then helped to define the themes. Turning points, when clustered, included changes in family structures: *“My mum took a new husband. My dad died.”* (CA-01); getting access to the internet: *“Soon after I got a phone, I started to get addicted to social media and talking with people and all of that, getting new friends and trying to fit in, in the online world. So, yah.”* (NA-03); and trying to manage emotional distress: *“When the incident happened, I didn't have any self-confidence left and I just felt left out and [Silence], yah, that was the turning point.”* (NA-01)

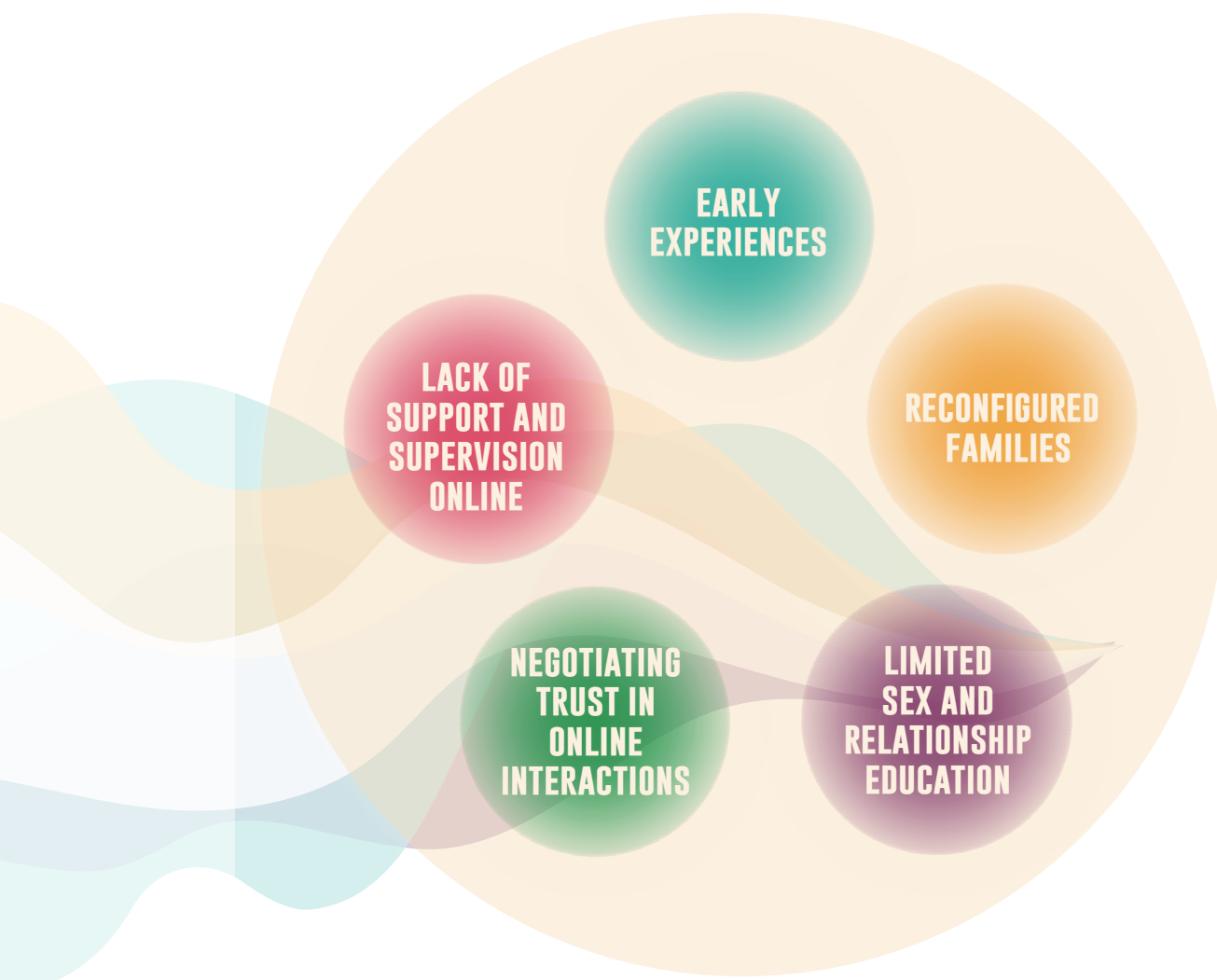
Turning points were also evident when the young people identified that what they were subjected to was not right for them: *“I was tired [laughing], I was tired because I felt that my value and my worth are placed on how much I can provide and how much attention I could attract. That's when I felt, if I am seeing myself the way they are seeing me, then I should change that. I stopped, I deleted my social media accounts and deactivated them, and I went on like a meditating cleansing journey.”* (NA-07) Critically, for some, this meant identifying that they needed help, and finding the resources to get help: *“Umm, the turning point for me was the day I told myself that I need to seek help and I contacted the social worker. That's where everything changed and that's when I started thinking positively and also that's where I lifted myself from being sad or depressed. It's like I woke myself up.”* (NA-02) Help was also found within families: *“Well, the turning point was my mom, she started to be so encouraging and motivated me, she made me realise that there is more to life and if I keep putting myself in a corner, if I keep pulling back, it's not to get me anywhere, I will not be growing. I will just be making my world and my life dimmer, bringing just darkness, so she was more encouraging and that is what I needed from her.”* (NA-06), and *“My mom also provides me encouragement. Now she encourages me more.”* (CA-06)

# THEME ONE – CONTEXT OF VULNERABILITY TO ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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All participants found ways to contextualise their experiences of OCSEA and attempt to identify their perceived vulnerabilities. There is no suggestion that these vulnerabilities caused the abuse, but it did reflect on how young people in their narratives struggled to make sense of what had happened to them. Factors they named included their early experiences growing up, family dynamics, including parental separations and reconfigurations of families, and their lack of understanding about sexuality and relationships, in part driven by common discomfort with any discussions related to sex by adults around them. The participants also discussed an absence of support focused on using technology, other than general warnings about its dangers, and a lack of support or supervision about being online, including specifically understanding who they could trust. Some of this was clearly related to young people hiding what they were doing from others and also wanting to, and seeing others engaging in, online relationships.

Figure 2: Theme One - Context of Vulnerability to OCSEA.



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## Early experiences

This theme consists of a number of linked narratives that provide a context for the abuse experienced by our young survivors. Many of the young people started the conversations by talking about the past, their family circumstances and the contexts in which OCSEA took place. Not all experienced multiple adversities as young children and, even in the face of challenges, many had memories of being happy, loved and cared for: *"I think about the happy things, when I was a child. I never think about being naked, having lots of photos taken, being photographed back then."* (CA-01), and *"So my mum loved me a lot and she used to advise me."* (KY-08) One young person still lived with his grandmother who had taken care of him since his mother died: *"She loves her grandchildren, doesn't let anyone do bad things to them... She told me stories of when my mum was a child."* (CA-04) However, others found it difficult to recall anything good: Facilitator: *"Do you have any fun memories or anything from before you were 15, before 16 years old?"* Young person: *"No"* (CA-03), and *"The rule was go to church and straight home and from home to school, life was very limiting."* (KY-03) Sometimes even good relationships were remembered as controlling or having ended. For example, one young person talked about her mother giving her a mobile phone: *"Though she bought me the one without internet because I refused to go to school. She has even reported me to the police for refusing to go to school."* (KY-05) Another spoke of losing the closeness that she had with her sister:

*"Yes, this is my sister. So, we were best friends while growing up and then my younger sister was born and I stopped being close to my older sister because I think throughout our high school, she didn't really listen to me. Like, we used to be really close, after school we would just like talk in the car and at home about everything. Then we got home, we would like hangout and everything but then after a while, she just stopped listening to me. She would be on her phone all the time."* (MY-01)



Facilitator: **'Do you have any fun memories or anything from before you were 15, before 16 years old?'**  
Young person: **'No'.**

CA-03



Many of these childhood experiences, such as family break-ups, issues relating to discipline or feelings of frustration and lack of opportunities, were common in the conversations. However, for some of these young people, their narratives made reference to specific adverse impacts like abuse, extreme financial difficulties, limited understanding of sexual rights, sexual health or sexual well-being, and caregivers who were unwilling or unable to talk about sex. For many young people, access to online platforms was exciting and seemed to offer an escape and possibilities that were missing in other areas of their lives.

## Reconfigured families

Many of the young people that we talked with referred to challenging early experiences, which can be read, at least to some extent, as having shaped their understanding of relationships and their own sense of self. To them, childhood was often described as a dangerous time where all sorts of bad things could happen and over which children had little control. One young survivor metaphorically described this:

***"It's basically my past, there were a lot of chains and shackles, which was dangerous for me."***  
(KY-03)

This included family separations in which caregivers had to go away to work and leave their children with other family members: *"I did not want to live with them. I wanted only to live with my parents. But when they returned home, they did not tell me. They did not want me to go with them. So, they kept me with the grandparents. At the beginning, I was crying a lot. I cried for my parents."* (CA-06)

## THEME ONE – CONTEXT OF VULNERABILITY TO ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Others described situations in which parents separated: *"We were not feeling good when our parents separated and we cried a lot."* (KY-08); or parents died: *"Me, my two brothers and my mother. Our father died."* (KY-05) This often left families in difficult financial situations in which the mother was the sole source of income:

*"I can say after my dad passed on, the male figure in the house, we didn't really have much and we had a broken home. We had broken relationships between us as well, me, my mom and my younger sibling. Most of our problems were caused by financial pressure because we couldn't depend on my mom to do anything for us, she would not really do much. You would ask her for something, but it would seem impossible, you know, and it was something that we had to adapt to, because we weren't used to it. After my dad passed on, my mom started a relationship with a boyfriend that was younger than her, and this boyfriend was abusive, so, we lost most of the things that we owned because of him."* (NA-07)

*"My mom used to be at work. Sometimes I didn't get to see my mom for a few days because we used to go to school early in the morning and then when we used to come back, she wasn't at home. We would sleep and only then she would come back."* (MY-04)

On occasions children simply felt unwanted, or unloved, and that no one considered what they wanted to happen: *"Then my mom said, 'How much money did you give me that you want me to give my child to you?' After hearing this I knew that my mom cared only about money more than me... Then I came with Dad and Dad gave her the money. My dad had a step wife and I felt afraid of them. And I was living with grandma since I was a child."* (CA-12) Looked-after children often had to depend on other family members, particularly grandparents, and for some, this experience was seen in a negative light: *"She's mean, nasty and angry... The way she speaks is mean, nasty and angry."* (CA-01)

When asked what memories they had of their grandparents, one young person said: *"Nothing. When I lived with them...It is difficult to speak. They are not the same as my parents. They did not take care of me well enough."* (CA-06) However, several young people felt that they effectively had to assume a parenting role and that, for complex reasons, caregivers were unable to be there to support them:

*"I am a very patient person, with my mom I have really given up on her, like, years ago, I have given up on trying to change her. I am just working on how I cannot be like her. Her character is still very childish, and it saddens me sometimes because it feels like I have to be the adult, I have always had to be the adult and it's exhausting. It's like I have to think for my sister, I have to think for the house, I have to think for the future, and I have to think for the family, think of dinner or what meal we are going to eat. Sometimes, when she is the mom again, then it feels like, okay, thank goodness, this is nice."* (NA-07)

*"Hmm... and... yeah, I just like, throughout the high school I realised that she wasn't really there for me and she let me down a lot of times, like when I would like go to her for help and she wouldn't. She would just be like, 'why, what do you want?'. She wasn't even like willing to help. So, I just like distanced myself from her."* (MY-01)

**“ Okay, I guess, uhh, everything started when I was a bit younger. I was, I can say, I was molested by my own brother, older brother. Later-on in my life, I think I was 14 to 15, I was raped by a boyfriend and then a few months later I was then raped by a friend.**

NA-04

Even when families were together, circumstances at home could still be difficult for some children: “And when we didn’t have any money, we borrowed from others” (CA-08), and on occasions unpredictable and violent: “Yes, its life, we always lived in fear and being chased with a machete. Me and my older brother would run and he would ride on his bike and chase us around, but the young one was just fine.” (KY-04)

*“In reference to Dad, was an incident where my uncle, [...], money was lost on his way back to [City]. They lost it while on the road and was afraid that it might have been at our home where they slept the night. At that time, I don’t remember how old I was, maybe five or seven years old. I didn’t take the money but they accused me of taking it. I was beaten and showered with hot water on my feet. While my mother threw hot water on my feet, Dad hit me with a rubber pipe and I was forced to admit that I took the money even though I didn’t – my sister did. I remember that incident vividly and have never told my sister up to this day. I have been keeping this to myself for a long time now, I can’t tell them the truth up to today.” (MY-03)*

For some young people, their childhood was also marred by sexual abuse: “Okay, I guess, uhh, everything started when I was a bit younger. I was, I can say, I was molested by my own brother, older brother. Later-on in my life, I think I was 14 to 15, I was raped by a boyfriend and then a few months later I was then raped by a friend.” (NA-04), and another young person was abused by her grandfather: “It was my grandfather, my mom’s side, he’s abusive. Yeah, he touched me, he abused my grandma and then he abused me a few times.” (MY-04)

The feeling of not being heard was evident in relation to experiencing sexual abuse:

**“ I felt, I don’t know, I felt unsafe, unheard, and that no matter what he does, he can get away with it because before, I never used to understand this, after talking to the social worker as I said, because physically we used to fight with my brother, so, I would always be the one that is removed out of the house, after a fight.” (CA-04)**

“

**I tried talking to my mom about sex, she told me she is not having that conversation with me.**

NA-04

”

### **Limited sex and relationship education**

In these narratives, it was also apparent that caregivers were often reluctant to talk about sexuality and that it was a topic that children were discouraged from. This led to children being unable to ask questions about this topic or disclose when problems arose: “I tried talking to my mom about sex, she told me she is not having that conversation with me.” (NA-04) Less explicit references were made to a lack of sexual knowledge when a young person who had been exposed to transactional sex talked with her friend who had guessed what was happening and who reminded her about the possibility of sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy: “I felt ashamed of myself. I didn’t tell her directly. I side-tracked her away from my topic, but she understood. She said in [City], they do that a lot and you should be careful with infectious diseases.” (CA-09) One young person talked about going for a test to scan for sexually transmitted infections and being relieved that it was negative and that she did not have to look for help: “After my check-up, I was just fine, and I was not infected, and I was afraid of being sick because I would have to tell my mum what had happened.” (KY-01) Other young people were not so fortunate: “I have a disease. When I lived outside, I did not know. When I lived here that I found out that I had a disease” (CA-06), and “When I came here, I had syphilis, but I was injected with medicines and recovered already.” (CA-11)

“**I have just written I was innocent, and I ended up being a mother.**”

KY-09

Another young person who discovered that she was pregnant said: “I went back home but threw the test results away because I did not want my mother to see them” (KY-09), and when reflecting on what she had written in one reflective exercise said: “I have just written I was innocent, and I ended up being a mother.” (KY-09) For one of the young people, her pregnancy was discovered at school: “Pregnancy tests were always done in our school during opening days and three weeks later, since it was a mixed school. We open school that term and all girls were tested. I was found to be pregnant. That is when I told my mother.” (KY-07)

### Lack of support and supervision online

None of the young people described being taught about technology, aside from vague warnings about the risks of the online world. They felt that this was hard to reconcile with their reality, one in which there was little choice about being online – from both a social and a practical perspective. The simplistic message from adults that ‘technology is dangerous’ sometimes had the effect of discouraging help-seeking when things went wrong for fear of being blamed:

“**No, I did not, because I was afraid because my mom had warned me not to communicate with people that I do not know on social media, so I was afraid that she will criticise me for doing that. I had to be my own rock ma`am.**” (NA-06)

Some of this reluctance to raise concerns also arose because several of the young people did not have their own smart phones and made use (either with or without permission) of other people’s: “Yes. But then she did not know that I had been communicating with someone online since she did not know I always used her phone. She knew on that day.” (KY-05)

When some of the young people did find the courage to disclose, they were in fact met with blame, anger and disappointment:

“Well, I thought to myself that she had to know, eventually she had to know because she is my mom and I was struggling, so, I needed to open-up to somebody and my mom was the person I trusted the most in my family, so, I told her. I also mentioned something about her telling me not to communicate with strangers on social media and that I was afraid of her criticising me, well she did exactly that, it’s exactly what happened. She was criticising me and then I got disappointed because I was expecting a little bit more help from her since it was difficult for me to open up, so, I was expecting her help more. I told her and she disappointed me, so yeah.” (NA-06)

The imperative to have a phone was present in most of the young people’s narratives: “At that age, as girls, we would get phones because a friend’s boyfriend is selling phones or they buy a new one and give you the old one. It was something done just amongst our friends at that age.” (KY-03) For some, the need for a phone was given as a reason for transactional sex: “Yes, I lost my virginity with my boyfriend, and I wanted to make it into benefit [have sex with men for money]. I wanted to have my own money. At that time, I wanted an iPhone 6.” (CA-10)

“**Even with this Omegle, I did it behind her back, without her knowledge, so with them, yes, it is my fault because I still did it even though I knew it was wrong. She said she didn’t know how else to guide me.**”

MY-02

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Keeping secrets about mobile and smartphone use clearly suggested that young people knew that others close to them would not approve and was an acknowledgement that they were aware of some of the risks they faced in their online lives:

*"No, she did not know the people I was chatting with, because I used to save them with different names. I would save them with girl's name... Yes, I used to delete everything, even the pictures, because she used to tell me not to be close with these boys, they are bad and that I should not get a boyfriend. I was still young and so I didn't want to disappoint her." (KY-08)*

*"When Mum was at work, I would hold the phone so that's when I would watch and read Mum's messages with that man on her WhatsApp and WeChat. So I felt okay then, if Mum can do it, so can I... Even with this Omegle, I did it behind her back, without her knowledge, so with them, yes, it is my fault because I still did it even though I knew it was wrong. She said she didn't know how else to guide me." (MY-02)*

When the young people reflected on their experiences, most of them blamed the online environment for what had happened and now echoed their parents' concerns about the internet being full of danger and traps:

***"Life was way better for me without a phone because when I didn't have a phone. I was more active, I did more things I loved, I played with my friends. I didn't have worries about, about photos, and I was just being a child, a normal complete child. Soon after I got a phone, I started to get addicted to social media and talking with people and all of that, getting new friends, and trying to fit in, in the online world. So, yah. 🗨️"* (NA-03)**

### **Negotiating trust in online interactions**

In many of the narratives, caregivers are reported as categorically saying that online, no one can be trusted. This left young people questioning how one knows who can be trusted, especially in the context of having developed various meaningful online relationships.

Young people faced a lot of conflicting messages about this, particularly in terms of romantic online relationships. At a time in their lives when forming relationships starts to become very important, they are told that these should only happen with people who can 'really' be trusted, alongside warnings that they can never really know what might happen in online relationships. Across these conversations, we can see that, for young people, these early relationships were an important part of their development, and being told that they should not happen, and that nobody online could be trusted, did not provide helpful guidance on how to behave:

*"Here is the word 'trust'. That is where the internet thing came on. The online scenario was brought about by me trusting the wrong people. Then I developed hate for a lot of things such as Facebook and parties because I felt that I had to be careful around strangers and never to drink anything offered by a stranger. You never know what they will do to you. I didn't imagine that I can go through such things." (KY-01)*

***"So, I came across a message, in my Messenger on Facebook and I read it and I was a little bit sceptical but because it was a woman who was communicating with me, I trusted, and I replied to the message. I agreed to the message that I am interested, and I would like to know more. 🗨️"* (NA-05)**

Where trust had been abused, and particularly where sexual images had been shared, young people had few resources to draw upon with which to manage this. One participant, when asked about whether she had checked if her pictures had been shared, replied:

*"I have, I have checked on Facebook. So far, the last time he posted something was 2018, so I assume he didn't post anything there. I couldn't access his Instagram because it was private so I couldn't see anything on Instagram, and I didn't know how to access other social media platforms besides Facebook. To be honest I wouldn't know if he posted or sold them because there was no way to check. Selling? I don't even know how to check if someone sold something on the internet. He could have. I don't know." (NA-02)*

## THEME ONE – CONTEXT OF VULNERABILITY TO ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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No one described reporting instances in which abusive images were uploaded or grooming had taken place to the online platforms, instead explaining that they blocked or close their accounts:

*“So those people had received it, and I didn’t know who else had received it as well. I tried to shut it [their account] because I was afraid that person would use another account to send from. I was... At that time, immediately after, I chatted to my siblings and said if that picture... Aah! I said if that account sends a picture, it was just photo-shopped. I tried to close the road, really, because I couldn’t explain to them what had happened.”*  
(CA-07)

The young people who shared their stories with us had lots of advice to give to other young people and caregivers about how to manage being online, and some of this directly related to a need for caregivers to talk to children about their online activities in ways that were supportive, rather than punitive:

*“As a child I was a very creative person because I didn’t need a laptop to start the online relationship, I started it on my phone, so, my parents never used to look at what I was doing on my phone. That allowed me a lot of freedom to chat and do what I want. Know what your child is doing and have a conversation, not to say because you are doing this, I am going to take away your phone, but to have an open conversation with your child. If you block them and don’t correct the mistake, there might be someone trying to correct them in the wrong way. Remember children can tell the offender that my mom is angry with me she took away my phone for two weeks and she just gave it back today, that person can teach the child how to make sure that your parents don’t see what you are talking about. He will say, ‘Save my name as best friend and this is how you delete’ and what not.”* (NA-04)

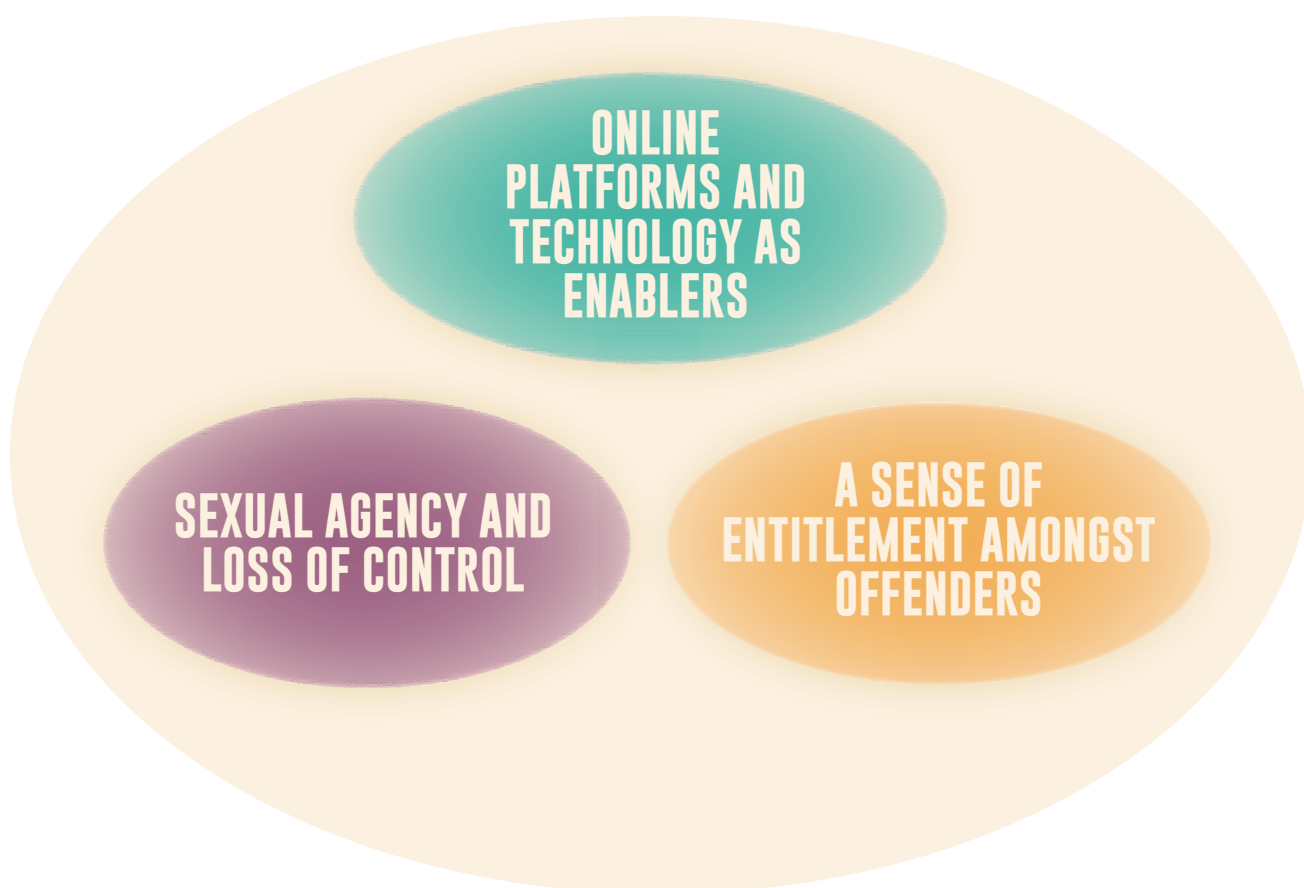


# THEME TWO – EXPERIENCING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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Within the conversations with young people, they were encouraged to decide themselves where they wanted to start their story and what they wanted to talk about. Drawing materials, toys, figures and emojis were also available to be used as part of their narrative. Later in the report, we give some examples of the ways in which technology played a part in the abuse and provide illustrations of materials that were created by these young people. This theme looks across individual accounts to capture commonalities within their stories of OCSEA and includes subthemes that relate to the use of online platforms and technology as an enabler of abuse, sexual agency and loss of control, and a sense of entitlement among offenders.

Figure 3: Theme Two – Experiencing OCSEA.



### Technology as an enabler

Online platforms such as social media were involved in the OCSEA for many, but not all, of the young people we talked with. However, six participants, all of whom were male, did not refer to owning smartphones or using the internet through a tablet or laptop at the time of the abuse. Instead, it was the person who committed the offence who took and shared the abuse and exploitation materials online. In one of our conversations, the young person who had been referred as a survivor of OCSEA did not seem to be aware that their abuse had in fact also been recorded or that videos and pictures had been found on a mobile phone – something known to their support worker. The young person talked about two periods in their lives when they had been sexually assaulted: *“My two brothers were not living with us, so my father abused me and my mom. So there came a time, on my seventh birthday, that he raped me... Then, when I had turned eleven, he raped me again.”* (SA-01) But as he did not spontaneously mention his father photographing the abuse using technology (and it likely having been shared since his father had been identified by police and was being investigated), this created an ethical dilemma for the facilitator of the conversation. The facilitator decided not to ask questions about the online elements of the abuse, which would have represented new information to the young person. In a follow-up with the young person’s support worker, it was then suggested whether it may be appropriate to discuss this with the young person in the context of their therapeutic relationship.

The other boys all knew that they had been photographed (the six male participants in Cambodia had all been exploited by the same offender): *“In the middle of the day, when we were swimming and playing, he came and took photos. He took photos of us playing, just normal.”* (CA-01), and *“He took photos when I was swimming, swimming with my friends. We swam. He rode a bicycle and took photos, rode a bicycle taking photos. He took photos, we didn’t know, he took photos, we’d never heard of that. He finished taking photos, gave me money and then rode away.”* (CA-03)



**He took photos of me naked, he took photos of me naked and I felt ashamed.**

CA-03



The man was described as someone outside their community: *“The foreigner came and saw us swim, like that, sometimes others went, said what he wanted us to do, sometimes we didn’t know... He gave money.”* (CA-02), who gave the boys money to be photographed naked and on occasion asked them to do sexual things, which he took pictures of: *“He took photos of me naked, he took photos of me naked and I felt ashamed.”* (CA-03) These young people expressed feeling confusion during that period about what the man’s intentions were: *“All the time, I didn’t know what to think, I just wondered... I wondered about the photos he took and what he was taking photos for.”* (CA-04).

This man took photographs of the boys over a number of years, and it appeared from their narratives that more boys started to come to the pond when they realised that he was giving money: *“At first, there were only a few of us. But as time went on, he arranged for the days we’d meet, he’d come and take photos, and there would be more boys, and more photos.”* (CA-05) There was some discomfort expressed when talking about this: *“Because we were all there together, we were swimming together, too... We experience the same thing, so we all knew... But we did not talk about it... No one talked about it.”* (CA-05), but, at the time, they did not appear to be frightened of the man. At least some responded to his requests and more children and young people came because he was offering money: *“Sometimes when he took photos, a lot of people came, sometimes when he took photos, only a few came. Because I was having photos taken when they arrived, maybe there were about 16 people there.”* (CA-02)

However, this young person did suggest it was something they wondered about but dismissed:

*"We did talk to each other and brought up why he took photos like that. But we didn't know. We didn't know why he took photos, or understand. Sometimes my friend said, 'He took photos with half my body pointed upwards,' like that, and we didn't really care, and another thing, we didn't know that taking photos like that made us... made us... sometimes we thought a lot, 'is it wrong or right?'" (CA-02)*

**I was scared, afraid that the police would arrest me.**

CA-02

This confusion increased when the police arrived at the pond and arrested the man and the boys ran off because they thought that they might also be arrested: *"I was scared, afraid that the police would arrest me."* (CA-02) They felt that what had been happening at the pond was widely known in the village but was in some ways disregarded because it involved boys rather than girls: *"They don't take any notice when it's boys... They thought we went to have a look and that he gave us money".* (CA-05) However, the awareness that people knew what had happened was also a source of shame: *"No... But I was a person who was afraid of them, who was ashamed in front of them, because everybody knew about this"* (CA-01). One young person clearly blamed himself for what had happened but was also angry with the response of some people from the village: *"Tell the villagers who are laughing and pointing when these things happen, hearing those things and pointing and laughing, tell them to tell their children to do better than me, not do the wrong thing like me"* (CA-04).

**They don't take any notice when it's boys... They thought we went to have a look and that he gave us money.**

CA-05

**If they know about it, I'm embarrassed and ashamed of myself, and worried about the photos...Who knew about them, who could see them.**

CA-04

These boys appeared to come to new realisations about what had happened after the police arrested the man and when the case came to court. Although a non-governmental organisation offered support and reassurance, and all the families went into court with their children, the boys' understanding of the offender's motives, and the nature of the pictures taken, shifted. These were no longer photos but child sexual abuse materials: *"They took my pictures to make porn photos."* (CA-01), and the boys were made aware that others might see the images: *"If they know about it, I'm embarrassed and ashamed of myself, and worried about the photos...Who knew about them, who could see them."* (CA-04). Moreover, they were made aware that they may be distributed and seen outside of the court proceedings and were *"afraid and worried they'd publicise those photos, and share them widely."* (CA-05)

Other ways in which technology enabled OCSEA that was evident in the young people's stories included the creation of online identities for offenders, and young people, which were public and accessible on social media platforms. The information contained on users' home pages could be used to select and locate young people. Technology also allowed for the creation of an online presence through photos, videos and live-streaming. Using their online presence, offenders could then contact young people and coerce or simply persuade them to share sexual content via private discussions about sexual fantasies, create relationships, arrange meetings both online and offline and exert control over the young person. All these situations occurred in tandem with young people having limited sexual education and virtually no education or support about managing their online environment. As one young person noted: *"There are no parents online."* (KY-05)

## THEME TWO – EXPERIENCING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Another stated:

*“When I was in high school, I had a secret phone because everything was illegal in that house and I was not informed on how to protect myself online because they don’t teach it in school and so when the idea of freedom was dangled in my face, it was different. It felt like a prisoner who was getting out and they decide to go drinking. That was basically what social media was for me, you overdo it because I didn’t have it before. I isolated myself all the time to stay in my room and go online.”* (KY-03)

For some, using online platforms was a way of managing loneliness: *“I had no friends... Most neighbours used to ask me why I was alone and why I was thinking a lot, yet I was just a child with no knowledge about phones.”* (KY-06), and *“My older sister and older brother had left, so I had the feeling I was on my own.”* (CA-07) These young people had to make their own decisions about their lives online: *“At first, I was afraid, everyone always says these things aren’t safe so better stay away and I first started chatting to make friends because I was at home alone with no friends.”* (MY-02), and what it might offer to them: *“Umm, I felt like I am not being loved enough.”* All of the young people who accessed the internet used handheld devices, so acquiring a smart phone or being able to borrow one was important: *“Okay, so I used to use my mother’s phone to chat on Facebook... She used to give me her phone and I had an account in her phone.”* (KY-08)

**“When I was in high school, I had a secret phone because everything was illegal in that house and I was not informed on how to protect myself online because they don’t teach it in school and so when the idea of freedom was dangled in my face, it was different.**

KY-03

**“Ummm, my friends at school were like, ‘How many likes do you have? Are you on Instagram? Do you have an account and how many followers do you have?’**

NA-01

For one young person, being able to buy a phone when she was away from home opened up a new world:

**“That was when I bought a smart phone. I was seeing my friends having a phone with internet so I wanted to have one like them. I opened a Facebook account. There are so many men disturbing you on Facebook, others want you to be their friend, others want you to go to their place and they are even willing to give you fare. But all in all I was in Facebook for fun, and I did not know it would affect me in life.”** (KY-09)

This was also part of a competitive world in which online and offline status can be judged in terms of how many ‘likes’ you received:

*“Ummm, my friends at school were like, ‘How many likes do you have? Are you on Instagram? Do you have an account and how many followers do you have?’ And all that, ‘How many posts do you have? How far are your likes?’ And all that. But at that time, I didn’t have and I was not on any social media site, so my friends motivated me to also, like, open an Instagram account. So, I opened one, it’s high school and you know we are this group of friends and all that... So, I opened an Instagram account and then the incident happened.”*

(NA-01)

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Sometimes, caregivers were involved in moderating online interactions, at least partially: *“My mom, she like took my phone for a month. So, I wasn’t on any social media platform for the whole month.”* (NA-01), and *“Yes, she knew that. She even knew I used to chat with her phone. She would even give me the phone whenever someone texted me.”* (KY-08); but often, online activity was done in secret: *“I kept it under my bed all the time and used it in secret.”* (KY-03), including opening social media accounts: *“I just opened an account, my mum had not opened one, so I opened. So that is when I started seeing things on Facebook. How to meet people on Facebook.”* (KY-05) Once online, establishing a positive presence was important and was often achieved through a profile picture: *“Then, also with the insecurities, I would always put younger pictures of me where I was a bit smaller, where I looked beautiful, where there is maybe someone else in the picture, so you had to guess, which one.”* (NA-04) Being online was also associated with feeling good:

**“ I felt really good (laughing). It really felt nice coming from another girl and since I am a teenager, I enjoyed the nice comments. So, I would say thank you for the compliments. ”**  
(NA-06)

### **Sexual agency and loss of control**

Social media made it possible to form new relationships very quickly: *“So, that’s the biggest part and then I somehow became obsessed with, ummm, in order to find a fast relationship, you can’t do it by meeting people at school or meeting people when you go out with friends. It has to be an online relationship.”* (NA-04), and *“I had friends online. I went there to look for friends.”* (KY-06) Many of these friendships were not problematic but were seen as extensions of existing relationships:

*“Hmm... Yeah, no, I mean yes, it made me feel like a normal teenager, like, like, I just, I get to look at funny stuff, funny tweets, who tweeted this, I wouldn’t say I, I used as a platform to let out all my emotions or anything but maybe here and there, yes, but I didn’t rely on it to express everything because all my friends were there, like, all my high school friends were on the same social media, so, I didn’t feel comfortable about sharing too much on Twitter.”* (MY-01)

*“Okay, being on Facebook, those years, it was actually something really trendy and you would meet a lot of people from a lot of places, and everything is online. As we grew up you start only interacting with your friends and people that you know. I was privileged enough to really have a smart phone [laughing], because growing up we didn’t really have anything.”* (NA-07)

However, online platforms also offered opportunities to meet with new people, as well as manage existing relationships: *“Okay... I met a man on Facebook and we exchanged numbers and started communicating.”* (KY-07), some of which were maintained over long periods of time: *“That man, I’ve known him long ago. I knew him on Facebook. We were friends on Facebook and I didn’t know when I added him, or if he added me... And we were friends on Facebook a long before.”* (CA-09) However, on occasions, it was too easy to jump to conclusions about the intentions of other people, especially where young people had little experience with romantic or sexual relationships:

**“ I think most of us youths, we don’t know a person. We believe in social media. There are strangers there where you post a picture a guy likes it and you don’t really know them, and when they comment good things on your picture, you think he is the one and so you jump fast to a conclusion and think this guy loves me, even though they are a total stranger to you, you think they are good and, as time goes by, you are not sure of their intentions with you or their thoughts. ”** (KY-02)

While most participants regardless of country used Facebook Messenger, there was also mention of other applications such as Instagram, TikTok, Tinder, WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube and others. These applications were used for different purposes: *“TikTok is only for imitating others like mimicking someone singing... We can create TikTok by using Facebook account... TikTok also has a chat which you can connect with others too.”* (CA-11)

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“ Okay. At the beginning, we met online like that on Vimeochat... After that, he spoke to me to calm me, he said he liked me and stuff like that, and we changed the app we both played on, because on Vimeochat, you can't send photo or send other things... So we changed to Viber.

CA-07

”  
Tinder was used as a dating application: “Tinder app... Yes, for dating and it has hook-ups. It has everything on it... The time I've been playing on Tinder this year, I've met with lots of people because I am very brave. Even if it's risky, but I think, 'We young women, we should try that.'” (CA-07)  
Movement between applications sometimes reflected the need for privacy:

*“I was always downloading, if this application didn't work, then I move on to Tinder. I moved on to so many different websites or different apps to see which one I could talk to people. But if it's an app that requires too much of my details and a profile picture, then I wouldn't go there. If it's something that I had to pay for, I wouldn't go there. So, if it was an app that allowed me to be a bit anonymous, that's where I will be.”* (NA-04)

This was also seen in the move to encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp, which, in some instances, was used by offenders as a way of keeping what was happening secret: “We chatted for some time, and we finally exchanged numbers and continued chatting on WhatsApp.” (KY-08) This also allowed for membership of private groups:

“ **My younger brother was looking at WhatsApp and asked me 'What group is this?' When he saw the pornographic pictures, he exited me from the group. He was the one who was holding my phone and he knew the passwords to my IG, Facebook.** ” (MY-03)

Changing applications offered the people communicating with minors the opportunity to not only control the level of privacy, but also to easily share sexual pictures and to locate information about the young person and their friends:

*“Okay. At the beginning, we met online like that on Vimeochat...After that, he spoke to me to calm me, he said he liked me and stuff like that, and we changed the app we both played on, because on Vimeochat, you can't send photo or send other things... So we changed to Viber. When we'd changed to Viber, there wasn't any information on there that affected me, there was just using the app. I didn't know his ideas or anything, maybe he thought, 'Huh, now let's talk to each other on Facebook, for different things.'... So, like you know, Facebook is full of information, including mutual friends of ours and all those different things.”*

(CA-07)

Sometimes, the choice of applications and platforms was driven by money constraints as well as functionality:

*“First, it started on a website... On the website unfortunately, you will only get to send someone, or in a day, you will only be allowed to send 15 messages, so, if you are talking to two people and 15 messages finish within that, you have to wait 24 hours. Unless you go and pay for an account, after that, then you have freedom to message how you want. I wasn't at that level of paying for things because how do I explain to my parents that I need to link up their banking details so that I can pay for something? It will end up reflecting on their accounts. So, I always went for free accounts, free trials. So, it started on the website but because of the limited amount of messages a day, we decided to exchange numbers so that we can be able to chat on WhatsApp, to be able to send pictures and call sometimes. This was after two months of talking on the website. So, we did that, and we started sending each other pictures on WhatsApp.”*

(NA-04)

“  
Okay, after we met on Facebook, he used to buy send me money and buy things. One time he asked me to meet him. So, we met, and he bought me everything I wanted.”

KY-05

For many of the young people who were exploited through transactional sexual activity, Facebook was often used to chat with the ‘broker’ and occasionally with the ‘clients’, but Telegram was used to effect payment: “A pimp chats to a client through Telegram, but to ask the girls, they use Facebook.” (CA-11) e-payments appeared to be usual, but also brought risks of being cheated:

“Once, with an ABA Bank transfer and another one with a Wing money transfer, that man, after sleeping with me, said he would send money by Wing. He put my account number and showed it to me, but when I went to withdraw, there was no money. I didn’t understand... He said he had no cash but had money in the bank account. Since I worked, I was cheated two times. So, these are the lessons learnt. Later, it became my routine.” (CA-06)

Promises of money even occurred in sexual exploitation that was not explicitly transactional. In the following excerpt, one young person described how she was offered the opportunity to earn money through modelling:

“Since I was in high school, I knew there were a lot of opportunities out there for me and everything that you want, you can get it out there, you just needed to be recognised. But I think there came a point of desperation when I was 16 because, I think it was the financial pressure as well because I wanted to change our living circumstances at home.

“Trying to change that, I was always seeking for an opportunity, anything extra and out of the blues, out of nowhere, I was inboxed on Facebook by this one lady and she gave me this amazing modelling opportunity which had dollar signs all over it [laughing]. With that, I was so interested because I just said to myself, ‘I am feeling this, this is it for me, I need this and its coming at the right moment.’” (NA-07)

Another participant, who had a lot of followers on TikTok, was asked if she would like to be a video star: “Then we were messaging each other, and flirting and we became friends with each other. Then he [the broker] asked me if I wanted to act in a video. I told him I didn’t know how to act. Then he said, ‘I saw you playing Tik Tok. Why can’t you act?’ That night, I went for a walk in front of [local landmark]. He also went there and we met each other there.” (CA-09)

Other young people were sent money and gifts as part of what they thought were romantic relationships: “Okay, after we met on Facebook, he used to buy send me money and buy things. One time he asked me to meet him. So, we met, and he bought me everything I wanted” (KY-05), and “He sent me money and was always willing to help without asking for anything in return. I felt like he was such a nice guy, and he was a blessing to me.” (KY-01) In other narratives, the offers of money were described as a way of coercing them: “After a while, he started making promises like he’ll pay my [school] fees and even give me pocket money any time I needed. So, I was lured with money and decided to finally meet him.” (KY-07), and sometimes money was accompanied by flattery: “Yes, just those flattering words that men use, like, ‘You are beautiful’ and ‘I will buy you a present.’ He once sent me money through my aunt’s number, and she questioned me, but I just told her to give me the money. It was after sending the money that we met, the week later.” (KY-09) Another young person said:

“**Personally, I had good intentions, but I wasn’t sure about his. Back then, I was still in high school, we used to chat, and he was way older than me, he would text me good things and he used to message me and say everything I wanted to hear, ‘You are beautiful and there is no one like you.’**” (KY-02)

## THEME TWO – EXPERIENCING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

OCSEA occurred online through sexual chat and image exchange, which, for some, occurred when the young people had actively assessed and judged that they felt that it was safe to do so – sufficient time had passed for them to know that they could trust the person:

**“ So, with the online relationship with that guy, we somehow kept on sending pictures on WhatsApp, and because of the sweet messages, I also came to a point where, I felt safe to send the topless pictures and also the videos started. ”** (NA-04)

There was also a mutual exchange of images on social media, some of which were sexual, but which also normalised the sharing of content: *“He used to send me his pictures and he used to ask me to send him pictures of me naked, but I declined. He used to send his bare chest, but I never sent him nudes.*

*So, we used to send each other pictures”* (KY-08), and *“I felt okay because, like, I already used to send nudes to him, and then he would say, like, ‘It’s normal. All couples do this and things like that.’ Yeah, at the time, I just felt normal. Yeah.”* (MY-04) The following extract illustrates the complexity of these exchanges and how expectations might be managed:

**“ So, I sent the topless pictures, he made me very comfortable. He was sending videos of himself masturbating and I would somehow try and complement that video because, I kinda felt that I needed to send him something, so that I feel like I am attracting him. I would start sending videos of my upper area, me doing stuff and he made me feel comfortable because he would say your videos are safe with me and all pictures are safe. ”** (NA-04)

**“ But I didn’t push him, lah, because you know, if I had pushed him, he would just be like, ‘Oh, no! Break up’ and things like that. Yeah.**

MY-04

In the context of being offered modelling work, one young person described how they had been asked not only to send pictures but also to appear in a video:

*“However, it didn’t seem to impress him because then he would... There was a time when he really requested me to send something more skin, something more to show my body, you know. So I thought maybe it’s more of swim wear kind of clothes. Later, I felt really uncomfortable because he demanded to do a video call with me, he wanted to do this video call, but I had to be naked completely. Now, besides the photos that he had requested, and I had sent him, he wanted to do the video call.”* (NA-07)

Throughout all but one of these narratives, there is a shift from the young people feeling that they had agency and were in control of what was happening, to things quickly spiralling out of control. This may include threats to end relationships: *“But I didn’t push him, lah, because you know, if I had pushed him, he would just be like, ‘Oh, no! Break up’ and things like that. Yeah.”* (MY-04), alongside persistent demands for images:

*“One day, he asked me for nude pictures, and I said to him, I am not going to send him any nudes and he kept on forcing me, ‘Can you please send me nudes. Can you please send me nudes’, and even went to that point where he threatened me and said, ‘If you don’t send me nudes, I am going to break up with you and I will forget about you.’ I didn’t want him to do that because I still liked him a lot.”* (NA-03).

Across these narratives, it was apparent that insistence, persuasion, coercion and threats all occurred on a continuum with the explicit goal of the offender getting what they wanted. The movement between these was also seen within individual stories. There were occasions in which deception had taken place, for example, someone representing themselves as being younger than they were or pretending to offer modelling opportunities, but this was not as common as is typically perceived to be the case in OCSEA.



Figure 4: Interconnected approaches used by offenders.



The most striking deceptions as described by the young people were when offenders, whom they had felt were trustworthy or who had been offering love, then changed in their engagements. Someone who they felt was nice and with whom they felt they had a relationship could quickly turn into a nasty, aggressive or threatening person. This left young people confused and unsure of the other person's actual intentions.

“ I later found out that he was actually recording everything that was happening. All the things that he made me do, all the pictures that he took and that I sent, he kept everything. He was recording the videos.

NA-05

”

## THEME TWO – EXPERIENCING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Such confusion was most obviously seen when images were recorded, used or shared with others without permission: *“I later found out that he was actually recording everything that was happening. All the things that he made me do, all the pictures that he took and that I sent, he kept everything. He was recording the videos.”* (NA-05) These anxieties about image sharing without permission were also present when images had not been taken as part of an online coercive relationship: *“I was afraid they would share them to others, to see that poor people don’t have clothes to wear... because they don’t have money.”* (CA-01). Threats were not consistently used throughout these narratives, but the most frequent threats were related to sharing or distributing images or videos if further images were not shared, or, in some instances, if a demand to meet was not met: *“In the beginning, ummm, there was a man that tied me up in his house and took pictures of me naked and threatened to sell them on the internet and post them on social media.”* (NA-02) At times, it appeared that the threats to share were carried out:

*“So, he sent it through a message and my brother received just one photo. My older brother phoned me immediately, he asked, ‘What is happening to you?’ So, then I told him everything, and after that he tried to contact that man, and threaten him. But he still continued to threaten my older brother.”* (CA-07)

*“Then, he started threatening me, saying, ‘Okay, fine if you not going to, I will post those nude pictures you sent me. I will post them all on Instagram and on Facebook and on Tik Tok, and I will also share them on my WhatsApp.’ I begged him. I said, ‘Please don’t do that to me, don’t do it, don’t put my photos on social media.’ Then he was like, ‘No, it’s too late...’”* (NA-03)

However, for many young people, it was the realisation that their sexual images *could* be shared that was so frightening: *“Because this person had these pictures and videos of me doing things to myself and he could just decide to expose me anytime. He wouldn’t feel anything about it. No one else knew that this is what I was doing so, for them to find out or know, it was just... it was hard.”* (NA-05)

**“ Yes. I was worried, worried. I was afraid they would take those photos to upload and share, share them with others to look at.**

CA-08

The fear of what might happen was associated with considerable distress. For some young people, this distress was so overwhelming they considered suicide: *“Yes. I was worried, worried. I was afraid they would take those photos to upload and share, share them with others to look at”* (CA-08), and *“So I stopped thinking about it, but the idea of suicide had become the master already.”* (CA-07)

The threat of sharing sexual media was also used to leverage face-to-face meetings:

**“ Then, I asked him, ‘Please, please, could you take off the photos. I don’t want anybody to see them.’ Then, he was like, ‘Okay, come then we can have sex with you.’ And I was like, ‘I am on the farm, what don’t you understand, I cannot come.’ He was like, ‘No. I am not going to take them off.’ And at that point I felt like committing suicide because I felt so embarrassed since I thought the photos were on social media. ”**  
(NA-03)

While face-to-face meetings were sometimes orchestrated by coercion, in other instances, young people agreed to meet someone they had met online as a natural progression within what, at that point, they saw as a relationship. For many of these young people, it was their ‘first relationship’ and was perceived as something special. In part, this was related to knowing and trusting the person for some time before the requests to meet came: *“Eventually, after some time of meeting online and via WhatsApp, we ended up meeting, but the time I am talking about is not beyond six months from the time we met on the website.”* (NA-04), and *“We chatted for, like, two months, then he requested that we meet and I agreed and asked where he wanted us to meet and he said in some hotel in [City] and that is where we met.”* (KY-08)

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These meetings took place in secret insofar as these young people did not tell their family what they were doing or where they were going:

*"So, I would feel good so I gave him my number and he wanted to meet in person. He was from [City] and I was in [Town] and he said he would plan so we could meet in person and not online. He said, 'I want to see that beauty, see the whole of you, I want to know you more.' He wanted to see me and spend time with me, and we planned a date that I didn't tell anyone about. It was a secret. I don't know if he told anyone on his side that he was going to meet a teenager. We planned a date, he came to [Town], and I was stupid back then."* (KY-02)

For others, meeting people unknown to them and being exploited through transactional sexual activities could also include non-consensual sharing of images: *"Scared... Because I didn't know what he... where was my photo?"* (CA-08). One young person recounted how she challenged this:

*"Yes, there were. Some clients recorded videos, but I caught his action. I went into the bathroom and in that guest house the bathroom had a mirror door and covered only a half of it. And the client prepared to take a video, but I saw him in time. I told him to delete it. I was there with my other friends too, if you don't delete, I will report you to the police."* (CA-06)

### **A sense of entitlement amongst offenders**

Where meetings took place, either within what was perceived by the young person as a 'relationship', or where transactions had been made, sexual assaults followed. Across all the narratives, a sense of entitlement is evident from the offenders. For example, nobody asked the boys by the pond if they could take their photographs: *"He took photos of me naked, he took photos of me naked, and I felt ashamed."* (CA-03) This ranged from 'clients' feeling entitled to take pictures and record videos of the young women they had paid money to for sex: *"They took her photos and then they shared to each other."* (CA-11), and *"Some clients, holding the phone to take the photo while I was returning from the bathroom."* (CA-06), to the intermediaries who then cheated these girls out of the agreed sum of money:

*"I asked, 'Why did you do like this? Tell us the truth about how much you receive and we will give you your part. Why do you need to swindle us like this?' But he didn't say anything. And we gave the \$45, we didn't talk much. And we told him that later the Karma [bad deed] will follow you. Like what we said. And the client also felt angry with him too about him swindling our money. They didn't like it. And each time, he brought girls about 5, 4 persons... A lot."* (CA-11)

“**They took her photos and then they shared to each other.**”

CA-11

“Those who committed OCSEA appeared to feel that they had the right to take what they wanted, as evidenced in the following extract from a young woman who stated that she was *"still wondering why he would do this to me"*:

*"After a while, food and drinks were served and I didn't know that my drink had been spiked. I felt weak and very sleepy. I couldn't stand up. I didn't know what happened to me because I trusted this person and I didn't think that I was drugged. I woke up alone in the morning, in a bedroom naked, with nothing and in pain. I got dressed and went to the living room and asked them what they had done to me and they just laughed because they knew what had happened but I didn't. All I felt was pain all over my body. I asked where the guy that invited me there was and they claimed not to know him, they asked me 'Which person are you talking about?' Because he was a friend of theirs, they denied knowing him as they knew what he had done."* (KY-01)

Other young people felt as though they were nothing more than objects, and that the men were going to have sex regardless of what the young person felt: *"But he told me that we were already there and that he had paid for it, and that he didn't care whether I liked it or not."* (KY-09)

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These behaviours were often in marked contrast to the person they felt they had known on social media:

**“It was more like I did it for him, it was for him. It’s like the person I was chatting with online, the caring person, the loving person, the affectionate person was not the same person I met. By that, I mean that when we had sex, it was like he was the only person there and I didn’t exist. It was like he was having sex with an object... He was just there doing his thing in a way that you will realise that this person, I mean nothing to him, I am being used as a sex body, like you are being used. The person didn’t even care what was happening, whether you enjoyed or not, whether you liked or not.”** (NA-04)

When persuasion did not work, there were occasions when force was used: “We argued for some time, and he closed the door saying that if I didn’t want it, I was not leaving the place. So, he took me by force and kept me on the bed and he raped me” (KY-08), and “He later forced me to have sex with him and it was after that, that communication stopped.” (KY-07)

There was an assumption that because a meeting had been agreed to, it automatically included sex: “Yes. When I told him I was going home since it was late, he said he has to have sex with me. So, when I wanted to escape, he forced me.” (KY-05) In one account, the adult demanding sex felt that it was his right as he had travelled to meet the young person:

*“No. When he saw that I was resistant, he said, ‘I came all the way from [City], I have used my money not for nothing.’ So, he saw I resisted, the place was isolated and even if I had screamed no one could hear me. He came closer to me, I was wearing a knee length dress and he was stronger than me, he came closer and grabbed me and removed my clothes, I tried to scream and fight back, and all my actions were in vain. He did what he did and left. He left me there alone.”* (KY-02)

In certain instances, it was also observed that when abuse was disclosed within the family, the family felt entitled to keep it a secret: “I couldn’t really open up to my mom about it and, at a later stage, when I told her about what happened with my brother, what my brother did, she said, ‘Okay, it’s a family issue. Let’s just leave it as it is. Let’s not cause problems.’” (NA-04)

# THEME THREE – WAYS OF COPING

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**It is difficult to grasp the diversity, complexity and sadness of what these young people experienced. When starting the work (in part, because only people who had received some social and therapeutic support were included), it was assumed that they would also talk about how they ‘recovered’ from OCSEA and how life was now better for them. While this was the case for some, in many instances it was not.**

For instance, some young people simply had to put psychologically dealing with their experiences aside because the immediate circumstances of financial insecurity, or hunger, took precedence: *“There’s not much food. There’s not much money... I don’t think about it now.”* (CA-1) Others found ways to place the experiences in a compartment:

**“ My thoughts are that now the story of having photos taken, it’s in the past. ”** (CA-02)

One young person concluded:

*“Something from the past...what I...up to the level... I got to one point. I’ve stopped hurting. You get used to being broken.”* (CA-07)

Yet these narratives are also remarkable for the ways in which these young people managed both the experiences, and the aftermath, of OCSEA.

Figure 5: Theme Three – Ways of Coping.



“ Afraid... Afraid that my parents would find out.

CA-03

”

**An emotional roller coaster**

Possibly the most pervasive emotion evident in the narratives associated with the experience of OCSEA, at any stage in the process, was fear: “Afraid... Afraid that my parents would find out” (CA-03); “Afraid and worried they’d publicise those photos and share them widely” (CA-05); and “Afraid that they would come to arrest me” (CA-03). For some participants, there were constant reminders of what frightening things may happen:

*“So, later on, this man started threatening me on WhatsApp saying that he will post my pictures on all social media platforms... So, as time went on the threats went on, he would WhatsApp me saying, ‘You have to come to [City] to see me. If you don’t come and see me, I will sell your pictures and I will post them.’ He would go on and say, ‘Otherwise, I will expose you.’ From there, as the days passed, I got really scared.” (NA-02)*

“ I knew I was wrong, and I made a mistake, so I knew I was here from my own doing.

MY-02

”

“ Yes, first I was angry with myself. Each and every day I would curse myself and think of how stupid I was, just meeting a stranger on social media, even after my parents had warned me severely...

KY-02

”

“

I also felt angry with myself, it was like I blamed myself... Why did I not see this coming, especially now that I was warned by my mom, and I trusted her when she [the person who they had been chatting to] was a total stranger.

NA-06

”

Many narratives spoke of self-blame and feelings of stupidity related to the fact that they had not understood what was happening to them: “I knew I was wrong, and I made a mistake, so I knew I was here from my own doing” (MY-02); “It made me feel really bad because I knew I contributed in a way” (NA-05); and “It was hell. I used to think and say how stupid I was” (KY-08). In many instances, young people spoke of having ‘been warned’ about the dangers:

*“Yes, first I was angry with myself. Each and every day I would curse myself and think of how stupid I was, just meeting a stranger on social media, even after my parents had warned me severely... That time I had a phone and most of the time she [mother] would comment on how I wasn’t concentrating on my studies, because I was always on the phone, and she kept asking me as I was not studying and warned me that it was dangerous and that she just wanted me to have a good life and concentrate on my studies and she wanted to warn me because she wanted me to have a good life, but I never listened being a teenager. I felt my mother was just being too strict and didn’t want me to have a life, because I already had a friend who told me I am good but my mother couldn’t understand me.” (KY-02)*

At times, this self-blame was overwhelming: “I also felt angry with myself, it was like I blamed myself... Why did I not see this coming, especially now that I was warned by my mom, and I trusted her when she [the person who they had been chatting to] was a total stranger.” (NA-06)

This young person also spoke about how difficult it was to get beyond this: *"Yes ma'am, but it was quite a process because the self-blame and the anger does not go easily. You can't just deal with that easily"*. When one of the boys who were photographed by the village pond was asked about whether he had discussed his feeling with the others, he said: *"We said that, now... Heard that... 'Did he make you do this, ey?' We should never have done that."* (CA-05) Self-blame was compounded by feelings of having been used: *"I just feel like I was used and like I was so young."* (MY-01), and *"I felt used, I felt abused, that love and affection when we were online was not the same person I was meeting."* (NA-04) For this young person, there was also a realisation that what had happened was also abuse:

*"Funny that all along I never thought of it as an abuse. I never considered it, but talking to my cousin made me realise that I was used and abused and I said, 'Okay, I will not talk to this person again.' You know, when I went to his house, I thought I was his girlfriend based on the things that he was saying to me or I thought it will be just an automatic decision that I was his girlfriend, but then, the way I was treated was like, 'You are no one to me, you are just a person that came to have sex with me, now I am done with you.'"* (NA-04)

A sense of being overwhelmed and high levels of anxiety were both experienced as part of the OCSEA: *"I was stressed and cried but I did put my clothes on and went home."* (KY-09), and where, for example, the meeting was transactional: *"Felt stressful, one mind felt I wanted to go, and another mind, I didn't want to go. But thought that I needed money because she, my God-sister, used to help me, now I want to help her."* (CA-12), and as a response to threats of sharing sexual images:

**“Yah, or even more, at first, I thought he wouldn't do anything about it until he started blackmailing me that if I don't come to him, he will post them immediately. I would not know that he will do such a thing because at first, when I met this man, he didn't seem to have such intentions and I didn't know that he had such intentions.”** (NA-02).

As seen here, feelings of being overwhelmed and lacking the resources to manage the situation were often expressed as 'stress' and, for some, this continued after the abuse: *"I used to avoid him afterwards when he texted me to apologise for what he did. I was stressed."* (KY-08), and *"I lost weight because I was very stressed a lot. I was depressed and all."* (NA-01)

Such feelings were often accompanied by a sense of helplessness, shame and confusion: *"I used to sit and think, especially when I imagined he had not been caught, I just cried. Then I came to see like it was something meant to happen, and I was helpless, and it had happened."* (KY-05), and *"I felt like I was stuck, and I couldn't do anything about it."* (NA-05) In some instances, these feelings impacted on the ability of the young person to disclose what had happened: *"Feeling helpless, I just went home and hid the truth from my mum because I knew she would be upset with me for not telling her earlier."* (KY-01) There was also a realisation that the images could be shared and shame that the community would find out what had happened. This also posed a threat to the young person's reputation:

*"At first, I didn't take it seriously, until my mind caught up with me, that, if this man sells these pictures or posts them on social media, what will people think about me? What will they say? What will the community say? That's where the fear started coming in, where my reputation will be ruined and I don't know what this man will say about me and what people will think. So that's where everything started going crazy for me, and I said to myself that I need to do something before he does something. So, there was a point where I had made up my mind to go and see him and I even WhatsApp him to say I will come, but then I thought that if I go there, this man can do anything to me. He could kill me, he could rape me and at the end of the day, he might still post these pictures. So, things were really messed up for me."* (NA-2)

**“No, back then, I saw myself as stupid, like someone that's stupid, totally.”**

NA-06

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Such feelings of shame had a negative impact on the way young people saw themselves: *“At that point, I felt so heartbroken, I felt soooo..., like I was a nobody. I felt like I was a worthless. I felt like I was like a prostitute.”* (NA-03); *“No, back then, I saw myself as stupid, like someone that’s stupid, totally.”* (NA-06); and *“When I came here, I felt ashamed of myself that I did it like this. Felt afraid that after I leave here, people might know about this”* (CA-09). Accompanying this shame was resignation about what had happened and the fact that there was nothing that could change it: *“I felt ashamed and shy but it has happened like this already”* (CA-11) and *“I thought my dreams were shattered.”* (KY-06) When using the flip chart, one young person described how different things were before OCSEA happened:

*“This is me and I felt broken, so this was after it happened. Here I am writing ‘suicidal’ [silence], ‘disappointed’ [silence]. Yah, I felt physically weak and tired [silence] [talking and attending to the flip chart]. Now I am going to put before it happened on the space that I left up there. Before it happened, I was very goofy. I also felt smart, I felt cool [silence] and I felt loved.”* (NA-03)

The shame was intensified by the knowledge that others would know: *“Everyone did talk about it, even the relatives.”* (KY-07); *“Yes... Because most people outside, they knew about my story.”* (CA-06); and *“Yes, I had a close friend who knew about it, and she told her friends and her friends told me about it.”* (KY-04) One young person remonstrated:

**“I just hate that, that whole experience happened to me, I hate that. People have seen, have seen my freaking photos when I was like a freaking minor and, like, a lot of these people, like, I still see, meet them at like clubs and things like that, and it is just weird knowing that they have seen photos of me when I was young.”** (MY-01)

**“Everyone did talk about it, even the relatives.”**

CA-06

”

### Blame

As we have seen, this roller coaster of emotions included self-blame, but there were also feelings of being blamed: *“Blamed me, he asked why I had done it like that. I told him I didn’t want to do it like that, that I was dense for a moment, I didn’t think, and it became a big story. Like that.”* (CA-07) This can also be seen in the following extract:

*“The community is actually not such a good place because the community likes to add stories of their own... add their own tales and they are the biggest judgers. You will maybe get a few of them who would say, ‘How could she go through such a thing?’ But then, there will be some people in the community who will say, ‘Why is she crying over such a stupid small thing. Stop being such a sissy’ and all of that. My family will take it very seriously, my family they are very overprotective and secure over their children. So, they will take it in a very harsh way, and they will even go and confront the person that hurt me. That’s why I was also very scared to tell them because they will scream and take my phone, go to confront the person and so on. That’s why I couldn’t talk to my parents.”* (NA-03)

**“My emotions. The people at home had blamed me already. When there’s a story like that already, you have to stand in front of the community, even stand in front of the people who received your photos. How are you supposed to resolve it with them?”**

CA-07

”



“ He was sad that, I don't even know why he was sad but I think he was sad about the wrong thing. I think he was asking me like, 'Why did you do that?', when the question should have been like, 'Why did he do that to you?' ”

MY-01

For some, the fear of being blamed and judged by others clearly influenced their ability to disclose what had happened and to seek help: “My emotions. The people at home had blamed me already. When there's a story like that already, you have to stand in front of the community, even stand in front of the people who received your photos. How are you supposed to resolve it with them?” (CA-07) One narrative captured a sense of injustice that was also felt:

*“It was actually... Obviously at that time also, yeah, I didn't know how to handle, like, my dad crying and, like, being sad and disappointed in me because I did stuff with a guy, like. He was sad that, I don't even know why he was sad but I think he was sad about the wrong thing. I think he was asking me like, 'Why did you do that?', when the question should have been like, 'Why did he do that to you?’” (MY-01)*

Keeping things to oneself, or not telling the full story to other people, was often described in these narratives: “Now not so much. I just never talk about those feelings at my house because no one asks how I am. They just ask bits and pieces. I tell you that because there's not really anyone who knows. I haven't even told my friends, because at the time I disconnected from all my friends. They don't know... So they didn't know because I didn't talk to them” (CA-07); “In the past, I felt scared because I felt that if my friends who knew my story, they would tell everyone my secret and so I opted to stay silent. I always remember. I can't forget” (KY-04); and “I just hid it inside.” (CA-05)

For some young people, this meant avoiding both friends and family: “I used to isolate myself. I didn't want to stay around people. I became introverted, and I would stay alone and cry. I didn't want any encounters with either family or friends, and at home, I would lock myself in and eat in my room alone and if anyone asked if I was going through something, I did not tell them. I didn't think anyone could help me, so I just kept it to myself.” (KY-02) There was also often recognition that this was possibly not the best way to deal with what had happened: “I started pulling back from my relationships, I started being more on my own. That also affected me more since I was not opening up to people. I just put myself in a corner, yeah, beating myself down. So it really affected me, and it even took me longer to overcome.” (NA-06) However, when one participant did disclose their history of abuse, they were left with the feeling that the person did not know what they could do to help:

*“I didn't tell anyone about all that had happened. I only told people about my fourth brother. Only [...] knows the full story. She was shocked and cried because I had not told a soul about the other two brothers. She felt upset because she couldn't help me then. From then on, she told me I couldn't see my brothers anymore, so I haven't.” (MY-03)*

### Reaching out

Not all participants kept things to themselves. For some, it was easier to talk first to friends: “I only told my friend, but I did not tell her everything. I only said that there is a friend of mine that I visited, and I did not like what he did to me. That's all I said.” (KY-08) Another young person found comfort in the fact that her friend had also experienced OCSEA:

“No one, that was my own little skeleton [laughing]. I put it back into the closet until I was ready to deal with it one day. But then, when I found out that my friend was involved in it as well, then I told her also what had happened to me and then she felt really comfortable. She told me how it's making her feel without the fear of being judged. So, my friend was the only one I told and we kind of gave each other support.” (NA-07)

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“  
**My mom is my rock. She guides me [Putting a rock symbol on the flip chart].**

NA-01

”  
Yet in some instances, friends felt ill-equipped to help and advised them to tell a caregiver or another adult:

*“She told me I needed to tell my mother, a grown up, because she was also young and that she could try to help but a grown up is better. She told me I had to tell my mother and I said, ‘No, my mother will kill me.’ She told me that my mother can’t kill me because I am her daughter... that man is to blame and she is my mother and she loves me, and she convinced me to try and talk to my mum or my older sister, but I told her never to speak about it.” (KY-02)*

In this particular narrative, the friend went on to tell her own mother what had taken place: *“But she said that she won’t promise not to tell anyone... That she might tell her mum, so that I can find help, because I was in a really bad state. So, she told the teacher who was her mother.” (KY-02)*

There were cases in the narratives in which families did offer support: *“My mom is my rock. She guides me [Putting a rock symbol on the flip chart].” (NA-01); “My parents, I was loved by my parents.” (NA-03); “Yes, she provides all I need, I am happy with my family, and I love them so much.” (KY-01); and “My mother she is on the board.” (KY-03)* One young person said of her mother: *“She loves me, doesn’t ignore. When I did that, she didn’t disregard me, she didn’t feel ashamed. She provided me encouragement.” (CA-09).* Families also helped young people to provide reports to law enforcement agencies: *“Later, I went home and told my mother. She took me to the police.” (KY-05); “My parents helped me out they looked for ways to get the man and talked to the police officer, but he was not found.” (KY-06); and “The doctor gave some papers that we took to the police station.” (KY-09)*

However, there was some ambivalence about the involvement of law enforcement: *“We went to the hospital and I was examined, then to the police so that he could be arrested, but they kept saying they didn’t get him, and the longer he was missing, the more money we were spending for his search. So we just gave up because the police couldn’t find him, but they kept asking for money.” (KY-04)*

“  
**My parents helped me out they looked for ways to get the man and talked to the police officer, but he was not found.**

KY-06

”  
This is also evident in the following extract:

*“So, after that, we were introduced to a police officer who took on the case and our statements were written down and I had to submit my cell phone at some point. I had to be there a few times, maybe about three months, once a week or every third week or so, whenever he would need me to answer a few questions about the case or so. I was, ahh, I started getting annoyed a little [laughs], because at that point, most of the information from the case I had given to them, and I felt like there wasn’t really much, or maybe they had other important cases at the time, so yeah, but it wasn’t really going anywhere.” (NA-05)*

This ambivalence was apparent in the narratives of young people exploited through transactional sex: *“But, for the police, I don’t know. After they came, they say ‘No’ or ‘What?’ or they are corrupt... Who knows?” (CA-09), and “Cambodian law, I think I rate it as really weak.” (CA-07)* In these cases, the police were involved because the young people were detained and were subsequently placed in a Residential Care Facility.

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This young person described what seemed like a confusing scenario:

*"Yes, he said go first and after I took the TukTuk with him, we were arrested by police. And the police told us a lie... They talked some and gave answers to some questions only for a short time and wouldn't let us go back home. After answering the questions, they asked us to sleep at the General Department of Police for one night. Then the NGO came and sent us to the Social Work Affairs Department and the Social Work Affairs sent me to an NGO." (CA-11)*

However, it appears from this account that these young people did not necessarily see themselves as victims but had accepted commonly held attitudes related to adult prostitution applied to them as they had 'actively engaged' in their own exploitation. This was a way to earn money in a context in which they had to both survive and send money home to support their families:

*"No, they didn't force us. And when the police arrested us, the police said, 'You are a victim.' We didn't understand what we were a victim of... I don't think we are a victim because we agreed to go by ourselves. They are not a suspect... I know it is illegal, but what we thought, we agreed to go by ourselves. They didn't force or groom me to go. We agreed to go by ourselves." (CA-11)*

For some young people taken into care, being viewed as a victim meant that they were kept away from home until their carers decided that they were ready to be released. In one country, young people were even required to sign a contract with the police stating that they would not sell sex again: *"For me, I want to return home soon, I want to go this month. It doesn't mean that I want to hang around or come to [City], but because my grandma is sick and no one is taking care of my little brother. So, if I go it will help my mom a lot. And I want to make a contract with the police more because it could help to discourage me." (CA-09), and "Can't go anywhere, even in the prison when your mother misses you. She can come to visit, but here she can't come except when they make an appointment with us to meet them." (CA-11)*

The 'contract' appeared to place the young person in a position of responsibility for what had happened, making them at least as much to blame as the 'broker' and the 'clients'. The contract was an agreement that they would not 'sell sex' again. This sits in marked contrast to the statement by police in which they were 'victims' and seemed to be the source of initial confusion:

*"I think I was only earning money. I didn't have money. I didn't steal or rob anyone. I didn't steal the client's property or find clients for other people. She also said to me that I am only a victim. I was wondering about this too, but I didn't ask. I've not asked. It is only a contract, but I have not yet asked clearly. But this week, I will meet with Mom [...], after she'll return tomorrow, I will ask her clearly about going home and about the contract." (CA-09)*

In some cases, the decision to disclose or not was taken out of the young person's hands because they became pregnant or developed a sexually transmitted infection: *"They waited until I delivered the baby before continuing the treatment." (CA-06) and "I got pregnant, my parents separated, and my mother wasn't working." (KY-04)* Within these accounts, it can be seen that some young people became pregnant by being exploited through transactional sex with men who refused to wear condoms, while others were raped when they met the person they had engaged with online. The discovery of pregnancy was disorienting, especially when the only source of money was through transactional sex: *"When I was first up to second month pregnant, I went out too. But later, I went a few times only." (CA-06), or when the young person felt that they were very much on their own: "I thought about it for a very long time, 'How will I survive when I have no work to do?' and 'I am pregnant', and 'I am a child'." (KY-06)* In other cases, help was given, although in the narratives, it appeared that there were few choices offered as to how the pregnancy might be managed: *"I got pregnant. They forced me to carry the burden of the pregnancy." (KY-07), and "We went to a different hospital, and I was tested, and I was found to be pregnant. The counsellor told me that abortion was not an option because it was a bad thing to do, and I agreed with her since I was afraid of that too." (KY-09)*

However, for some of the young people who became pregnant, families – especially mothers – rallied around them and were supportive: *“She told me I can always talk to her. She takes me out for dates at restaurants and we have fun and its freeing, and when I was pregnant I told her about it and she convinced me to keep it and she assured me that I could count on her and that was a huge weight off my shoulder. I cried because I didn’t think that she would react like that.”* (KY-04) Sometimes mothers stepped in to help after the baby was born: *“I gave birth to that child and then my mum came in to help me”* (KY-07), and *“My mother came back when my stomach was big, and we were comfortable, and I was almost giving birth. She was surprised how ready I was with everything. I went through a normal birth process and my baby was healthy.”* (KY-09) However, for this young person, the responses of others towards them being pregnant were not always supportive:

*“Yeah... I had to, even though it was not easy for me since friends laughed at me and talked ill about me. I had a very rough time. They would say, ‘She used to feel good about herself now she is pregnant.’ But the more the pregnancy was growing the more I had to become more comfortable because I could not take it back, it was too late.”* (KY-09)

**“It also took me to the point where I started doing drugs and the drugs were actually just to numb the reality of what I am fighting so then, when I would use the drugs, I would not feel the need to go out and I wouldn’t feel that lonely or anything at all. I lost friends. I lost a lot of things that were meaningful for me at that time, and it wasn’t nice.”**

NA-07

### The aftermath of online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Many of these conversations took place several years after the OCSEA had occurred, and the narratives showed considerable variation in how these young people felt about what had happened and where they were now. Initial coping responses included a lot of avoidant strategies, for example, using drugs and alcohol: *“It also took me to the point where I started doing drugs and the drugs were actually just to numb the reality of what I am fighting so then, when I would use the drugs, I would not feel the need to go out and I wouldn’t feel that lonely or anything at all. I lost friends. I lost a lot of things that were meaningful for me at that time, and it wasn’t nice.”* (NA-07) This was also the case for some young women during their pregnancy:

*“Yes, because I would sit and think too much. To help me forget the stress. But after giving birth I thought that using drugs was just another way of harming myself with the drugs, and I stopped using them after giving birth. Like, it was useless using them since I had already given birth and now, I had to raise the child.”* (KY-07)

Again, in the aftermath of the abuse, there was often a sense of helplessness, which the enormity of being pregnant made all the more acute:

*“It affected my thoughts since I would just sit and wonder how I am underage and pregnant and not married. This was another addition to my problems. The problems I had. I did not know what to do. I was really affected mentally that I ended up using drugs since I did not have a choice.”* (KY-09)

For other young people, coping included impersonal sexual relationships: *“I was 17 years old when he came into the picture, and I was like, ‘Okay, the only thing he wants is sex and I can give him sex and he can just give me money.’ I didn’t have to think about the online experience because now I had money... After that, well, I have a provider’s mind set and at that time I was really just like, ‘Okay, I can just have this transactional relationship with all the men that I meet’, you know. I guess it was very self-destructive at the time.”* (NA-07)

“  
Yes, I had professional help leading up to the online abuse. I dealt with all of that with the social worker. This was because at some point, the online and the previous abuses, it all became too much, and I looked for help.

NA-04

Other young people were able to actively look for and find help, sometimes online: *“Well, it was something that I had to put on, like, for me. I had to stand in front of the mirror every day and I had to encourage myself that I am a human, I make mistakes and that I go wrong at some point. I also had my smart phone, and I am exposed to the internet. I used it for my own benefit where I searched for videos, motivating videos to help me to get rid of all those feelings that were running through all inside of me”* (NA-06). More often, help was found within schools or community centres. One young person had previously received help following intra-familial abuse and looked for further help once they had experienced OCSEA: *“Yes, I had professional help leading up to the online abuse. I dealt with all of that with the social worker. This was because at some point, the online and the previous abuses, it all became too much, and I looked for help.”* (NA-04) Others sought help for the first time, and noted the importance of someone listening and accepting what was being said: *“That I could speak openly to the counsellor, and I can..., without her judging me or saying to me bad things. She just gave me counselling. I felt more like a wolf [puts a wolf on the flip chart], strong and independent.”* (NA-03) Psychosocial help was often recounted in a positive light: *“The counselling sessions have been very helpful, you go there and share freely. The coach and I are best friends. I tell him everything. Counselling is good too.”* (KY-04), and *“The counsellor in our estate has really helped me because after giving birth she brought me gifts. She still tells me not to give up.”* (KY-09)

Seeking professional help often led to caregivers being told what had happened:

“**Yes, I was still living with my parents and it made it, umm, I don't know. When I told our school psychologist, she told us that she knew a few people that could help us get this attention so, they helped me go to my mom's work and I had to tell my mom what happened and it was very hard for me because I always try to make my mom proud and I have always try not to disappoint her so, it was really, really hard for me [sighs].**” (NA-05)

However, sometimes, the young person was still not ready for either caregivers or the police to be involved:

*“I finally got the courage to talk about it so, I contacted a social worker. So, I went through counselling. She helped me. She told me that what this man was doing is wrong and that he was exploiting me and threatening me to do what I don't want to do and she helped me go through the process of healing and trying to get through what had happened and... ummm... she asked if we could report the case to the police because what the man was doing is a crime and he could have already sold the pictures on the internet for his benefit but, I wasn't ready for that because I didn't want my parents to find out.”* (NA-02)

### Providing help

The process of seeking help can take quite some time and involve multiple agencies. This must have been difficult as some young people were trying to maintain secrecy, so that their caregivers did not find out what had happened:

*“I went to [organisation] and I was treated there. I told them I was raped, and they said they would take action for me because I was a minor and after around six months, I still hadn't told anyone at home what had happened to me. I heard of this person called [...] who helped and counselled people. I went to him and told him what had happened to me, and he asked if I was okay, and I said, 'Yes'. He asked if I had told anyone and I said, 'No', and he wanted to know why I hadn't. I told him that I didn't want to stress my mother about what had happened to me, considering the hardships she had gone through raising me.*

## THEME THREE – WAYS OF COPING

*"It took me six months to meet [...] and once I did, he really helped me and we went to [...] where they offer counselling. They would call you and offer counselling." (KY-01)*

Non-governmental organisations<sup>37</sup> also played an important role on multiple levels, including reassurance and kindness: *"They spoke with a smile, they spoke... gently, softly... They listened and spoke gently, softly, and explained that I was not being arrested and that I had not done wrong... So that helped, and I wasn't so scared." (CA-01)*, and *"The organisation came and explained to us what happens when we go up [to court], and my fear was released." (CA-02)* Some offered practical help to manage immediate problems related with accommodation and finances: *"To help with a toilet, to make a toilet." (CA-03)*, and *"We went out, ate together, they gave money, and other things." (CA-05)*

Non-governmental organisations also offered medical and psychological help: *"For my disease, I would not be able to have natural delivery, so I needed a lot of money for surgery. They helped me with everything... to find a place to stay... they helped with the delivery and will help to find a job later." (CA-06)*, and *"That place was inclusive of both genders, and it was very helpful for all of us, be it boy or girl. Their counselling is very good. They also do testing. You would go there and hear of cases worse than yours, and you would appreciate your situation and become brave and become a team. We share with each other our experiences." (KY-01)*

Other non-governmental organisations facilitated a return to school: *"They are helping me out. If it was not for them, I would not be in school. [...] after my experience they decided it was better for me to go back to school." (KY-06)* However, for young people exploited through transactional sex, there was a sense that the help offered was sometimes a mixture of both support and control.

One young woman spoke of not being allowed to leave the residential shelter to return to her family: *"I want to tell them that the organisation helps me a lot these days. I do not blame, but I want to make clear with them. Sometimes she promised this month and that month. Some said in March and some said in April for a total of three months." (CA-09)*, and that the message was: *"Stop, stop going out with clients." (CA-09)* These young people felt that they were being deprived of their liberty in order to prevent them from earning money through transactional sex and that this limited the amount of contact that they had with their families and their ability to make any choices for themselves:

*"When I came here, I thought a lot. I used to live outside. I had a phone to play with. In here I have no phone to play with and at night I sleep and look at the wall all the time. We always say that the non-governmental organisation told us a lie. They didn't speak the truth. When they came to take us, they told us that they would not keep us here for long, after our family acknowledged us as their child, they would let us go back home. Our families acknowledged us already. Our families called to ask us when will they let us to go back home. The non-governmental organisation said that in this case we need to ask the police. After only the police allowed, the non-governmental organisation would be able to allow us to go home." (CA-11)*

**“ They spoke with a smile, they spoke... gently, softly... They listened and spoke gently, softly, and explained that I was not being arrested and that I had not done wrong... So that helped, and I wasn't so scared.**

CA-01

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that the sampling process identified young people for the conversations via networks of non-government organisations, so a positive bias is sometimes noted in references to them.

At the centre, these young people were taught practical and vocational skills: *“Like, before I didn’t wash the clothes but here, I can wash the clothes by myself. And they asked you to do this and that and we obey them.”* (CA-12), and *“They have classes for hairdressing, both female... But I like to learn about nails, and I am good at it.”* (CA-08), but it was felt that the non-governmental organisation did not offer any psychological help: *“They didn’t... They didn’t have the depth of the man I met who was a therapist. It wasn’t up to that level. They just advised me, ‘Not to think too much.’”* (CA-07)

Participants repeatedly emphasised the need for others to listen and not to judge:

**“Listen, listen more than give advice. Someone who’s a good listener listens, and is not an advisor. So at that time, I needed someone who listened. I didn’t need an advisor.”** (CA-07)

One young person reported that: *“The teacher used to talk to me, and she told me everything happened for a reason, but we don’t know why it happened, but you have to accept it happened and move on. Each and every day she would talk to me, and I felt someone cared for me and I started smiling again.”* (KY-02) What was also important was an understanding of the social pressures experienced by adolescents:

*“Well, she came to realise that I am growing up and I am being exposed to these things. She also decided to play her role and being a mother to me, being a mother of a teenage girl. When she did that it made me feel happy, it made me feel supported and it turned my world around since I felt it was upside down. It made me really feel happy especially because the support came from the person that I trusted so much and that I loved, so it really helped.”* (NA-06)

**“I just never talk about those feelings at my house because no one asks how I am.”**

CA-07

However, many families appeared to feel unsure about what they could do to help: *“They [my family] didn’t really do anything. They told me to listen to them [the representative from the non-governmental organisation]. Listen to them explain so that I wouldn’t be afraid.”* (CA-02); *“I just never talk about those feelings at my house because no one asks how I am.”* (CA-07); and *“They don’t know the story. They never asked what happened.”* (CA-03) This is not to say that for some caregivers, there was not a willingness to help: *“She told me to eat more and do not think too much.”* (CA-06), and *“They were shocked and said what’s past is past. I don’t really remember what else they said, but at the end, they said if I want peace in my heart then I should forgive everyone before I close my eyes at night to sleep.”* (MY-03) For one young person, when the family tried to discuss what had happened, she felt the discussion turned to blaming her and also stirred up memories of events again:

**“It’s like a shadow... When they recall what happened, okay, that, but it was just a message that woke us up. But that, it’s not just a message, it’s like picking a scab.”** (CA-07)

### Other coping mechanisms

As already noted, many of these young people were resourceful and were able to take practical steps to deal with some of the things that had happened. This included blocking people or deleting an application: *“I don’t know exactly how I ended things, but I did end things. I declined actually, I told him not to send messages on Facebook or call me anymore and I blocked him on Facebook.”* (NA-07); *“He just kept manipulating me and manipulating me till I was just like... It was enough. I just cut him off, blocked him off everywhere.”* (MY-01); and *“Sometimes I chatted online and someone called and showed his genitals. I blocked that person.”* (CA-11)

## THEME THREE – WAYS OF COPING

Other strategies were reported as follows: “I was following her on Instagram, you know, ever since we started our friendship. I decided to unfollow her.” (NA-06), and “So I cut it off. After all, it’s just an app. We’re not going to meet or anything like that, so I just left it like that.” (MY-02) For one young person, the internet was used to find information about the adult they were chatting with and to use that to try and stop the abuse: “His name was not the one he had told me. He was actually married and he wasn’t from Canada, he was from another continent. So, I screenshot all of that and the next time he sent me a message, I told him that I think it will be better if we just didn’t see each other anymore.” (NA-05)

“ I don’t know exactly how I ended things, but I did end things. I declined actually, I told him not to send messages on Facebook or call me anymore and I blocked him on Facebook.

NA-07

“ I usually think a lot, the shame from the past torments me... That is when I think a lot right now, as I am studying what I want to do to avoid a repeat of what happened.

KY-06

Help was also found through religious beliefs and practices: “Actually Buddhist scriptures can help. That’s for when I’m troubled and I don’t know how to express it or how to resolve it, I take the Buddhist scriptures to tell myself.” (CA-07), and “Umm... Because, like the belief in the Holy Spirit and everything and then like every time when I think about it, I used to tell God to remove these thoughts. Yeah.” (MY-04) This also allowed some young people to feel that they could put what had happened behind them: “I must pray every day and I ask God to protect me and give me that strength, whatever happened to me is in the past, give me the strength to go on and most of the time I read inspirational books and I get inspired about life.” (KY-02) This is seen very clearly in the following extract:

“It was the faith, definitely it was the faith that made me cope at every stage of this and the fact that I told myself that if I wanted to really get over this and move on and grow with my life, I had to put it behind me because if I kept on thinking about it and making it my own, I wouldn’t ever heal from it.” (NA-05)

However, for many young people, when talking about their feelings in the present, there was very much a sense that there was no clear closure: “I usually think a lot, the shame from the past torments me... That is when I think a lot right now, as I am studying what I want to do to avoid a repeat of what happened.” (KY-06) One used a symbol of a lion to illustrate what she needs to become: “So, this is still a work in progress now. When I see myself, I think I just have the qualities of a lion in the future. That’s what will actually help me to overcome my situation. Someone that will lead and inspire others to fight and to be the light.” (NA-04) Again, a lion was used to illustrate what the person had once been but no longer was: “I am just going to use the lion that I put here last time, it represents strength... Although I am still broken like this guy over here. This one I will use as well. It feels like I am carrying a lot on my shoulders. Sometimes I feel like, I could just be a traveller and just say, ‘Bye guys’, I will see you when I am back [laughing].” (NA-07)



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Finally, for some, the challenges were related to how to manage new relationships following their experiences: *“Back then, I had a lot of close friends, but now I don’t have anyone who is close.”* (CA-01), and *“Umm, I try to push them away when they get close to me and I keep distancing people that like want to be close to me, and like sometimes, I feel like I don’t need friends. Yeah. And then like, I really don’t really know what to do.”* (MY-04) This was particularly the case for romantic relationships: *“Because I feel that I haven’t got anyone in my life.”* (CA-07) and, when trying to establish new relationships:

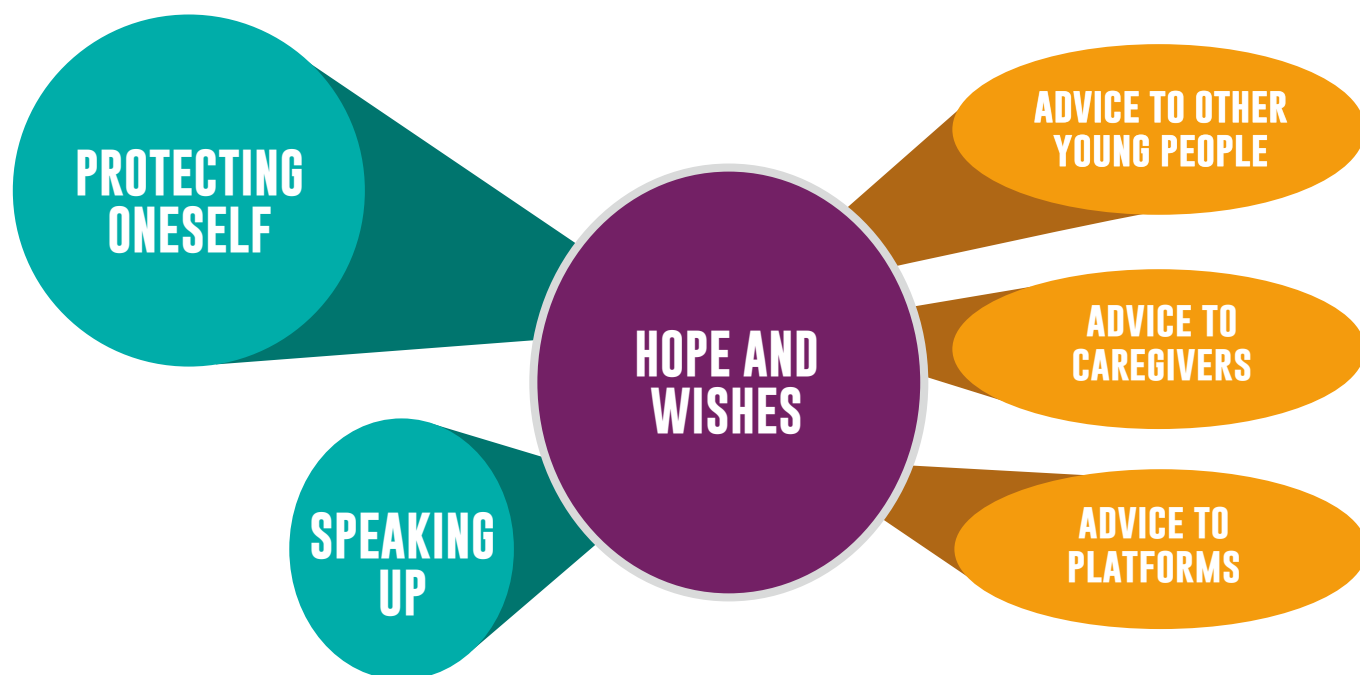
**“ Whatever happened to me. It can be hard sometimes because I am trying to be in a relationship, because I am grown and you understand these things, but the moment I am in a relationship with a guy, I don’t know what happens, I just get stuck and I can’t go on with it, and I feel like I can’t do it, because sometimes I sit and try and I think it will stop, but the moment I am with that guy, my thoughts are just hard to control. They go someplace else and the guy would ask what was wrong because I just switch all of a sudden. ”** (KY-02)

# THEME FOUR – THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

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All the young people talked to some extent about how things were now and how they saw the future. Their feelings about the present were clearly projected into the future and this was most obvious in terms of relationships and online social media. For some young people, their hopes and wishes also included a future in which there was enough to eat, a place that offered shelter and a job that might make having a family possible. In this theme, the need to protect oneself, and expressed hopes, wishes and advice to others are identified. All of these reflected on, and were influenced by, their experiences of OCSEA.

Figure 6: Theme Four – Thinking about the Future.



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## Protecting oneself

Throughout the abusive experiences, it often proved difficult for many of these young people to find ways to protect themselves. For some, the solution was to keep what happened from other people: “Umm, I stay with my parents, my brother, my cousins and my aunt, but no one actually knew about it because I never told them about it. The only person that knew was the social worker that I contacted and went to seek help from.” (NA-02), and “No, I never told them a thing. They still feel I am this innocent person. I fear my parents a lot, because of how we grew up” (NA-04). Sometimes the reasons for not disclosing were related to the fear of shame and the potential damage to important relationships:

“I would just tell my mum and she would fix it for me, but when this incident happened, I didn't want to embarrass her. She is my mother, and she has raised me and provided everything I needed. I didn't want to make her feel bad, why would I tell her and spoil everything we have?” (KY-01)

“It was kind of hard because I didn't want people to judge me, because nowadays not everyone is willing to help. They will just listen to your story and go and spread it all over and since I was in high school, it's brutal because you can trust a friend and you know this one is friend and then after listening, they would go and spread it, so I just felt it was better to keep it to myself.” (KY-02)

For others, disclosure brought potential punishments:

“So, I am not very open with them, even though they are trying to be open with me, I am not. I am also trying, but I am scared that they will probably judge me, scold me and maybe they will give me some punishment like no watching TV or take my phone away. So that's why I am scared to be open with them.” (NA-03)

Some participants noted a change in their behaviour in response to OCSEA: “Currently yes, because of pushing people away, most people say that I am rude, and I am being rude. But in perspective, I am not being rude, I am just protecting myself.” (NA-02), and “I didn't know who I was anymore, but then I came to this realisation that I must change myself sometimes even if it means hurting people around me. I have to change myself because I am letting people get the best of me. I am letting people take advantage of me and it's not good.” (NA-03)

Inevitably, some of these changes were related to how they used social media: “When a stranger texts me, I don't reply. In fact, I delete it immediately.” (KY-05), and “I don't really reply to texts anymore on Instagram. I am just so scared that if I do, the same thing will happen to me again, so I don't reply. For me that's being prudent and careful.” (NA-06) This is also evident in the following extract:

“I think with the online experience, I am traumatised by the online spaces and social media. I don't even want to be in anything online except for talking to people that I know already [started writing], because even to the point that, I am on Facebook, Instagram but all my accounts are private. Unless I have added you, and unless I know you, I don't add you. I don't add people to find out, ‘Oh, who is this person? You look cute, let's chat.’ I absolutely do not do that.” (NA-04)

Young people also talked about specific anxieties: “So, I felt very insecure about myself, about my body.” (NA-03), and “Honestly I think that it broke me, and I don't know if I will ever recover because there was a certain confidence you get coz it's you. I used to have it but that's long gone now. It might come back or not, and I might grow into a different person, but either way, it's gone.” (KY-03) For one respondent, this related to her fear of males and the difficulties in knowing how to manage this:

“I used to act like I am cool. If anything happened, I pretended that I was okay, and if anyone asked if I was okay, I would fool them I was okay and deep down inside I was dying of stress and trauma. I didn't want to come into contact with boys. It took a while because I used to hate men in general.

## THEME FOUR – THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

*"I never wanted to see them and there was a time my teacher put me as a desk mate to a new-comer boy and I didn't want to sit with him. I said, 'I don't know him. I don't want to sit with him', and the teacher didn't understand why I didn't want to and she sent me out of the class. So I left and my mother asked me why I didn't want to tell her, she asked me, 'Is the boy hurting you?' I said no, then she asked me what is wrong with me and she took me back to school and I had to sit with the boy, but at a point, the boy asked the teacher to be reassigned a seat because, as my desk mate, he would borrow a pen from me and instead of saying 'No', I just abused him. I hated men in general. It is like he also... So something was wrong with me."* (KY-02)

**I think it affected my relationships very badly, where I couldn't trust people anymore and I became very straightforward since that time, sexually.**

NA-04

Others also spoke about the loneliness they felt in not being able to manage relationships: *"When I was student, I lived a sad life. I have never overcome that incident. I always blame myself whenever I remember that. And since then, I have never loved boys, since I feel like they are all the same."* (KY-08), and *"I think it affected my relationships very badly, where I couldn't trust people anymore and I became very straightforward since that time, sexually."* (NA-04) As we have seen before, loss of trust and suspicion of the motives of others was evident in many of these narratives: *"I have learnt that what, ummm, I don't know how to put it, but at the end of the day, in any relationship, where you share information and you trust people, sometimes people just..., depends on people's characters what the outcome will be so... I don't know how to put it [silence]."* (NA-05), and *"Trust is an important thing."* (KY-01)

**I am actually getting a chance to tell my story, to say it. So, this can be a motivation to the other young girls out there. So, I am actually happy that I got a chance, like, not everyone gets a chance to do this, but I actually got. I feel very happy and excited.**

NA-01

### Speaking up

It would be wrong to suggest that these young people, even in the face of uncertainty, were defeated by what had happened and some spoke very positively about sharing their story: *"I am actually getting a chance to tell my story, to say it. So, this can be a motivation to the other young girls out there. So, I am actually happy that I got a chance, like, not everyone gets a chance to do this, but I actually got. I feel very happy and excited."* (NA-01), and *"I want people to know that I came out of it and they can come out of it too."* (NA-07). Many spoke of feelings of happiness, or of things moving in the right direction: *"I have learnt that no matter what you go through, life must move on and you should not regret it. We have goals and dreams so we must keep going."* (KY-08), and *"I have just explained how am a hustling young lady with so much going on in my life and am proud to have this child and I've made a lot of bad decisions, but I don't regret any part of it since we all learn from mistakes. I am navigating this life."* (KY-07) There was also acceptance of what had happened and some optimism about the future: *"I would say that I am happy, happier and more proud of myself because I have learnt from my mistakes and I have tried to not ever put myself in such a position again."* (NA-05), and *"I think there is hope finally, and whatever I have gone through, there's hope that at the end, I shall overcome it completely, all of it."* (KY-02)

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## Hopes and wishes

All these young people could see a future that they hoped for or aspired to. Sometimes these aspirations were very concrete: *"I need a proper job."* (CA-01); *"I want to build a house, a house to live in."* (CA-03); *"I dream that I have a job and help to look after my family first."* (CA-05); *"I want to get myself a house, a beautiful house and a car. I can't draw a car. I will get myself a house and car and loads of money so I can help my mother and my grandmother when they are in their old age."* (NA-03); and *"I would like to have a car."* (KY-04) These dreams often made reference to stability: *"To have stability and to achieve what my heart's desires are. At this point, I just want to be a good wife one day and a good mother and just to have everything that I need. It doesn't have to be extreme [laughs]."* (NA-05), and *"After earning money, I want to help my family and I can save money and have a house and a car. Enough for me and I save money for when I am old."* (CA-12) This is also seen in the following extracts:

*"I want to get married and have children because I want to experience what it is like to be a mother. I want to put myself in those shoes, how it feels to be overprotective of your child [laughing] and to just love that little child."* (NA-06)

*"In five years' time, I just want to live a comfortable life, nothing extreme or luxurious. I want to do a lot of things with my grandmother. I cannot determine the time frame, but I think that everything that I am building right now leads up to something that I really want because it's the journey that matters. I don't know what will happen now, but all I know is, if I put in the effort towards what I want and how I want it, then I can get that or better."* (NA-07)

As seen in these extracts, their hopes often included others aspirations: *"In the near future, I want to have a bakery and a business that generates my daily income and also provide for my mother for all her hard work raising me. Then I will help my mother so that she does not have to struggle."* (KY-01), and *"Next year, I want to help young people attain a better mental health status through theatre and art"* (KY-03).

The young people's wishes to help others also referenced children who had experienced OCSEA: *"I feel challenged to prove myself. I feel that I can help others. My experience can help others, like through your research I feel a sense of urgency to help others too, InshaAllah [God willing]"* (MY-02), and *"Okay, about the future, I would like to help girls out there who are undergoing what I have undergone, like, they should talk about it and not keep it to themselves just like I did since. If you keep it, it disturbs you a lot. I have dreams of becoming a model and a rapper."* (KY-08). One young person talked of having her own clinic: *"So, five years, maybe kids, maybe married, maybe my own clinic, maybe a whole psychological wellness centre. I am not sure, but I am keeping my options open."* (NA-07), and was able to articulate why this mattered:

*"Yes, I just want to say now, I just want to help females. I can't help them from going through that, but I want to help them to just view themselves differently from how society views them whenever they make a bad decision, so that they can get help faster. They don't have to go through all the breakdown stages that I have gone through to realise that getting what you want doesn't mean throwing away your value or your worth because of your circumstances."* (NA-07)

However, woven into some of these narratives of hope was a sense of danger associated with the internet: *"If I have to depend on what people say to me, whether it's a WhatsApp group, where someone is saying the things that I am interested in, it's easy to be lured back in again, so being independent emotionally where I do not need someone to validate my feelings or how I should feel about myself, physically and emotionally. I think that will be a very important thing because people are very good at saying the right things to get you somewhere."* (NA-04). This was also reflected in the advice that they offered to others in relation to OCSEA.

## THEME FOUR – THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

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### Advice to others

The young people who shared their stories gave lots of advice about how to prevent, manage and respond to the problem of OCSEA: *“Girls shouldn’t have to go through this, and for girls that have been exposed, it’s actually even more sad because that trauma leaves a deep scar, because people have seen you and your most private, how should I say it, ummm, being naked. I feel like it’s definitely something that should change, and people shouldn’t have to go through that.”* (NA-05) As we have seen within the other themes, a lot of advice was related to caregivers and schools, while much touched on the use of the internet in general and social media in particular. It is not so surprising that this often presented the online environment as dangerous and as a place to be approached with caution. In the instances in which young people had not engaged on social media themselves, but had been exploited by their sexual images being uploaded to the internet, the advice focused more on the children’s response than the offender: *“Don’t trust people you don’t know. If they give money, don’t take it. And if they want you to follow them, don’t go with them.”* (CA-05), and *“I’d help by telling them that if there’s anyone who comes to take photos or something, don’t go and have photos taken.”* (CA-01) The offender was not identified as someone that either they, their family or their community had any control over. Instead, the advice was directed to caregivers: *“Help look after children so that the children don’t go with people they don’t know.”* (CA-01), and to the police, in situations in which children had no caregivers: *“Police should help look after the children, the same as those victims, those whose photos were taken, those who have no parents and those who walk the streets.”* (CA-01) In this scenario, advice was also given to members of the community: *“Don’t tell them off or blame them... They need to speak to guide them, don’t... Don’t hit them... They can help them by not making them talk, and then leak the story, and leak it again.”* (CA-05), and *“Everyone should watch the children.”* (CA-02)

### Advice to caregivers

Regarding situations in which children have access to the internet, a lot of advice was directed towards caregivers, although it seemed to echo what they had heard from others rather than what they wished for themselves: *“I would say that children shouldn’t be allowed to have cell phones. A lot of this issues are because they have phones.”* (KY-04) Some advice was more generally related to listening to children while other advice was directed at taking responsibility for their children’s online activities: *“Well, for me, it’s something that starts with you first, and children should be a little bit more open to their parents and inform them of what is happening with them. Parents should also inform their children of the dangers of social media.”* (NA-06) There was also an emphasis placed on advice being given in a supportive and non-judgemental way:

*“I think in today’s world, some of us, we don’t all grow up the same. Some grow in stricter homes than others and it definitely affects the way we parent our children, evidently. I think parents should have more open-mindedness, and sometimes, even if it’s not something one wants to hear, try and talk to the children more often to know what they are doing. In that way, they can advise their children that this is safe, or this is not safe, but in such a way that they don’t feel attacked or criticised or so, I think, yeah, that’s it.”* (NA-05)

*“Umm, to parents, it’s very important to be, how can I say it, be strict and be observant with what your child is doing, not just put your child in front of the TV or computer, because in-between adverts can come up and can send the wrong message, pop-up ads, so be observant. Have that communication with your children on what is actually happening in their lives and being open. Don’t say that I am going to take your laptop or your phone because of these things.”* (NA-04)

Some young people felt that caregivers should play a supportive role but that there was a generational gap in their understanding of the online environment that needed to be bridged:

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*"Umm... I just feel like people should talk about it more and, like, parents should have these conversations with their kids from, like, a younger age, 'Don't...When a guy starts doing, acting like this to you, it's not because they are being nice to you, it's not because they care. It's because they are trying to take advantage of you,' and things like that. And just be more wary of these signs and, like, umm...Yeah, trust your instincts in a way and, like, parenting is one thing. I think the next generation will obviously...will do a better job at raising kids and, like, having these conversations with them." (MY-01)*

The participants also referenced the need for age-appropriate information about sex that starts at an early stage, as well as education for caregivers: "No, no one taught me about it. Yeah, so like, yeah, you should start teaching them when they are young, four years old, you should start telling them, 'It's not right, it's not right.'" (MY-04); "Rather I should have people educating me about the dos and the don'ts of sex." (NA-04); and "I think mostly, whatever we do, we should... the parents should receive training or a workshop related to how to bring up the children in different things, provide training for them." (CA-07) These young people felt very strongly about the need for ongoing communication with caregivers and the importance of observing and being alert to changes in the behaviour of young people. This is illustrated very well in the following extract:

*"Uh, for parents, my advice is like, ummm, they should keep track of what sites their children visit on the internet and who they communicate with on WhatsApp, and they should also be aware of the way the child behaves, because sometimes parents do not notice that if something happens the child becomes distant or the behaviour of the child, ummm, it, it changes. In most cases, it changes, and I would advise that parents should look out for that and ask most of the time how their child is doing emotionally because most, especially when it comes to teenagers, whenever something happens, they tend not to tell anyone, especially their parents. They don't tell, so I would advise that, with most teenagers, they should ask if everything is okay because if not, that's what causes self-harm, starting with drugs, drinking, and locking themselves up, and parents don't know what is happening because they don't ask in most cases." (NA-02)*

In one narrative, there was an emphasis on sexual rights, which was interesting in that it acknowledged the rights of children as sexual beings as well as having the right to be protected:

*"Things I would want to change are the way the society views young people who are victims of sexual abuse. For example, there are places where, if a child is abused and they get pregnant, it's a normal case where the elders sit and decide. The offender is told to pay, for example, two goats and the case is forgotten. I wish things like that would stop because it's a violation and not a trivial matter. I would want that children are taught that they have sexual and human rights too. Because if they know about their rights, they would be in a better position." (KY-03)*

Most of the advice directed at both caregivers and other children was cautionary and involved warnings against online platforms: "My opinion is just for young people, they must just stay away from social media. Like, social media is actually dangerous. They might think it's cool but it's not cool hey, there is a lot of danger in it and its, mmmm, social media is also an unsafe platform because it makes the younger kids, like, like it changes their life." (NA-01), and "Don't allow your child too much internet time. I have actually learnt this recently that your brain actually works, it also gets tired you know, so the more time you allow your child to spend on the internet, the child will be roaming on everything and going through everything." (NA-07) Some of the advice specifically related to issues of trust: "Don't trust anyone on Facebook." (KY-01), and "Don't be easily influenced, don't be quick to trust people. Even if we know them well, they might betray us." (MY-03), which also emphasised the point that even people who seem nice may have bad intentions:

*"I have learnt that not everyone has good intentions. I have learnt that not everyone that seems to be sweet can be trusted and to be always vigilant around the people that you are with, no matter how much they, let me say, how do I put it, no matter how much they feed you with sugar by their words, it always takes time to study a person's true ways." (NA-02)*

## THEME FOUR – THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

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*“Don’t trust people online and don’t put your whole trust and your whole heart in people because people are not like they seem. They are not who they say they are and mostly they just want you for something. Also, don’t go and meet a person that you found online because they can easily catfish you, and if you get a weird feeling that this person is not good or is weird, you should tell your parents, tell your mom or somebody that you are close to. They can find out more about this person and they can help you.” (NA-03)*

Issues of trust were also discussed by young people who had been abused through transactional sex: *“I want other children not to trust anyone easily. Do not do it like this, it could spoil your future... If anyone asks you to go, do not go.” (CA-11)* This same young person again positioned the responsibility for experiencing OCSEA with the child: *“Before deciding to go [have sex for money], think about your future, you might get infectious diseases and when people know, you would feel ashamed.”*

### **Advice for technology platforms**

Some of the advice given was also solution-focused, including the use of applications that seek consent before allowing shares: *“Umm, I have to say that the policies that have to be made are that, no one, or someone cannot post someone else’s pictures without the consent of the other person. That person needs to be sent an email or something to verify that the person that is posting can do so with your consent. If not, then they can block them from posting.” (NA-02)* Increasing caregiver monitoring of children’s activity was also referred to:

*“I think that parents should constantly monitor their children’s phone and there should be an app where parents can link their phone to their children’s phone and then there will be, like, a chart where they can show how many or for how long your child has been on this app, and with all the contacts and all the chats and everything. So, your parents know what is going on your phone and if they feel like this person is not good for you, they can do something about it.” (NA-03)*

Further industry-focused solutions included reducing the ability to see personal information that might be used abusively: *“Even friends of my friends, I can see them. Their friends are not mutual friends, but I still see all their information. It should be closed.” (CA-07),* or using tools for reporting or blocking:

*“Sometimes it brings yourself trouble if you report it too quick like this. No need to reply, if you know that it is a fake account, block it.” (CA-09)*

Reporting and blocking was referenced by several young people:

*“Don’t do what I did. Do not keep quiet, because the more you keep quiet the more you, how do I say it, the more your mind plays with you and makes you feel like you are the cause of it, while you are not, and the most important thing is, if you are on the internet and you see something wrong, report it, always, always report it. Talk to someone that something is wrong, look for help and never be afraid to speak out. Always speak out.” (NA-02)*

The internet was also seen as a source of information that could be used proactively to verify the real identity of an individual or company: *“There are always different ways that you can go on the internet and search and find out about a person or company and validate whether this person is real or not. I think, at this point, that the best that you can do right now is just find any information about the company or the person. Don’t even reply to the person, I think that it is the best thing to just completely avoid going any further.” (NA-05)*

### **Further general advice**

Further solutions proposed by the young people related to future caregiver involvement. One young person suggested the following for when she has children: *“I will tell them, if you want to open a Facebook account, it must be done at a certain age when the child can understand the risks that are there, not while they are still young, because it can influence their minds. When they are old enough to be on the internet, I will walk them through the process, make it fun and allow them to explore.” (NA-07)* Again, for one young person, this was positioned in relation to children’s rights:



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*"There is a programme in our community about empowerment, where they teach people about their rights. They should be made more aware because people don't really know their rights and their freedoms and how they should be treated. I think something like that could help reach a lot of young people and their parents, because this kind of problem can't be solved by only the young people. The parents must be involved too."* (KY-03)

Within these narratives, young people also referred to the people who had perpetrated OCSEA: *"Sue him for defamation of character, for exploiting and for ruining my life... I would want him to take those pictures down, I would want him to publicly, I would not say apologise, but I would want him to confess that he did something wrong to a minor. Yes, I would want that and, how do I say it, and probably make an oath that he will not do it again."* (NA-02); *"I would also like that those who do such things to girls be put behind bars so they don't ruin a girl's future."* (KY-08); and *"I wish he was in prison, like honestly. I wish he went to prison, if I could say anything to him."* (MY-01) The need to punish people who commit OCSEA was also seen as a potential deterrent:

*"I would file a complaint to make him stop doing it, and to make other people afraid to do that too. If he is brave to do it, other people are brave to do it too. He took photos of that person and shared them to others to see. Then the others can do that too, because they think that, if they do it like that, no one will file a complaint against them. For me, I would file a complaint. File a complaint, not for money, but for sending him to jail, because they used my photos to harass me."* (CA-11)

Again, in the advice offered by young people, there are tensions about who is to blame for what happened:

*"I think the client is wrong, then the person who brings you there. Firstly, the client who has money and told [the broker] to find younger children, 16 years old. So, the victim is the child. Normally the child thinks only about getting money. Like me, I went through this. They don't think of anything. Nowadays, children have a phone, so it is easy to be contacted... So, the clients commit the biggest mistake, they have the money. Some people care too much about money like [the broker], so he has a lot of techniques to find girls for the clients."*

(CA-06)

Advice was also directed at the person committing OCSEA. This referred to thinking about their victim as a child for whom the abuse may cause harm: *"When you did that to the child... Do you know how it hurts their whole life? And it stays in the memory? And imagine if you have your own child... like someone did that to your child. They might hurt the same too... Sometimes the child might think negatively or commit suicide... It can happen when someone is very upset."* (CA-08); *"Stop doing bad things. Stop trying to influence others because it won't bring any good to you. Any evil that you do will not bring any pahala [good] but only dosa [sin]. If your evil is more than your good when weighed, do more good."* (MY-03); and *"I mean, I just feel like, if you're a bad person, like, umm, eventually it will catch up with you, you know."* (MY-01) Reference was also made to reporting what has happened to the police: *"If you are brave, you don't want this to continue, you can report it to the police."* (CA-09), although within these narratives, the police were not always seen as being helpful: *"Let's just say that they did not help with anything and yet we left them with our numbers. So, they used to call and ask whether we have found him, and we just said we hadn't found him, and they would then say that they would see what they can do."* (KY-05)

# FEEDBACK FROM FACILITATORS

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**Following the completion of the conversations in Malaysia, Cambodia, Kenya, Namibia and South Africa, an online meeting was held with all of the experts who conducted the conversations. The group reflected on the methodology, the influences of gender and culture, and future directions for similar work. The conversation was recorded, transcribed and analysed.**

The facilitators of the conversations noted that cultural influences frequently had a significant impact on the way survivors experienced abuse and the responses to their disclosures. Societal values determined whether survivors were seen as victims or in some way were responsible for their abuse, and consequently, how (or if) they were heard and supported.

In most settings, conversations were carried out in either the facilitators' first or second language. Colleagues or interpreters were relied upon in Cambodia (five young men) and with two participants in Malaysia. Consultants noted that the use of first language tended to make a difference in the accuracy and clear understanding of the participants' experiences.

Themes from the reflection workshop included:

- 'Self-blame' on the part of the survivor (in virtually all interviews), and 'shame and guilt' (which may have influenced their help-seeking and disclosure).
- Some survivors preferred to disclose to strangers, which is in contrast to other findings from *Disrupting Harm*. Others chose not to disclose at all from fear of losing freedom, including access to their phone. They also sometimes chose not to disclose due to the reaction that they expected from their families and communities.
- In some situations, those who were supposed to be providing support – such as family and support workers – placed the blame and responsibility for the abuse and exploitation on the young people, rather than the offenders. Some of the young people's self-blame, therefore, stemmed from internalising these messages.
- The young people frequently expressed the need for support from those they loved, including their family, new partners and close friends.
- Survivors were often more vulnerable due to non-supportive, neglectful or absent caregivers.
- Sometimes, the online abuse was an extension of previous in-person abuse and distinctions were rarely made by the young people between the 'types' of abuse.

# DISCUSSION

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Within this study, we aimed to hear how young survivors of OCSEA described their experiences and the pivotal turning points in their lives that resulted in the movement from abuse and exploitation to disclosure or discovery. Disclosure had happened for all young people who agreed to talk to us, although the pathways to disclosure came in various forms: from speaking to friends, caregivers or professionals who were able to offer help, through to forced disclosure because of pregnancy or the involvement of law enforcement. These different disclosure routes also related to the variety of OCSEA experiences described by the young people. This ranged from exploitation through child sexual abuse material and online grooming through to live-streaming and transactional sexual exploitation. As discussed earlier, our sample of young people was not representative geographically or in terms of socio-economic groups but was purposeful and driven by clear criteria, which sought to ensure that the young person was able to give consent to talk to us but was also offered support should distress arise. Access to young people was, therefore, moderated by non-governmental organisations who intentionally acted as 'gate-keepers'. It is possible that these young people came to their attention because of the engagement of law enforcement or because of the level of distress experienced. This could potentially oversample more serious cases of OCSEA and those that fit a particular understanding of OCSEA among those currently working to support affected young people. Consequently, some of the characteristics of the OCSEA that the young people who took part in the conversations were subjected to differ from the trends reported in the broader *Disrupting Harm* data.

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Despite this, as it can be seen in the accounts of these young people, there are universal feelings of shame in which young people blame themselves and are blamed, and a lack of the digital skills and sexual knowledge necessary to negotiate the transitions that they were making and the opportunities and dangers they faced both online and offline.

In the conversations, there was a variety of types of OCSEA experienced and ways in which it came about. This influenced whether the dangers came from strangers or from people known to them. Within the broader *Disrupting Harm* data, and particularly in the household survey data, it was apparent that OCSEA was likely to be committed by people known to young people and often these were peers. However, a number of the young people in the conversations spoke of abuse at the hands of strangers.

Access to digital platforms exposed these young people to different kinds of content and contacts, and they had to learn new ways of managing these. In seeking new ways of being online, young people also exposed themselves to risks. For the young people spoken to, this eventually led to serious harm. This may not be the case for all young people who took the same risks. As noted, the way that this sample of young people was identified meant that harm was inevitable in their accounts. However, other studies that have retrospectively examined experiences of online grooming of children (measured in cohorts of undergraduate students) found that, while less than half of young people who engaged in online relationships with an adult stranger went on to meet them in person, the majority of those who did reported that sexual intercourse took place.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that some risks do frequently result in harm.

Across our sample, there were differences in online access and use of digital devices, but there appeared to be a universal drive to own a smartphone and to be online. Moreover, support from caregivers or school as regards how to navigate their lives online, or any support in mitigating risks was also universally absent. However, it may also be the case that, in countries which have low to moderate levels of internet adoption, caregivers may have to rely on their children in relation to digital skills, rather than the other way around.<sup>39</sup> In many of our conversations, the young people borrowed devices and often created social media accounts without the knowledge of caregivers, so those who may have helped were unaware of the risks that young people were exposed to.

Digital inequalities were evident in this study, whereby cultural and contextual factors influenced who had access. Notably, a proportion of the young people who made up our sample appeared to have no access to the internet at the time of OCSEA (nor owned devices), while others used their own, or another person's, smartphone and purposefully accessed platforms that extended existing relationships or offered new ones. For some young people, the internet appeared to offer exciting opportunities to potentially make money, establish a career, achieve social status or influence other young people through creating content. In low- and middle-income countries, adolescents are early adopters of technology, yet there has been little research on the impact of mobile devices and online platforms on adolescent well-being outside of high-income countries.<sup>40</sup>

As noted across a number of other studies, children and young people who are vulnerable offline are more likely to be vulnerable online,<sup>41</sup> or in the case of child sexual abuse material, exposed to situations offline that increase the risk of exploitation associated with online activity by an offender. Many of the young people we talked with had experiences of poverty, violence, neglect, fragmentation of caregiving and physical and sexual abuse.

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38. Greene-Colozzi, E.A., Winters, G. M., Blasko, B., & Jeglic, E. L. (2020). [Experiences and Perceptions of Online Sexual Solicitation and Grooming of Minors: A Retrospective Report](#). *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 29(7), 836–854.

39. Rodríguez-de-Dios, van Oosten, J. M. F., & Igartua, J.-J. (2018). [A study of the relationship between parental mediation and adolescents' digital skills, online risks and online opportunities](#). *Computers in Human Behavior*, 82, 186–198.

40. Magis-Weinberg, L., Ballonoff Suleiman, A., & Dahl, R. E. (2021). [Context, Development, and Digital Media: Implications for Very Young Adolescents in LMICs](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 632713–632713.

41. Magis-Weinberg, L., Ballonoff Suleiman, A., & Dahl, R. E. (2021). [Context, Development, and Digital Media: Implications for Very Young Adolescents in LMICs](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 8, 632713–632713.

Although again it should be noted that sampling biases may have meant that these young people were more readily identified in our sampling process.

Nevertheless, research on the cumulative burden of different kinds of victimisation experiences indicates that it is widely responsible for trauma symptoms and other adverse outcomes.<sup>42</sup> Importantly, victimisation involving technology uniquely contributes to post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression, even after controlling for demographic differences and in-person poly-victimisation.<sup>43</sup> A Swedish study involving a large national sample demonstrated that, although the number of young people who had been pressured into sexual activity by someone they met online was relatively low, those that were, had more prior experiences of different kinds of abuse, which indicated that they belonged to a group exposed to poly-victimisation. These young people were more likely to engage in risky behaviour, experienced poorer psychological health, poorer relationships with caregivers and lower self-esteem.<sup>44</sup> It seems inevitable that as technology becomes ever more embedded in our everyday lives, offenders will seek opportunities to engage with young people who they see as displaying vulnerabilities that make them likely targets.

However, the extent to which young people conveyed that they directly experienced forms of online harm, as opposed to exchanges online that led to actual harm through physical contact, was less than anticipated. In many of the online grooming relationships, the exchanges seemed to be mostly positive to these young people, until they were not. The young people often perceived them as dating relationships, sometimes accompanied by gifts or money and with the promise of something that left them feeling special.

These exchanges may have led to an initial willingness to share sexual content, but the harm that followed was the result of manipulation through further persuasion or coercion and threats. In some cases, the offender would extort further content or meetings in person. When meeting, the relationship was used as evidence to support the offenders' entitlement to sex, which also resulted in rape in some cases. These tactics have been documented in recent research into online grooming strategies in which friendship formation and flattery are used by offenders, alongside persuasion and pressure, to engage with the young person. This is quickly followed by criticism or threats if the result is non-compliance.<sup>45,46</sup> For the young people involved, this resulted in self-blame, as they felt, or anticipated, that the reactions of others (including the offender) showed that it was, in part, their fault. Other research with young people who had experienced OCSEA described the negative impact of having been manipulated or threatened into engaging in sexual activity and how they continued to blame themselves for what had happened and struggled with constant fear that images of their abuse may be seen by others.<sup>47</sup>

The experience of harm was clearly different when live-streaming of sexual activities took place and were recorded. In these instances, images were again used to coerce the young person into further sexual engagement. In the narratives related to transactional coercion, there were few instances of live-streaming; instead, technology platforms were used to communicate with the 'procurer' or 'clients' and to manage payments. In cases in which offenders took photos, the young people recalled feeling uneasy and wondering why a stranger would take photos of them while they were naked in the local pond; however, it was only after the arrest of the offender that they spoke of this as a problem or showed awareness of how others may construe the images and the possibility of them being distributed.

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42. Ford, J.D., Grasso, D.J., Hawke, J., & Chapman, J.F. (2013). [Poly-victimization among juvenile justice-involved youths](#). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(10), 545-552.

43. Hamby S., Blount, Z., Smith, A., Jones, L. Mitchell K., & Taylor, E. (2018). [Digital poly-victimization: The increasing importance of online crime and harassment to the burden of victimization](#). *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 19(3), 382-398.

44. Jonsson, L.S., Fredlund, C., Priebe, G., Wadsby, M., & Svedin, C.G. (2019). [Online sexual abuse of adolescents by a perpetrator met online: a cross-sectional study](#). *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 13(32).

45. Lorenzo-Dus, N., Izura, C., & P'erez-Tattam, R. (2016). [Understanding grooming discourse in computer-mediated environments](#). *Discourse, Context & Media*, 12, 40-50.

46. Lorenzo-Dus, N., Kinzel, A., & Di Cristofaro, M. (2020). [The communicative modus operandi of online sexual groomers: Recurring patterns in their language use](#). *Journal of Pragmatics*, 155, 15-27.

47. Lorenzo-Dus, N., Kinzel, A., & Di Cristofaro, M. (2020). [The communicative modus operandi of online sexual groomers: Recurring patterns in their language use](#). *Journal of Pragmatics*, 155, 48.

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This 'problematization' of experiences is challenging and may raise issues about how children identify online sexual exploitation and abuse. What is particularly apparent in these narratives is the tendency of others to blame the young people. As previously noted, one young person gave a clear account of a history of physical and sexual violence but never mentioned that images of rape had been taken on a mobile phone. The facilitator felt uncomfortable and confused by this as this was known to the professionals working with him and had resulted in him being asked to participate in the study. It was assumed by everyone that he must have known, but the facilitator did not feel that they could ask him about this in the conversation in case he did not know this had occurred. As with the group of Cambodian boys whose pictures had been taken, there are issues concerning the right to know, and understand, what happened and concerning the products of the abuse or exploitation that will have a life beyond the act of taking the image. Yet the right to know is necessarily counterbalanced by the reality that, once disclosed, this cannot be 'unknown' and may be a source of ongoing concern and distress.<sup>48</sup> For adult survivors of crimes related to child sexual abuse materials, the knowledge that images had been taken and potentially shared has been identified as causing specific problems that were additional to those caused by the actual sexual abuse. In one study, approximately half of the people interviewed worried constantly that people would think they were 'willing participants' or that people might recognise them.<sup>49,50</sup> This is echoed in some of the narratives in this study in which concerns were expressed that the young people would be seen as having given permission. In other studies, this has been called 'abused consent', as consent was given in the context of deception about motives and coercive engagement.<sup>51</sup>

The intense shame, humiliation and self-blame experienced by the young people spoken to in the conversations has been identified in other OCSEA studies<sup>52</sup> and, in these narratives, appeared to be compounded by issues of perceived agency. Some, but not all, of these young people had been warned of 'online dangers' by caregivers and had found themselves in difficult situations in spite of this. Even those who sought to help them appeared to struggle with whether these young people were victims or were responsible for what had happened. Such blaming activities by professionals have previously been noted as problematic for victims.<sup>53</sup> Whilst this was seen across all OCSEA experiences, it was most apparent when transactional sexual exploitation had taken place and young people were effectively detained and had been restricted, or denied, all forms of phone or internet access. In these cases, there was uncertainty as to how to position young people and this may have influenced many of the professionals' attitudes and behaviour towards them. In a previous study of 'juvenile prostitution' cases, US law enforcement records were classified based on police orientation towards the young person as 'juveniles as victims', 'juveniles as delinquents' or 'juveniles as both victims and delinquents'. It was found that all young people involved in child sexual abuse with payment were treated by law enforcement as victims, which was not the case for youths who were exploited through a third party, or where they were seen as acting on their own. It was concluded that law enforcement responses to what was seen as 'juvenile prostitution' were influential in determining whether these young people were seen as victims of exploitation or as 'delinquents'.<sup>54</sup> These tensions around being seen as victims of exploitation or agents of exploitation were confusing for the young people involved. However, this was also seen in cases of online grooming, in which young people expressed distress and confusion about the attitudes of both law enforcement and caregivers.

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48. Ost, S., & Gillespie, A. A. (2019). [To know or not to know: Should crimes regarding photographs of their child sexual abuse be disclosed to now-adult, unknowing victims?](#) *International Review of Victimology*, 25(2), 223-247.

49. Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Walsh, W., Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2018). [The complex experience of child pornography survivors.](#) *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80, 238-248.

50. Gewirtz-Meydan, A., Lahav, Y., Walsh, W., & Finkelhor, D. (2019). [Psychopathology among adult survivors of child pornography.](#) *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 98, 104189-104189.

51. M. Melrose, & Pearce, J. (2013). [Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and related trafficking.](#) Palgrave Macmillan, London.

52. *Ibid.*, 52.

53. Hamilton-Giachritsis, C.E, Hanson, E, Whittle, H., Alves-Costa, F., Pintos, A., Metcalf, T. & Beech, A.R. (2020). [Technology assisted child sexual abuse: Professionals' perceptions of risk and impact on children and young people.](#) *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 119, 104651.

54. Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2010). [Conceptualizing Juvenile Prostitution as Child Maltreatment: Findings from the National Juvenile Prostitution Study.](#) *Child Maltreatment*, 15(1), 18-36.

The importance of understanding the social norms that influence whether transactional sex is considered exploitative was explored in a study with young people aged 14–24 in Tanzania and Uganda. Social norms included gendered expectations that men should provide for women’s material needs in relationships and that women should reciprocate by having sex. According to the perspectives of the community, factors that influence views about when transactional relationships become exploitative include an imbalance of power: where a man fails to reciprocate and where sex is coerced. However, young females were considered exploitative of men when they take gifts or money and refuse to have sex or when they demand large sums of money.<sup>55</sup>

One of the most significant findings from these narratives was how unskilled young people were at managing the often self-serving or predatory behaviour of others both online and offline. Outside of warning messages about ‘boys’ in general and the internet in particular, young people were left to navigate what they perceived to be romantic engagements on their own. This was the case even when it was known that prior sexual exploitation had taken place. There were few opportunities to ask questions about sex and caregivers appeared unaware of what young people were doing online. When breaches of the ‘rules’ were identified, there were always threats to remove or limit the use of mobile devices. Far from helping young people negotiate the transitions in adolescence towards autonomy, particularly in relation to sexual behaviour, this limited the opportunities to learn how to manage risk. When the young people spoke about the advice that they would give to others, much of it centred around how caregivers needed to be interested in what they were doing, to help set reasonable limits both online and offline, to be supportive rather than judgemental and to listen and be patient when help was asked for.

There was also a perceived need for sex and relationship education that respected their rights as emerging adults. Indeed, denying children’s agency, autonomy and access to knowledge about sex increases their vulnerability to abuse as it denies them the opportunity to develop the tools to recognise abusive and exploitative behaviour and situations.<sup>56</sup> Children’s rights discourse may need to begin to accommodate young people’s emerging sexuality, and consider increasing agency and autonomy around their sexual decision making as they age. The right of the child to be protected from harm is understandably prioritised over the more contested right of the child to explore their emerging sexuality. However, rather than perpetuating the rhetoric of the internet as a dangerous place and advising children what not to do, there should be a focus on how, for young people (as well as adults), technology shapes our behaviour, including our sexual behaviour. There is a need to support young people in how they express their sexual rights and enable decision making that is congruent with their development and which promotes well-being.

A recent study of a comprehensive dating violence prevention model for adolescents (Dating Matters®) was able to demonstrate that there was less physical violence, bullying and cyber-bullying experienced for most students post-intervention, as compared to those in a control intervention.<sup>57</sup> A recent review of internet safety education concluded that there is limited evidence for most education prevention programmes related to online harms and that a better approach might be the integration of comprehensive programmes *“that target both off-line and online risks and dynamics conjointly”*.<sup>58</sup> It might be argued that the development of such programmes should be inclusive of young people, who are rarely consulted in such initiatives. From study to study, adolescents ask for honest and comprehensive content, which should be presented by non-judgmental professionals in a non-stressful environment.<sup>59</sup>

55. Wamoyi, J., Buller, A.M., Nyato, D., Kyegombe, N., Meiksin, R., & Heise, L. (2018). [‘Eat and you will be eaten’: A qualitative study exploring costs and benefits of age-disparate sexual relationships in Tanzania and Uganda: Implications for girls’ sexual and reproductive health interventions.](#) *Reproductive Health*, 15(1), 207.

56. Arthur R. (2019). [Regulating Youth Sexuality, Agency and Citizenship: Developing a Coherent Criminal Justice Response to Youth Sexting.](#) *King’s Law Journal*, 30(3), 377–395.

57. Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Niolon, P.H., Estefan, L.F., Le, V.D., Tracy, A.J., Latzman, N.E., Little, T.D., Lang, K.K., Degue, S., & Tharp, A.T. (2019). [Middle School Effects of the Dating Matters® Comprehensive Teen Dating Violence Prevention Model on Physical Violence, Bullying, and Cyberbullying: a Cluster-Randomized Controlled Trial.](#) *Prevention Science*, 22(2), 151–161.

58. Finkelhor, D., Walsh, K., Jones, L., Mitchell, K., & Collier, A. (2020). [Youth Internet Safety Education: Aligning Programs With the Evidence Base.](#) *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 1–15.

59. Corcoran, J.L., Davies, S.L., Knight, C.C., Lanzi, R.C., Li, P., & Ladores, S.L. (2020). [Adolescents’ perceptions of sexual health education programs: An integrative review.](#) *Journal of Adolescence*, 84, 96–112.



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The conversations not only indicated just how resourceful many of these young people are, but also how they needed the technology industry to make it easier to report unwanted behaviours on their platforms and to step up to the removal of images when they had been non-consensually uploaded. Given the pressure from peers to be online and to receive likes, comments and views, it also seems important to consider how and when internet platforms afford opportunities for young people to engage in risky behaviour that can be identified and exploited by other users. An example of this can be seen in a study from Denmark in which anonymous posts to an online counselling hotline were analysed. Two thirds of these posts described experiences of image-based sexual abuse and the psychological consequences were characterised by fear, worry, sadness, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. All of these were evidenced in the conversations. Importantly, this study demonstrated how the technological affordances of social media platforms, such as being able to take screen shots on Snapchat, played an important role in facilitating online sexual violence. Half of the young people blamed themselves for their victimisation, framing what had happened as a result of their stupidity, naivety and poor judgement.<sup>60</sup>

The existence of victim-blaming discourses, which depict those who share images as naïve, foolish and responsible for the misuse of their own images, was clearly present in the social contexts of the young people. These messages have unfortunately also been observed in prevention materials aimed at reducing non-consensual sharing of images, wherein victims are often actively discouraged from making and sharing such images.<sup>61</sup> These materials encourages victim-blaming and serve to make those who share images without consent invisible.<sup>62</sup>

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60. Mandau, B.H. (2021). "Snaps", "screenshots", and self-blame: A qualitative study of image-based sexual abuse victimization among adolescent Danish girls. *Journal of Children and Media*, 15(3), 431-447.

61. Naezer, M. & van Oosterhout, L. (2021). *Only sluts love sexting: youth, sexual norms and non-consensual sharing of digital images*. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30(1), 79-90.

62. Sett, E. (2019). A rights-based approach to youth sexting: Challenging risk, shame, and the denial of rights to bodily and sexual expression within youth digital culture. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1(4), 298-311.

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Without the collaborative effort of all staff, consultants, translators, and interns involved in the reports, this tremendous piece of research would not have come together. In particular, we would like to thank:

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# ANNEX 1: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

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# ANNEX 1: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

## Sample

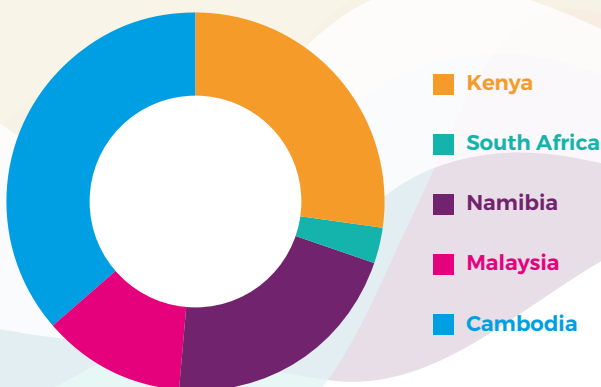
Initially, up to 80 survivor conversations with young people were planned, but COVID-19 created a number of challenges, which are explored below. Our inclusion criteria included participants aged 16–24 years, of any gender, who had experienced OCSEA when under the age of 18 years. They also had to be in existing relationships with support services, and having received or been in receipt of support, and able to give informed consent. It was important to us that we were able to identify any ongoing vulnerabilities or factors that may place participants at increased risk.

All participants, though aged 16–24 during the conversations, were subjected to OCSEA during childhood. The participants were between 9 and 17 years old at the time of the abuse.

The final sample for this activity amounted to 33 conversations with young people across five countries, as shown in the table below.

Country	Male	Female
Kenya	0	9
South Africa	1	0
Namibia	0	7
Malaysia	0	4
Cambodia	5	7

Figure 7: Participants by country



Facilitators that had relevant professional backgrounds as social workers or psychologists and had experience working with children who had been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse were identified in each country. In addition, the facilitators prepared over two months with two expert Survivor Engagement Consultants through a series of virtual meetings in order to learn the methodology and develop and adapt tools. These coordination sessions were held virtually over a number of weeks and were focused on exploring all aspects of the trauma-informed participatory approach of the ‘survivor conversations.’

The facilitators worked with the ECPAT member organisations in the target countries to identify potential participants, both within their own client lists, and through networks with other social service-providing organisations.

Figure 8: Participants by age

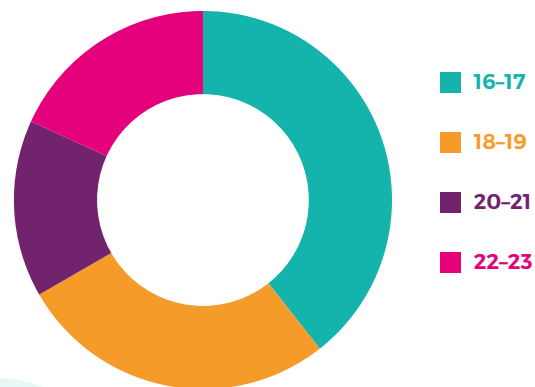


Figure 9: Distribution of OCSEA

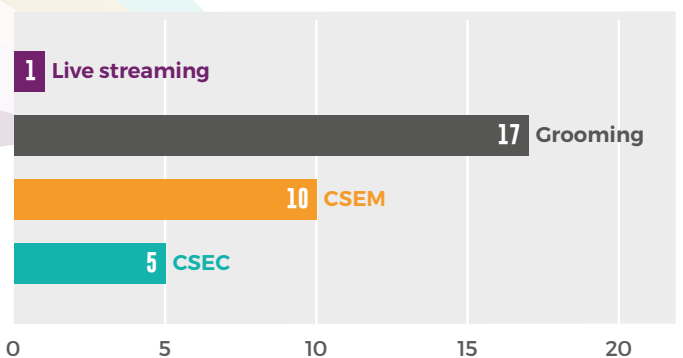
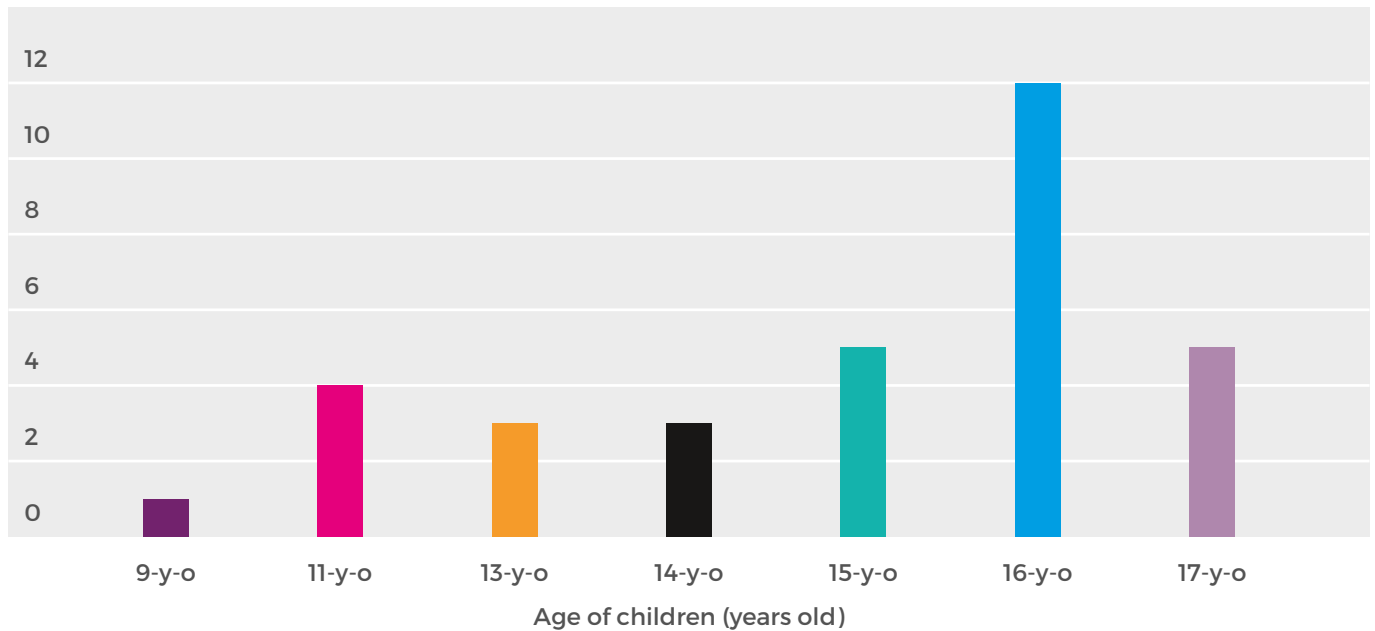


Figure 10: Age at which OCSEA occurred



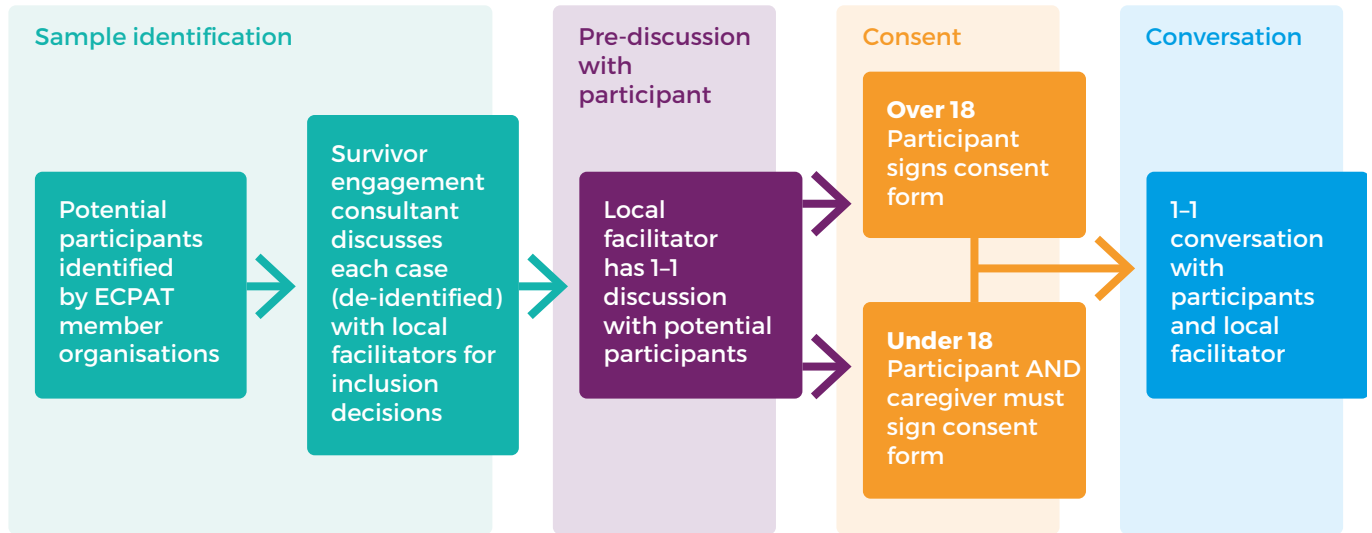
Organisations were approached to talk about the research activity and were asked if they knew of potential participants that could be invited to take part. The inclusion criteria around OCSEA were sometimes quite complicated to clarify, particularly in terms of ensuring that digital, internet and communication technologies were involved in the abuse that the young people had been subjected to. A range of different circumstances are represented in the survivors' stories.

The facilitators shared de-identified details about possible participants with the Survivor Engagement Consultants in order to assess appropriateness for inclusion. A key element of this assessment also included reviewing the 'psychological readiness' of potential participants by considering the time that had passed since the abuse had ended, their stage of therapeutic care and the support systems they were engaged with.

Potential participants were expected to have existing relationships with support services and were receiving/had received support. In most cases, they continued to be in contact with organisations after being direct service users. Young people who had completed their therapeutic care were prioritised as participants as they were expected to be more psychologically ready to engage in a conversation related to their exploitation or abuse.

Once approved for inclusion, potential participants were contacted by the facilitator in a two-step process of engagement. A pre-discussion was held in which both consent processes were explained and the circumstances in which the young person wanted the conversation to take place were discussed (such as location, support people present, any no-go areas of discussion). A key aim of these pre-meeting engagements was to begin to establish trust by engaging in ways that clearly demonstrated that the young person was in control. If the young person then agreed to participate, a time for the conversation was arranged.

Figure 11: Conversations' steps



## Tools

The 'survivor conversations' were framed as person-centred discussions to ensure the young person held control over what was shared. There was no structured interview schedule, simply an interview guide that covered three time periods in the young person's life, and suggested open-ended prompts for facilitators to aid discussion (if required). An example of this can be seen in conversation CA-03 in which the young person was shown a flip chart divided into three columns and the facilitator asked: "Now out of those three, which one of these would you liked to start with? Do you want to talk about the present, talk about the past, or talk about what you want to do in the future? Where shall we start?" All the resources for these conversations were developed by the Survivor Engagement Consultants and were shared with the facilitators, who then had the autonomy to adapt tools to the specific context and facilitate the conversations.

Our goal in these conversations was to allow participants to construct their lives through the conversations in a non-linear manner, giving personal meaning to events of importance while helping the researcher to facilitate this across a chosen span of time.<sup>63,64,65,66,67</sup> Participant storytelling allowed an exploration of how their narrative has developed temporally<sup>68</sup> and contextually in relation to the meaning this holds for them in key areas of their lives. For most people, storytelling is a natural way to recount experience. Moreover, it is a way of creating order out of what we might be struggling to make sense of and what we may want to communicate to other people. As seen in this report, these young people were able to utilise the method to recount their experiences in ways that placed them firmly in control of the narrative.

Narrative conversations are a tool used to develop detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements<sup>69</sup> and involve emotionally attentive listening to attempt to enter the world as experienced by another.

63. Verd, J.M. & Andreu, M.L. (2011). The rewards of a qualitative approach to life-course research. The example of the effects of social protection policies on career paths. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(3).

64. Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

65. Kirmayer, L. (1992). The Body's Insistence on Meaning: Metaphor as Presentation and Representation in Illness Experience. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 6(4), 323-346.

66. Mattingly, C., Garro, L. (2000). *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing*. Berkeley, CA, and London, UK: University of California Press.

67. Labov, W. (1972). The transformation of reality in narrative syntax. In Labov, W., *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 354-396.

68. Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation* (Applied social research methods series : v. 47). Thousand Oaks, CA; London: Sage Publications.

69. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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Narrative approaches are good for rapport building as they allow participants to tell stories in their own way and to focus on key issues that are important to them.<sup>70</sup> Questions occur in the natural flow of the story being told. One such example is a qualitative analysis of boys' narratives about sexual abuse in terms of how boys describe their life prior to, during and after child sexual abuse.<sup>71,72</sup>

The Survivor Engagement Consultants worked extensively with the facilitators in the target countries to sensitise them to the theory, approach, resources, and key issues in working with OCSEA survivors. Given the COVID-19 travel restrictions, the original process was adapted to be undertaken via shorted online meetings across a number of months (rather than shorter more intense in-person preparations). The topics covered included ethical research approaches, definitions and exploration of the parameters and dynamics of OCSEA, and gender and cultural norms and perspectives; these were designed to build a strong foundation for additional learning with a focus on the methodology. Ongoing support and debriefings were also provided throughout the duration of the field research by the Survivor Engagement Consultants.

### Pre-meeting

In the pre-meeting, a participant information sheet and consent form, which explained the purpose of the project and what the conversations would be like, was shared with the potential participants (and caregivers when potential participants were under 18) and then discussed in detail.

During the pre-meeting process, a counsellor with a well-established relationship with the young person was often present with the facilitator to act as a support and to help establish rapport for the ongoing engagement.

The pre-meeting always took place a few days before the main conversation to ensure the young person had time to reflect before providing their consent/ assent to participate and did not feel pressured to sign in the moment. Given the COVID-19 situation, in a small number of instances, these pre-meetings were held virtually, but this was really a last resort.

### Main conversation

Guidance for the conversations was provided to the facilitators in the training, with all approaches strongly focusing on the young person having complete control of the conversation. Permission to record the conversation using a digital recorder was requested at a prior meeting.

The young people were invited to speak freely about their experiences and the facilitator attempted to develop a visual timeline of events, using active listening to engage with the young person and understand their story – exploring particular gaps in understanding and drawing out the detail needed to represent the young people's perspectives. Probing questions were used sparingly to elicit narratives across their journey, prior to, during and after their experiences. Questions were largely just responsive and kept intentionally open, with young people being encouraged to tell as much or as little of their story as they were comfortable with.

Resources such as a visual representation of a 'timeline' were used to anchor and frame the story as it unfolded. This visual tool took the form of past, present and future with the young person deciding where they wanted to start. This empowered participants to control the way that their life story was organised and to illustrate how their experiences unfolded. The timeline was seen as an aid to help place the narrative within its context, taking into account the varying dynamics and experiences of each young person. It included options for drawing, speech and thought bubbles, and symbols and emojis that could be used to guide the verbal conversations. Other materials such as models of animals and people were also provided, and with the permission of the young person, these visual representations of the narrative were photographed by the facilitator. Other tools were used to manage potential distress, which included music, squeeze balls and breaks with drinks and snacks.

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70. Ziebland, S. (2013). Narrative Interviewing. In Ziebland, S. et al. (Eds.) *Understanding and Using Health Experiences: Improving patient care*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

71. Foster, J. (2017). *The Fears and Futures of Boy Victims of Sexual Abuse: An Analysis of Narratives*. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 26(6), 710-730.

72. Foster, J. (2017). *It Happened to Me: A Qualitative Analysis of Boys' Narratives About Child Sexual Abuse*. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 26(7), 853-873.

### Follow-up calls

The facilitators contacted the young people by phone the day after each conversation to check in with them in order to ensure the experience had remained positive on reflection and to ask whether they wanted to connect with support services.

It should also be noted that the facilitators engaged in debriefing meetings with the Survivor Engagement Consultants, and in one case with a local therapist, to reflect on the difficult material covered in some of the conversations.

### Data Management

The survivor conversations were all conducted in the participants' preferred languages, which were also spoken by the facilitators. All conversations were audio-recorded and then transcribed (those in other languages were first translated into English). The ECPAT Head of Research, who was a qualified psychologist, held psychological debrief calls with all staff who transcribed conversations given the difficult nature of the content they were working on.

All data files were given a unique identification number and any identifying information was removed from audio recordings, transcripts and visual images.<sup>73</sup> Data was stored separately from the consent forms. These were transferred via a secure online password-protected platform that only the facilitators, Survivor Engagement Consultants and the ECPAT research team had access to. Once stored on the server and analysis was complete, all copies of data files were deleted. All records will also be deleted from the ECPAT server six months after the release of the report.

### Analysis

Full transcripts were shared with a Senior Survivors Expert who completed the analysis of all data for the set of 33 conversations (no within-countries analyses was undertaken). Along with the transcripts, photographs of the visual materials created by participants and a journal entry that was completed by the Facilitators immediately after each conversation were used for the analysis.

These journal entries served as field notes to inform the conversations but were not used to establish 'the truth' of what was being said.

There are different approaches to narrative analysis. In this study, when the researchers examined the transcripts, a reflexive thematic analysis was used.<sup>74</sup> Within this approach, the young people's insights and their visual representations of the same were collected. From these, conceptual groupings were established and case studies or vignettes identified to provide an illustration. This approach allowed the researchers to look for common thematic elements across the accounts in patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept. The coding process required continual questioning and querying of the assumptions being made in interpreting and coding the data. Themes were analytic outputs developed through and from the creative act of the coding; the researchers looked for common thematic elements across transcripts and the events reported, while also noting differences. This included an examination of 'turning points', barriers, or shifts in perspective. Reflexive strategies were used to identify possible confounding influences from the researcher and contextual factors, such as the conversation itself, family dynamics and wider systemic influences.<sup>75</sup> This process served to enhance transparency in the research.<sup>76,77</sup>

Each transcript was taken to be a discrete narrative, and attention was paid to the distinctive features of how each participant's experience of OCSEA changed over time. Seeming shifts within the cases were labelled as turning points. Within survivor stories, we re-sequenced the narrative to examine the interlinked episodes in terms of context, interaction and continuity over time. From this process, individual participant narratives were developed, representing the unique story of each participant's journey through the phases of OCSEA and their recovery. The analysis of each narrative was then examined across the whole group in order to develop and test theories that gave a predictive explanation of the stories as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

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73. Note that the ID numbers are retained within this report and follow the format CA-01 to designate the country and the number of the conversation.

74. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). [Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.

75. Mishler, E.C. (1986). *Research Interviewing Context and Narrative*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

76. Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis and interpretation* (Applied social research methods series ; v. 47). Thousand Oaks, CA; London: Sage Publications.

77. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

78. Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.



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Themes were conceptually linked without seeing the data as 'facts', but rather as situated interpretations. This framework was selected with the hope of enhancing the reliability of the interpretation, whilst patterns were used to strengthen the internal validity of the research.<sup>79</sup>

The cross-case analysis examined convergences and divergences, and the role and meaning of shared themes across all narratives.<sup>80</sup> Themes that were evidenced across narratives became the focus of the narrative-orientated enquiry and were synthesised, building a general interpretation, grounded in the themes of each within-case analysis.<sup>81</sup> Insights from the survivor's data were also sparingly included in each of the *Disrupting Harm* national reports.

### Challenges and solutions

Initially, up to 80 survivor conversations with young people aged 16 to 24 who had been subjected to OCSEA during childhood were planned in eight of the *Disrupting Harm* target countries.<sup>82</sup> Countries were selected based on a number of factors, including the type of work that ECPAT member organisations in the target countries was engaged in, and their connection to organisations in which potential participants could be practically identified. The legal circumstances surrounding OCSEA were also carefully considered, in particular, the inclusion of male survivors was restricted to countries in which homosexual sex was legal, as boys disclosing abuse by a male offender in our research could have faced prosecution for such a disclosure, even as victims (this excluded us seeking male samples in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Namibia, Ethiopia and Malaysia). While the design stipulated that gender non-binary young people could certainly participate, none were identified in the sampling process for inclusion.

The reduced sample was a result of a number of limitations. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a substantial reorganisation of most *Disrupting Harm* activities, including this one.

Two Survivor Engagement Consultants with specialised skills in working with boys and girls were recruited, with the intention that they co-facilitate all conversations together with local social workers in the target countries. When the pandemic restricted global travel, the researchers instead recruited facilitators in the target countries, who would work closely with the Survivor Engagement Consultants to deliver the planned methodology. These local facilitators were identified in Cambodia, Malaysia, South Africa, Kenya and Namibia. They were all psychologists and social workers who were highly experienced in working with survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

In Mozambique, the ethical clearance process took more than 12 months (due to the COVID-19 pandemic), which meant permission to proceed was secured too late to be feasible for data collection in the country. In the Philippines, while ethical clearance had been received, the pandemic was at its peak during the possible data collection period and movement restrictions prevented face-to-face engagements. The team strongly felt that, for these sensitive conversations, virtual engagement was not appropriate, and thus did not proceed with this activity in the Philippines.

Movement restrictions in South Africa, Kenya, Malaysia and Cambodia also impacted logistics as countries strengthened and eased restrictions at different stages of the data collection period; however, the researchers are pleased to have been able to gather the data that was obtained, and to be able to ensure that these young people's insights are included amongst the rich *Disrupting Harm* dataset.

This research activity included engagement with children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and, therefore, very strict ethical guidelines and ECPAT International's robust child safeguarding procedures were followed carefully. The *Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children*<sup>83</sup> were closely used to inform the design and implementation of this research activity.

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79. Wertz, F., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., & Anderson, R. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research and intuitive inquiry*. New York: Guilford Press.

80. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

81. Noblit, G. W., & Hare, R. D. (1988). *Qualitative Research Methods: Meta-ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

82. Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines.

83. ECPAT International. (2019) *Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

## ANNEX 1: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

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There is always risk of causing distress when engaging young people who have had experiences of OCSEA in research. However, a range of careful measures were put in place for this activity. These young people were identified through their engagement with supportive agencies and the extent of the support available, and their psychological readiness was considered by a number of professionals, including staff who had worked with them and understood their circumstances and the expert Survivor Engagement Consultants, before inclusion. This activity was carefully and ethically constructed – with reference to the relevant literature and the expertise of social workers and psychologists with experience working with survivors – with the fundamental aim of empowering survivors to control their own narratives, rather than to explore particular research questions. The conversations themselves were conducted by local Facilitators with experience working with survivors in their country contexts.

As already noted in the sampling procedure above, an assessment of psychological readiness was completed for each case by the Survivor Engagement Consultants and the facilitators. This process was essential and completed on a case-by-case basis to consider the unique circumstances of each participant. Factors such as the resilience of the young person, the support systems around them, and timing since the abuse were primarily considered.

A further ethical issue was related to participants in this research activity being invited via existing relationships with service providers, so there was a risk that potential participants felt obliged to take part based on who was issuing the invitation. To mitigate this, both the initial invitation and the informed consent documentation explicitly named the risk of participants feeling coerced to take part and emphasised there was no obligation to do so. The Survivor Engagement Consultants also considered this risk as part of their assessment of each participant's readiness to participate. Furthermore, the participant information sheet emphasised the right to withdraw during or after the conversation. No withdrawals were requested.

One difficulty encountered in the process was that of finding the balance between being a 'helper' and a researcher. The facilitators had counselling/therapeutic professional backgrounds, and some found it very difficult to separate the role of counsellor from the role of researcher. We included training regarding this from the Survivor Engagement Consultants in order to try and ensure that facilitators used referral rather than taking on a therapeutic role during conversations.

Further to this point, there was a strong necessity for self-care for all those involved in this research activity. While all facilitators were professionally experienced in working with these topics and with trauma, the nature of undertaking these conversations, which were deeply moving yet 'limited time' contacts, was difficult. Therapeutic relationships tend to be more long term and slower to build. Debriefing and coaching through research of this nature must, therefore, be mandatory for the psychological wellness of researchers.

Finally, as explained carefully to potential participants in the consent procedures, in the event that a child (under 18) disclosed a situation of further abuse or exploitation beyond the case being discussed in the conversation, ECPAT's child safeguarding policy and procedures would be followed, which required that national reporting procedures be followed, including connecting the child to support services arranged for the activity. This, however, did not apply to those participants over 18 years of age. No such instances for any participants emerged during the activity.



