Briefing Paper

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

WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE

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

ECPAT

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

ECPAT México

Espacios de Desarrollo Integral, A.C. (EDIAC)/ ECPAT México started 28 years ago as a non-profit organisation with a multi-disciplinary team of professionals committed to contribute to the knowledge and prevention of the commercial sexual exploitation of girls, boys and adolescents. EDIAC/ECPAT México carries out dissemination actions, impact on public policies, training, research and prevention applying a comprehensive care model aimed at improving the living conditions of girls, boys and adolescents in situations of vulnerability and at risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:

Survivors' Perspectives in Mexico

The Voices of Survivors research project aimed to explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in six countries, including Mexico.[2] Presenting the perspectives of young survivors within the research was paramount.

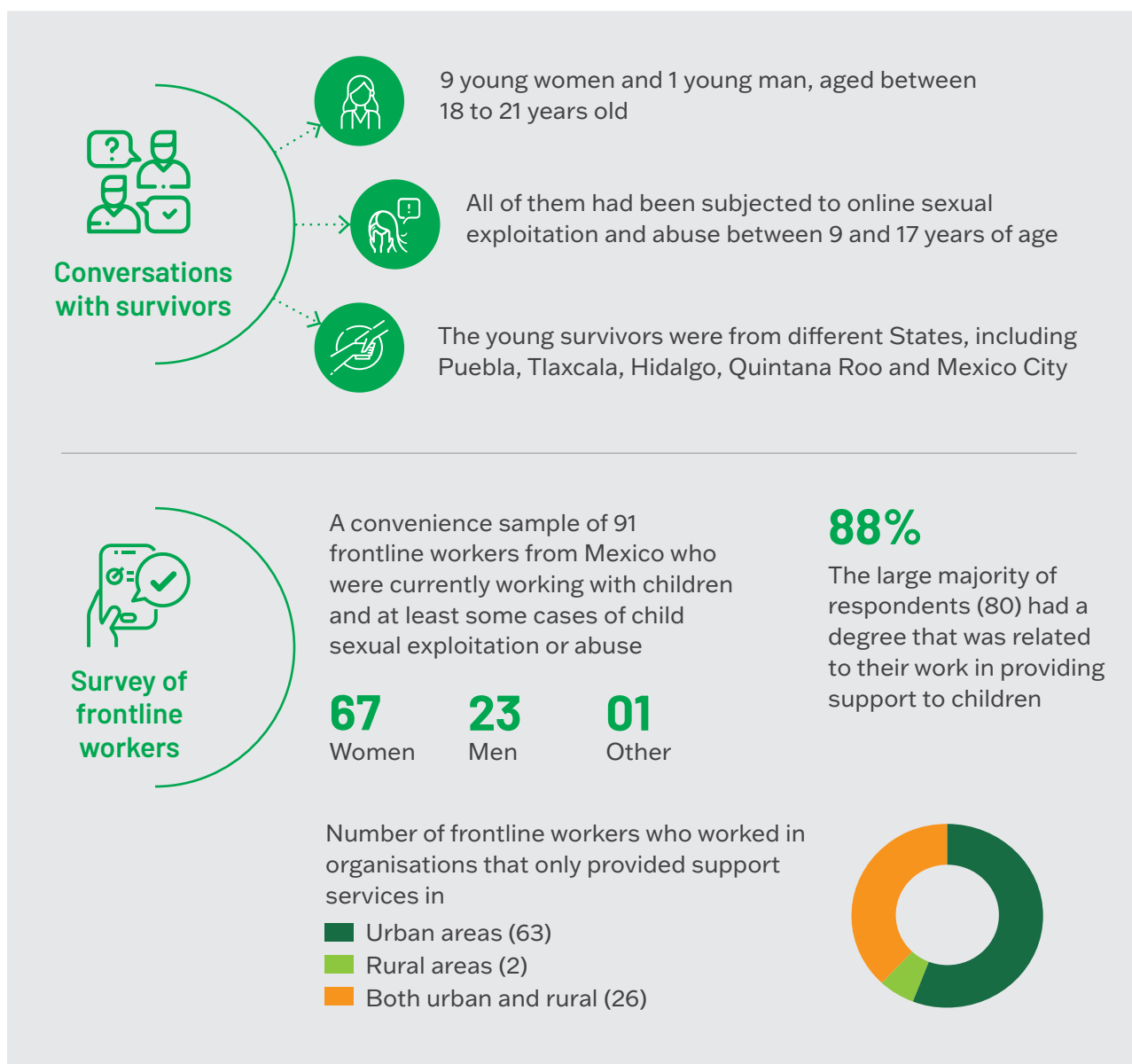Two best-practice activities were undertaken:

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

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

1. ECPAT International and EDIAC/ECPAT México. (2021). Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors' Perspectives in Mexico. WeProtect Global Alliance.

2. A total of six countries were involved in the Voices of Survivors project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru.

Who participated in the project?

Conversations with survivors

9 young women and 1 young man, aged between 18 to 21 years old

All of them had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse between 9 and 17 years of age

The young survivors were from different States, including Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Quintana Roo and Mexico City

Survey of frontline workers

A convenience sample of 91 frontline workers from Mexico who were currently working with children and at least some cases of child sexual exploitation or abuse

67 Women   **23** Men   **01** Other

88%
The large majority of respondents (80) had a degree that was related to their work in providing support to children

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

- Urban areas (63)
- Rural areas (2)
- Both urban and rural (26)

Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

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

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

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

Main findings and recommendations

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

Reporting mechanisms

1. **Promote information and awareness about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services.**

Conversations with young survivors generally illustrated that although they are aware of formal reporting mechanisms that are available in Mexico, they do not feel that they can access these services by themselves. They said that even in situations where they had a broad idea of how to disclose, they felt like they needed to first talk with an adult that they already trusted, who would be in charge of guiding them throughout the process of disclosing. Therefore, it is important that these awareness campaigns focus not only on children, but also on parents/caregivers, frontline workers and on broader society, so they can better understand online forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

> *"Just as there are commercial advertisements for sweets, cheetos [snacks], it's also necessary to have information so everyone knows there are abuses, that people are at risk, so people can hear more about this topic [dissemination] and we can do prevention."*
>
> (VoS-MX-01)[4]

This recommendation was supported by the surveyed frontline workers. More than a half (69%, n=63) considered general awareness "poor". When provided the opportunity to share any last thoughts at the end of the survey, almost one third (32%, n=29) emphasised lack of awareness as a major issue in Mexico.

2. **Improve the accessibility of reporting mechanisms, creating child-friendly tools and making use of methods available via social media platforms.**

The reporting mechanisms should be as accessible as possible and available in easy-to-use online formats.

> *"There is a need for more services where you can say 'well, right now I can go and ask them'. Places that are not secret, so that people who pass by say: 'Well, there is a service I can go and ask and approach' because they feel they no longer want to continue with that situation… and for the same reason they do not know how to get out or where to ask for support."*
>
> (VoS-MX-03)

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

Social media platforms should provide easy tools for reporting and, once a report is made, there should be a help centre to provide the necessary support.

> *"They should have a personalised help centre, have a department that is in charge of this legal part in which to find a way to really support their victim."*
>
> (VoS-MX-08)

The need to make reporting mechanisms more visible and accessible for children was also raised by the surveyed frontline workers:

> *"Children who are victims of sexual abuse or exploitation do not know where to turn to or who to ask for help, there is a lack of the follow-up they should carry out."*

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

These requirements ensure that providers will promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material as well as comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

> *"It is important that this type of material is recognised and censored, preventing it from being disclosed, but at the same time finding who uploaded it. This would facilitate the investigation of a lawsuit and the search for justice. The Internet should be a safe place for everyone."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

> *"I would like you [Internet providers] to be more careful about questions regarding permission and ask for all the information of the pages they want to open, be more aware of the pages that are on the networks and investigate them."*
>
> (VoS-MX-03)

4. Provide training on victim-centred approaches to law enforcement officers and create simple, straightforward mechanisms where children feel safe to disclose even if not accompanied by an adult.

Even in cases where they knew about the existence of formal reporting mechanisms, the young people said that they felt ill-equipped to proceed alone. They needed to first talk with an adult that they already trusted, who would support them throughout the process. Mechanisms like formal government services and law enforcement can be intimidating or confusing for all people, especially for children, and a number of survivors said that they would have felt more confident accessing these mechanisms if they had a trusted adult who was willing to support them.

> *"In the case of complaints made by minors, I think it is important to consider that not all have a good relationship with their parents, which stops the desire to speak. We have to look for possible solutions to this, since I know it is very difficult."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

Support services

5. Better promote the availability of a full range of specialised support services for cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, as well as capacity building for the service providers.

Any child who goes through such an experience should have access to specialists who can help them. These professionals should be specialised and know the specifics of these cases. Efforts to enhance collaboration amongst support services and law enforcement to smooth the process of disclosure and help-seeking for young people are also important.

> *"The most appropriate thing is to create an institution or space dedicated exclusively to digital violence."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

6. Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity building opportunities to law enforcement officers and legal professionals on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Both the young people who engaged in the conversations and the frontline workers who responded to the survey spoke about the need to improve the capacities of service providers. The young people mentioned that they had negative experiences in accessing support services, mostly because the professionals did not take their cases seriously or did not know how to deal with cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

> *"It would be better if there were people who are more prepared to provide support to people who have experienced these situations."*
>
> (VoS-MX-03)

A surveyed frontline worker emphasised the lack of trained professionals

> *"I believe that there is a lack of trained personnel to work on these issues, quality of assistance in medical and psychological services and infrastructure in agencies that respond to the needs of children and adolescents. Training courses are required as well as adaptation of the places where the care and support of parents and the community is provided to identify these problems in children and adolescents."*

Another one mentioned the need for providing

> "comprehensive and quality care, having more personnel specialised in the subject."

7. Improve the investigation and prosecution of online sexual crimes against children to cut the long periods from reporting to prosecution and to ensure young people receive information about progress of their cases.

Law enforcement should improve the approach to conducting investigations related to reports of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people in Mexico, in order to ensure offenders are brought to justice and that those who have been subjected to such crimes are able to access compensation and other legal remedies. This would also encourage new victims to report cases of sexual abuse and exploitation.

> "I think this goes hand in hand with the laws, because sometimes this situation happens: many people have been raped and the authorities say: 'Yes, I believe you, but bring me the rapist.' I mean, if I knew who my rapist was, I wouldn't go on my own and I wouldn't seek the laws."
>
> (VoS-MX-06)

> "In Mexico we have many processes, laws and instruments that regulate us; however, I believe that we need to control the real progress of how we work, evaluate the processes and results."
>
> (VoS-MX-08)

8. Efforts should be made to reduce discomfort and stigma surrounding discussions related to gender and sexuality so that the shame associated with disclosure is reduced.

Young people strongly recommended that sex education should be more present and comprehensive, addressing gender and sexual diversity.

> "We need children to have the knowledge and see that their sexuality and gender is normal, so that they have the security and confidence to come for help."
>
> (VoS-MX-10)

Indeed, surveyed frontline workers raised the need to

> "transform the stigma and mentality of sexual taboo so that it is possible to speak clearly, generating a healthy generational culture in this regard."

Shame and blaming

Blame towards victims was a key issue mentioned by the young people during conversations. They spoke about negative experiences involving school staff, legal service providers, family and community after experiencing child sexual exploitation and abuse online. They felt indifference and normalisation of violence when trying to report their cases:

> *"I went to the Prosecutor's Office. To begin with, they treated me super badly. They sat me down and asked me 'what happened?' Their treatment was very cold. 'What happened?', as well as 'What happened to you?' It was ugly, because I already started to tell him the story, …or was trying to finish. I said 'I think it was here', because I did not remember what hotel it was, 'I think it was here, but I do not remember the name because I did not see it'. He said 'How come you don't remember? You got high, that's why you don't remember'. Then I said 'I didn't get high, they drugged me'. and then he answered 'how do you know that if you don't remember?'"*
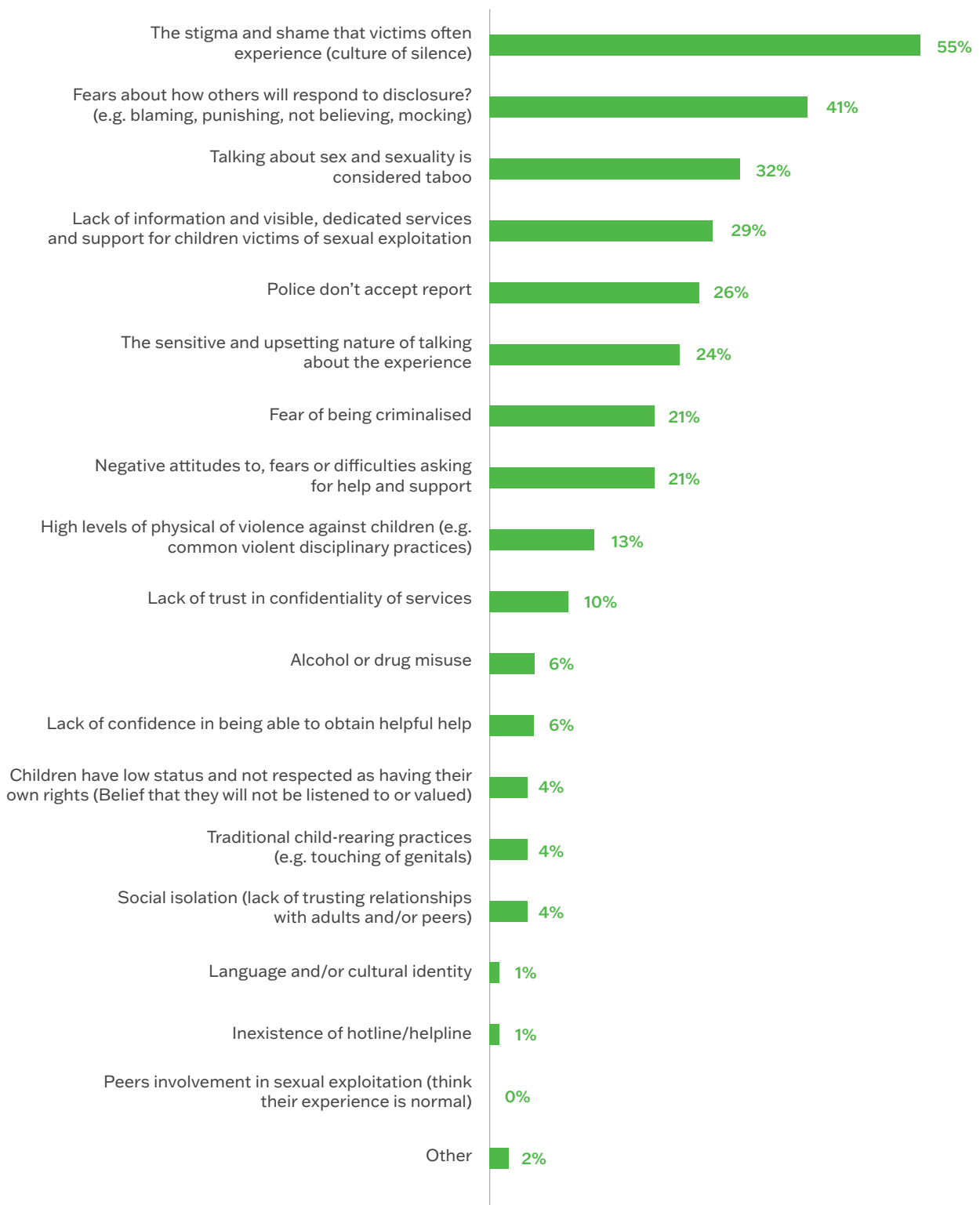>
> (VoS-MX-05)

Seeking help may be a challenge due to the shame and judgments surrounding the access to reporting mechanisms and support services, particularly psychological support.

> *"They told me that I was crazy, that I was hysterical, that this was the reason why I was going to the psychiatrist and I said, 'well, that is not the sole purpose of psychiatrist or a psychologist'. So it is good to let people know that if you go to a psychologist, it is not because you are crazy but because you may have a certain emotional problem…"*
>
> (VoS-MX-03)

Stigma was also mentioned by the surveyed frontline workers as a major issue. When presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children's disclosure of online sexual exploitation and abuse, the most commonly named barrier to reporting selected by the surveyed frontline workers was a pervasive culture of silence ("the stigma and shame that victims often experience"), 55% (n=50), followed by "fears about how others will respond to disclosure" (41%, n=37). Closely related are the third and fourth most common barriers –the taboo around talking about sex and sexuality, and the lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for child victims of sexual exploitation.

Factors that potentially limit children's disclosure.

Factor	Percentage
The stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence)	55%
Fears about how others will respond to disclosure? (e.g. blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking)	41%
Talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo	32%
Lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation	29%
Police don't accept report	26%
The sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the experience	24%
Fear of being criminalised	21%
Negative attitudes to, fears or difficulties asking for help and support	21%
High levels of physical of violence against children (e.g. common violent disciplinary practices)	13%
Lack of trust in confidentiality of services	10%
Alcohol or drug misuse	6%
Lack of confidence in being able to obtain helpful help	6%
Children have low status and not respected as having their own rights (Belief that they will not be listened to or valued)	4%
Traditional child-rearing practices (e.g. touching of genitals)	4%
Social isolation (lack of trusting relationships with adults and/or peers)	4%
Language and/or cultural identity	1%
Inexistence of hotline/helpline	1%
Peers involvement in sexual exploitation (think their experience is normal)	0%
Other	2%

Multiple responses permitted

These views reiterate the impact of shame faced by survivors, and how community attitudes can negatively impact them and their help seeking. Providing qualitative inputs to the survey about the biggest problems faced by children, one frontline worker commented:

> *"Mainly, they face the invisibility of the problem by their close and immediate circle, meaning that there are few cases in which after the communication of the facts of the crime to an adult who could facilitate access to justice, their testimony is ignored or invalid and as a consequence it is rarely reported; this coupled with the social rejection derived from said violence, as well as the constant re-victimisation derived from the little empathy displayed within the justice institutions and agencies."*

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

> *"It's not your fault. All you did was trust the wrong person; but regardless, that person was the one who betrayed you, profiting from your intimacy and that is a crime."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)