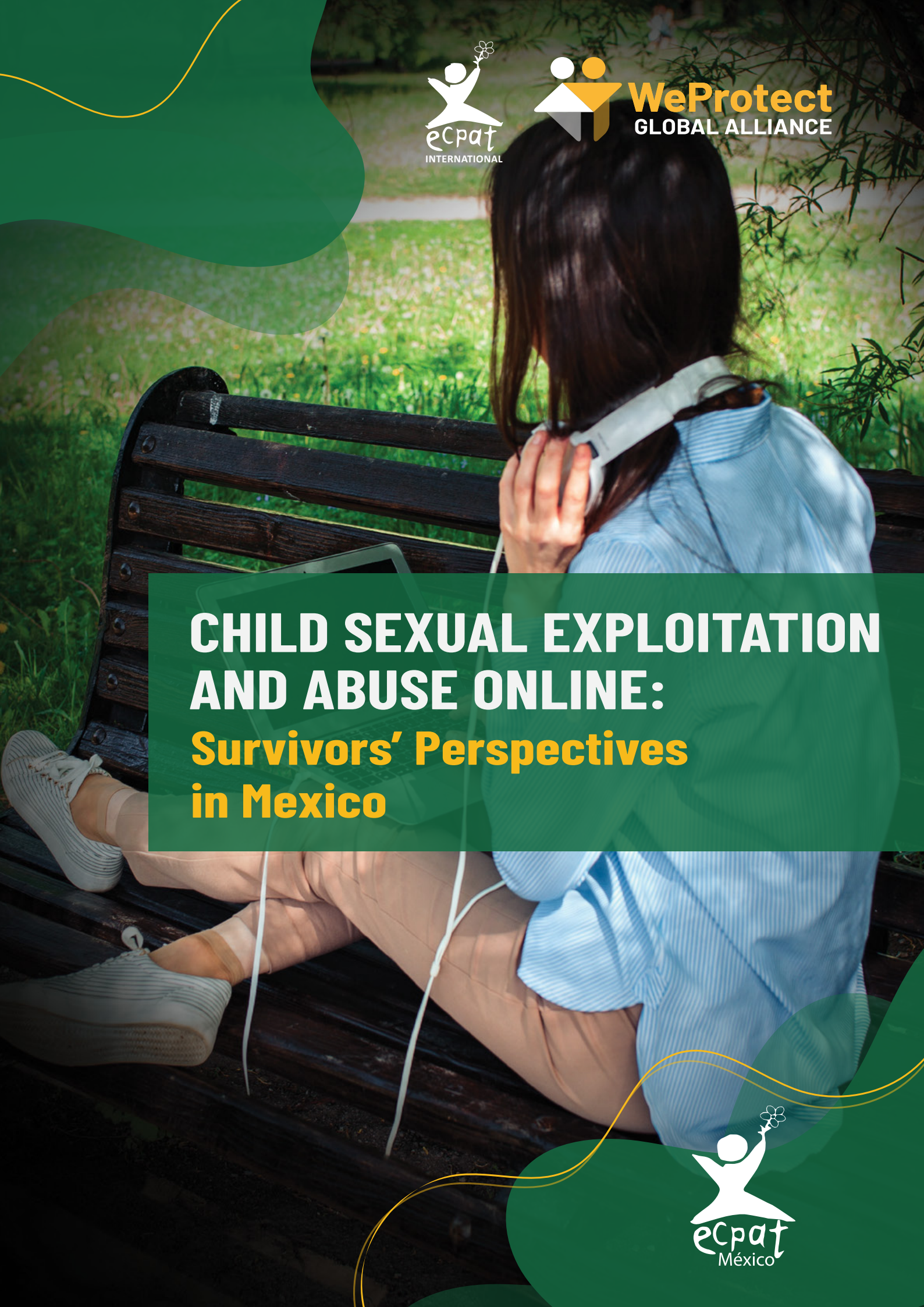

ECPAT INTERNATIONAL

WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:

Survivors' Perspectives in Mexico

ECPAT México

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication is based on a research project undertaken by WeProtect Global Alliance, ECPAT International and Espacios de Desarrollo Integral, A.C. (EDIAC)/ECPAT México as part of the Voices of Survivors project.

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IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The Alliance generates political commitment and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.

ECPAT International is a global network of civil society organisations working towards the vision of ending the sexual exploitation of children. With over 30 years of experience in engaging with and managing multi-stakeholder processes and alliances across national, regional and global levels; ECPAT is considered to be at the helm of all issues and manifestations pertaining to the sexual exploitation of children. With a Secretariat based in Bangkok (Thailand), driving strategic direction, producing key research and working on global advocacy; together with the on-the-ground efforts of 122 members in 104 countries, the network approach bridges local communities, governments and the private sector; offering a global approach combined with customised national actions.

Espacios de Desarrollo Integral, A.C. (EDIAC)/ECPAT México started 28 years 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.

In recent years, important achievements have been made in the areas of prevention, legislative protection, child participation and research, as well as collaboration with private companies in the travel and tourism sector in the fight against the sexual exploitation of children in such contexts, both at the national level and in the main tourist destinations of the country.

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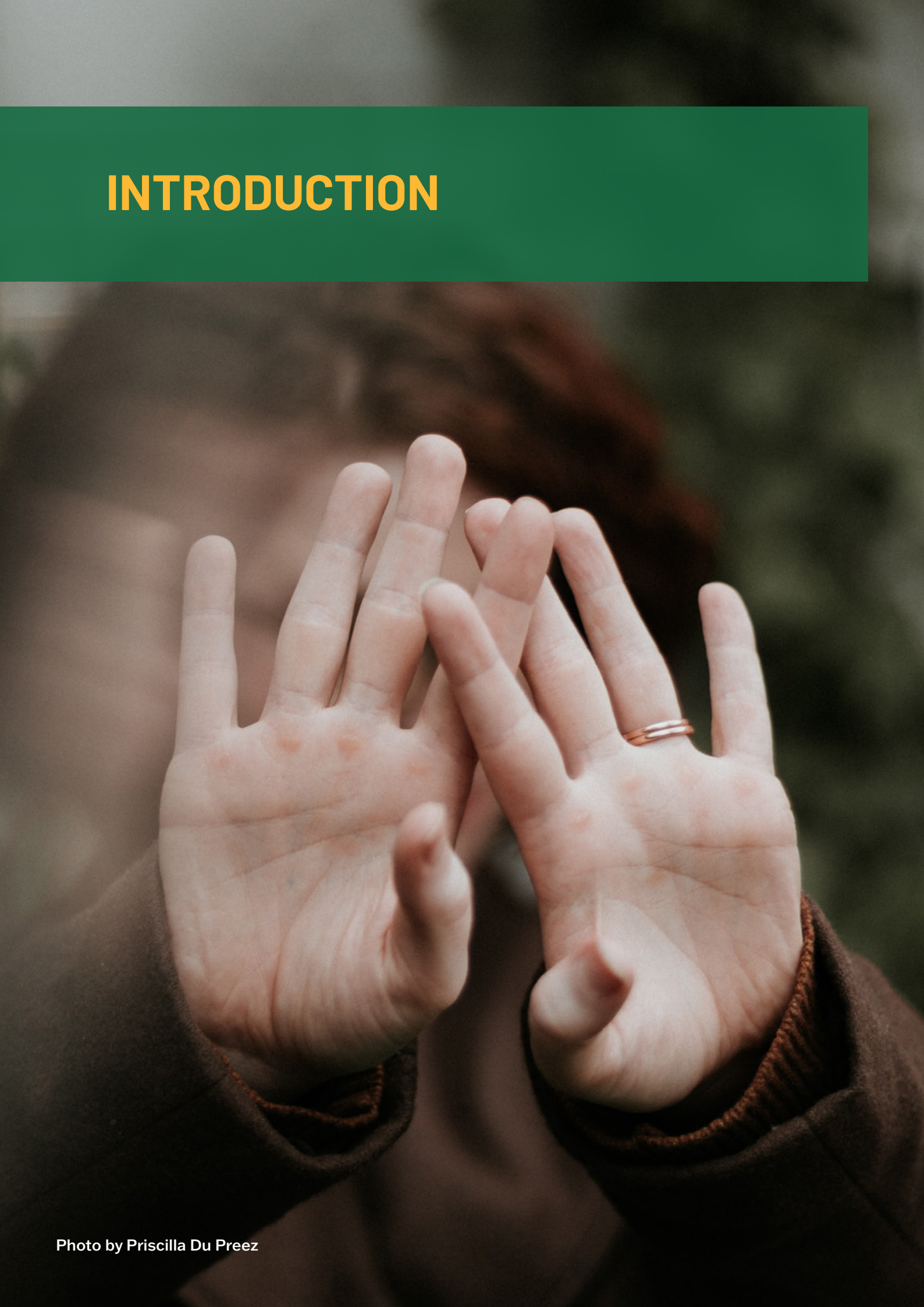
Photo by Jezael Melgoza

INTRODUCTION



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Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

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

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

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

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online includes an evolving range of practices including:

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

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

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

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

1. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Bangkok: ECPAT International. 18.
2. *Ibid.*, 24.
3. ECPAT International. (2020). Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Background

Research about child sexual exploitation and abuse online has received increased attention recently – particularly as our lives shifted further online during responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Research from global north countries is over-represented on this topic, with far fewer studies taking place in low- and middle-income countries.[4] A continuum exists for our online and offline lives which also impacts this issue - with blurred boundaries between our physical and digital worlds. Sexual violence is also taking place in different ways: online, as well as in situations involving online and in-person elements of grooming, facilitation and sharing.[5]

Children's voices about their experiences of sexual crimes continue to be rarely centralised in the dialogue - there is surprisingly little research directly conveying their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online nor the responses they receive.

Furthermore, children's voices about their experiences of these crimes continue to be rarely centralised in the dialogue - there is surprisingly little research directly conveying their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online nor the responses they receive. Much of the existing research has also focused on identifying potential risks to children rather than directly measuring the evidence of harm that some have faced.[6] This is understandable, as its ethically more complex to conduct research with young people who have experienced harm. Yet fully understanding online harms is important to inform our preventions and responses. It must also be remembered that in reality, the vast majority of cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse go unreported, making it difficult to truly determine the scope of this problem in the first place.

Researchers have used qualitative methods like online surveys to examine childhood experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse online – predominantly focused on survivors of child sexual abuse material production.[7] In one such study, approximately half of those who responded felt that the images were associated with specific problems that were different to those caused by the actual abuse. Nearly half of the respondents worried that people would think that they were willing participants or that people would recognise them. Interestingly, in this study, one-third refused to talk about the images and 22% denied that there were images. Three themes were identified from the data: guilt and shame, their ongoing vulnerability and an empowerment dimension the images sometimes brought.[8] An additional study of adult survivors came from the Canadian Centre for Child Protection, who conducted an online survey with 150 female respondents whose child sexual abuse was recorded and/or distributed online.[9] Seventy percent of that sample also expressed anxieties about being recognised from the images.[10]

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4. *Ibid*.
5. ECPAT International. (2020). Summary Paper on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
6. 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.
7. Gewirtz-Meydan, A. (2018). The complex experience of child pornography survivors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 80, 238-248.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2017). International Survivors' Survey.
10. *Ibid*.

A further qualitative study of 20 children who were referred following suspected online sexual abuse found that only 12 were willing to talk about what had happened. The remainder denied that anything had taken place in spite of the fact that there were digital images of their abuse. The interviews with these 12 children indicated that they were very critical of themselves, and often had strong feelings of loyalty towards their offender.[11]

The reluctance to accept, disclose, and attributions of self-blame have been evidenced in other research with children who have experienced online sexual exploitation, both in relation to abuse through sexual image production as well as online grooming.[12] These are important lessons not only for research studies with these hard-to-reach populations, but also in relation to the recovery needs of these individuals.[13] Breaking down these common phenomena - which may be heavily internalised - is clearly required.

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

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

The burgeoning problem of child sexual exploitation and abuse online requires detailed, extensive and sustained attention. This is especially the case in middle- and low-income countries, where the issue often lacks visibility and few studies have been conducted to date.

Specific evidence about the quality and effectiveness of support services will enable targeted responses in which governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector can cooperate to address this problem.

Ensuring that the voices of children who have had experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse online are part of the evidence – as was achieved in this project - enables child-centred and informed approaches that better prevent this issue from occurring, and better support those young people subjected to these crimes.

11. Katz, C. (2013). Internet-related child sexual abuse: What children tell us in their testimonies. Children and Youth Services Review, 35 (9), 1536–42.
12. Quayle, E., Jonsson, L., & Lööf, L. (2012). Online behaviour related to child sexual abuse: Interviews with affected young people. Stockholm: ROBERT
13. ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF (forthcoming). Disrupting Harm: Survivors Perspective of Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.
14. ECPAT International. (2019). Guidelines for Ethical Research on Sexual Exploitation Involving Children. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

The project in Mexico

To explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Mexico, this project undertook two research activities:

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

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

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

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

Data from Mexico was presented – alongside data from five other countries involved in the project[15] to a panel of experts at an online roundtable held on 26th July 2021. Insights from the roundtable helped frame the data in the overall project report and this and other countries' national reports.

15. The project was implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru. This report solely includes the findings of the activities conducted in Mexico. Similar national reports are available for all project countries along with a project report summarising the findings across the six target countries.

METHODOLOGY

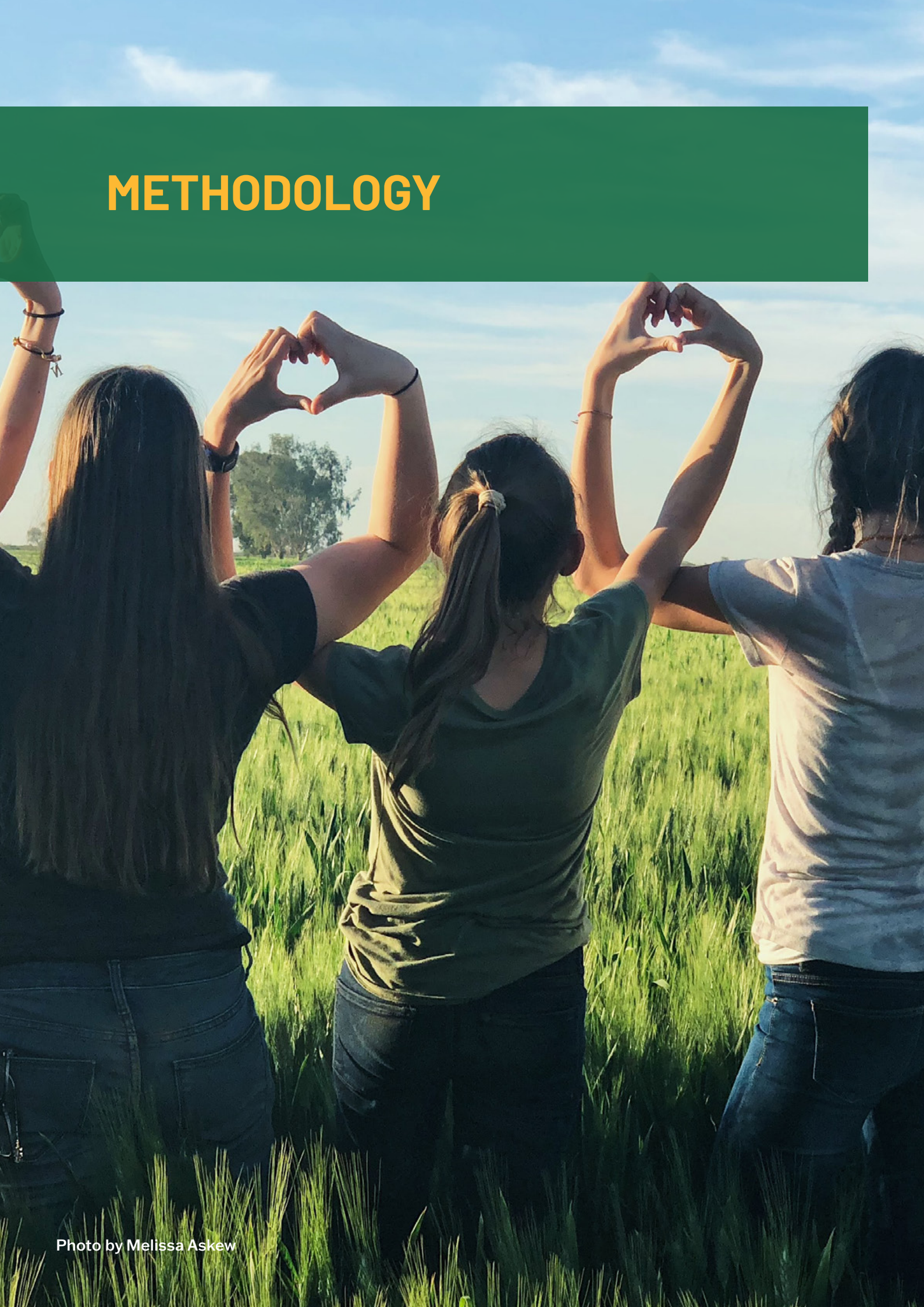


Photo by Melissa Askew

Conversations with survivors

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

Rationale

Engaging survivors of child sexual exploitation in research requires substantial care to accommodate a range of ethical considerations.[16] Such research must place significant value on survivors having the right to safely, actively and meaningfully participate in discourse on issues that impact upon them. Therefore, the design for the survivors' conversations in this project was built on the principle that the participants had, and perceived themselves to have, significant control over the process, including the decisions of what they shared. A range of measures were taken that reinforced that survivors had full control over sharing their perspectives on their terms.

To ensure that the perspectives of young survivors were meaningfully included in this project, ECPAT International developed a comprehensive, participant-centred, ethically sound, and trauma-informed approach to engaging them with the help of an expert who had extensive experience working with survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. The 'conversations' approach is thus a dialogue with young survivors on issues which matter to them, and which explore their experiences of the support that they received.

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

In Mexico, the conversations were carried out by three facilitators: a psychotherapist, specialised in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for children and adolescents, who works for EDIAC/ECPAT México and has more than 25 years of experience in working with survivors, along with two co-therapists who were psychologists experienced in supporting children and adolescents subjected to sexual crimes.

Sample

In Mexico, the facilitators carefully identified possible young people that could be invited to participate. Inclusion criteria included, inter alia, being aged between 18 to 24 years old, having had an experience of online sexual exploitation and abuse before turning 18 years of age as well as a need for participants

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

to have current access to support structures, and for adequate time to have passed since the exploitation occurred.

Of those identified and contacted by the facilitators and their networks, ten survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, nine young women and one young man between the age of 18 to 21 years old, agreed to take part in the conversations. The participants were identified through the work carried out by different organisations and professionals, including a private shelter specialised in victims of human trafficking, a non-governmental organisation supporting women victims of digital violence, and a private psychologist.

The young people who participated in the conversations were from different States of Mexico, including Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Quintana Roo and Mexico City, providing a diverse picture regarding experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, as well as diverging opinions and perceptions on the services available to children. The local team also visited an organisation in Veracruz to invite young people to participate in the conversations, however, at that time none met the study's criteria

Conversations approach

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

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

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

Facilitators took every measure to make sure that the survivors felt as comfortable as possible during the course of conversations. The conversational nature, open questions, allowing enough time to respond, regularly giving permission not to respond, all helped shape the outcomes of the conversations.

In the final stages of the conversations and during follow-up discussions, the majority of the participants expressed positive feedbacks about the approach, mentioning that they enjoyed engaging in the project and that it helped them seeing their experiences from another perspective.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has meant lots of interactions have had to be virtual, the researchers were adamant that psychological safety would be hard to maintain in such an approach. Conversations were therefore all held face-to-face.[17] Although the research did not seek to determine the specifics of the exploitation and/or abuse that the young people were subjected to, in this way the facilitators – trained and experienced in working with trauma – were physically present to provide psychological support if distress was encountered.

Analysis

Following the conversations, the facilitators reflected on what they had heard, their notes, and other outputs (sessions were purposely not audio-recorded to prevent it changing the feeling of the conversations). They developed a brief preliminary report – in Spanish – that focused on specific themes across the ten conversations, such as barriers to disclosing, the quality, usefulness and accessibility of services, and summarised the young people's recommendations for improvements. This preliminary report was then reviewed and discussed between the facilitators, the project expert, and the ECPAT research team. Once finalised, it was made available to those participants who had indicated they wanted to see the output to offer their feedback and additional inputs.

Ethical considerations

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

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

17. Some flexibility was needed to adapt to changing movement requirements and Covid-19 safety plans were applied.

Frontline support workers' survey

The engagement of frontline support workers through completion of a workforce survey was aimed at adding data to 'flesh out' a comprehensive picture of child sexual exploitation and abuse online by exploring the perceptions, knowledge and practices influencing disclosure and support provision.

Rationale

Workforce surveys have increasingly been used in research to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of social support systems. Most commonly these surveys are used by health[18] and social work professions[19] to measure service delivery effectiveness.

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

Sample

EDIAC/ECPAT México utilised their national contacts to identify organisations supporting children from which to invite staff working at the frontline of providing support.

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

A convenience sample of 91 Mexican frontline workers was surveyed. The sample should not be considered representative of the diversity of frontline workers in the country, however, attempts to represent different types of services, both in terms of geographic location as well as type of services were made.

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

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

18. Magadzire, P M et al. (2014, November). Frontline health workers as brokers: provider perceptions, experiences and mitigating strategies to improve access to essential medicines in South Africa.
19. Sadeghi, T and Fekjaer, S. (2018). Frontline workers' competency in activation work. International Journal of Social Welfare. 77-88; Netsayi, M (2019). Perceptions of frontline social workers on their contributions agenda for social work and social development.

The survey

Self-administered online surveys (emailing a link) have notoriously low participation rates. Thus, the design for this project had planned in-person administration ¬– though using an online tool with limits and designated required items for a clean dataset. Unfortunately, restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that, despite these plans, administration had to happen by phone in all cases.

Data collection took place between April-May 2021.

The online survey consisted of 115 multiple choices and short open-answer questions. The draft tool in English was translated to Spanish and ECPAT International and EDIAC/ECPAT México collaborated to check and contextualise the survey, which was then pilot-tested with a small number of frontline workers in the country before being fielded.

The full survey in English and Spanish can be provided on request.

Analysis

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

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

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

Ethical considerations

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

Challenges and limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic meant movement restrictions varied at different times during the data collection period which had an impact both on the survivors' conversations as well as the frontline workers' survey.

Regarding the frontline workers' survey, a limitation occurred as a result of our inclusion criteria. Our intent was to include support workers who worked directly at the frontline (not higher up managers). Thus, a hurdle question sought experience of working directly with children "within the last 12 months." As data collection occurred in the first half of 2021, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic had restricted some frontline workers from doing direct client work for some time, so it is likely that some of the 168 participants who began the survey but were disqualified by hurdle questions may have been false positives.

FINDINGS

Photo by Xavier Mouton Photographie

The perspectives of the young people who had direct experiences of harm from child sexual exploitation and abuse online are the primary data used to structure this report. Quantitative and qualitative data from the surveyed frontline support workers is then integrated amongst their perspectives to enhance a comprehensive picture of the on-the-ground situation for preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Mexico. Public perceptions and beliefs, the knowledge and practices of workers, availability and quality of reporting mechanisms and the resource levels of support services are all presented. The report concludes with recommendations for action – these stem primarily from what the young people told us but are expanded in places with other data and analysis from the project partners.

Trends in child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Mexico

Gender

Both the conversations with young people and the survey data indicate that girls, boys and non-binary[20] children are utilising formal reporting mechanisms and accessing support services in Mexico. Despite the perception that girls are more at risk, boys too are clearly seeking assistance for a range of things, including for child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

> *"There are boys who are also going through this situation and sometimes because they are male, many people do not realise it. We think that they are not capable of being vulnerable, so we should also pay attention to that, to the boys."*
>
> (VoS-MX-03)[21]

Surveyed frontline workers were asked if they thought there were trends related to gender and sexual exploitation (generally and online).

As might be expected, Figure 1 below shows that a third indicated that they perceived more girls than boys were affected as also indicated in the qualitative input provided by surveyed frontline workers:

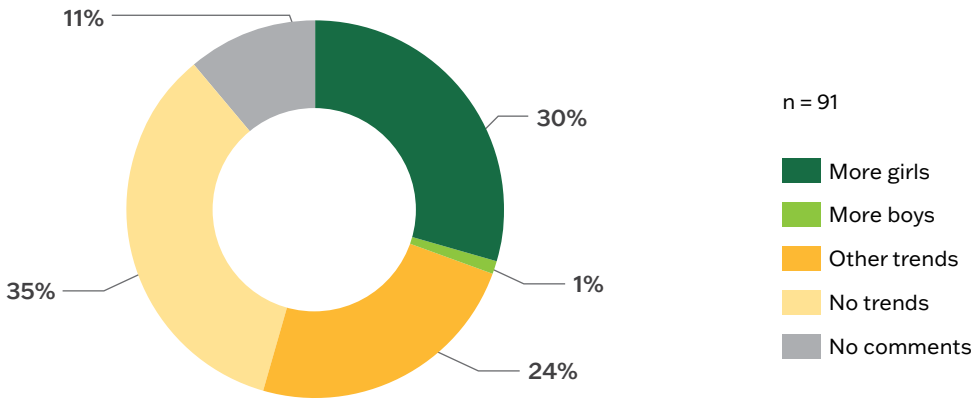
> *"Yes, it is more visible among girls, female adolescents and women."*

Interestingly however, survey data show that most of the frontline workers had provided some support for boys. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents (n=72) said that they had boys among their caseloads and of these, 85% (n=61) had supported boys for child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Similarly, 85% (n=77) of the participants had provided support for girls and most (n=73) supported

20. A non-binary person is someone who does not identify as exclusively a man or a woman. Someone who is non-binary might feel like a mix of genders, might use the term 'third-gender', or even feel like they have no gender at all.
21. Please note that 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

girls in relation to online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. In line with global research,[22] these numbers confirm that boys are more represented amongst victims than people commonly perceive. Perhaps also reflecting this bias, the team had difficulty identifying young men to include in the survivor conversations and were able to include just one young man along with the nine young women for the conversations.

Figure 1: Gender trends identified by frontline workers (generally and online).



Issues related to gender and access to support services were recurring in the conversations too. In fact, among their recommendations the young people focused on ensuring equitable access for girls, boys and all young people, no matter their gender identity.

> *"It is necessary to promote equity, respect and create spaces free from harassment within the governmental organisations."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

The male participant underscored the need for boys to seek help:

> *"For male children and adolescents: Have the courage to seek help from a specialised person."*
>
> (VoS-MX-10)

But there were some interesting departures from expectations in the Mexico data. A number of respondents referred to non-binary children in their responses:

> *"Undoubtedly, girls and adolescents, in addition to trans women, present states of vulnerability, which is why we mostly attend victims of this gender."*

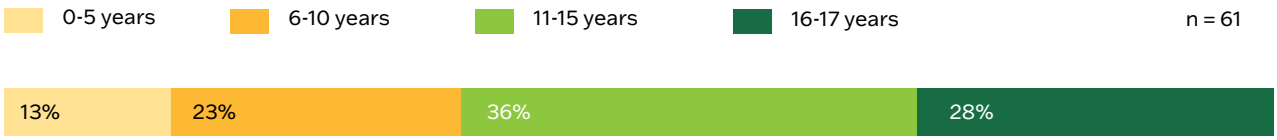
22. ECPAT International. (2021). Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys. ECPAT International.

Some of them commented that "confusion of sexual identity and personal choice" could put children at risk of sexual exploitation. Twenty-six percent of workers, a surprisingly high proportion, indicated that they had worked with at least some non-binary children. Two respondents indicated they saw 10-12 non-binary clients in the last year, suggesting a specialisation in their caseload, while others within the 26% subsample saw one or two during the last year.

Age

As mentioned above, 61 surveyed frontline workers had directly supported boys during the last year who had experienced online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. These workers reported that nearly two-thirds of the boys in their caseloads (64%) were sexually exploited online between the ages of 11-17 years old. This is in line with the age at the time of abuse (14 years old) of the young man who took part in the conversations.

Figure 2: Age of boys who had experienced online sexual exploitation.



Similarly, the 73 frontline workers who had supported girls reported that a similar age category was evident for most girls – with 79% subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online between 11 and 17. Eight of the nine young women who took part in the conversations were between 14 and 17 at the time of the abuse. One of the survivors was just nine years old at the time she was targeted.

Figure 3: Age of girls who had experienced online sexual exploitation.

Reporting mechanisms

Awareness and access

Young survivors demonstrated that they were reasonably aware of formal reporting mechanisms that are available in Mexico. During the conversations, they did not mention that they were not aware of the reporting mechanisms, which suggested a certain level of knowledge about where to formally report. However, their responses did indicate that they did not feel that they could access these services by themselves. Young people said that even in situations where they had a broad idea of how to formally report, 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.

One young woman spoke about the experiences of children who are facing the same challenges that she faced years ago:

> *"I also note the experience of people who are still under underage today… they said that as a minor, in order to report you need to have your father or mother or tutors with you… there's a phrase that I remember very well, they felt that instead of filing a complaint, they were exposing themselves. This is understandable – being a minor and having witnesses while reporting makes you feel more vulnerable."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

Another young woman described a situation where she tried to report online sexual exploitation to the prosecutor's office specialised in violence against women but perceived that they did not take the situation seriously. The fact that this specialist office downplayed her case not only made her feel uncomfortable while reporting, but also led her to withdraw her complaint after four months.

> *"The girl who admitted me said to me 'well, what are you reporting?' I had so many things to say at the time, and she said 'no, no, just tell me what crime are you reporting today' and I was like 'well, I don't know what I am reporting', that is when I realised that the service was not going to be what one would expect."*
>
> (VoS-MX-08)

This data indicates that children's awareness of formal mechanisms alone is not the foremost barrier to access.

A successful example of support provided by adults was described by one young woman who received personalised support from a group of mothers of young women and girls who had been subjected to online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. This group helped her in filing the report and provided her with support throughout her case.

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

(VoS-MX-07)

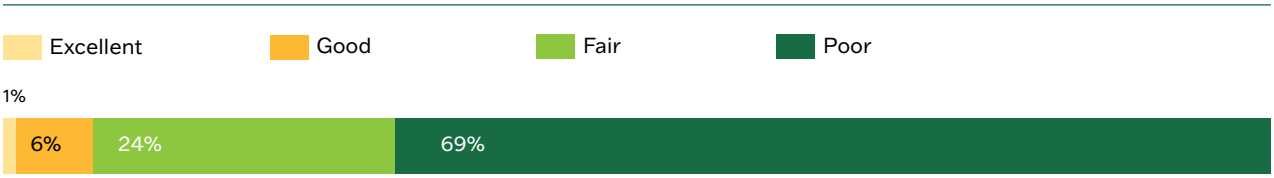
These mothers in fact founded a social collective, *Código Violeta*, that provides support to women subjected to Internet-related violence and they promote awareness of the Olimpia Law[23] in Mexico at state and federal levels.

The lack of general public awareness of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse was highlighted by the frontline workers' survey data, as shown in Figure 4 below. Sixty-nine percent of participants (n=63) considered general public awareness "poor" while only six participants said it was it "good" or "excellent". Although this question was not specifically related to the awareness of reporting mechanisms, the fact that most of the frontline workers believed that there is little awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online confirms that adults, particularly at the family level, but also amongst frontline support workers and law enforcement and legal professionals, must get acquainted with these issues if access to support for children is to improve.

The need for promoting information and training on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online was emphasised by one frontline worker:

"It is important to disseminate this type of information but above all to professionalise/train the authorities such as public prosecutors to provide timely follow-up and without revictimising the victims of these crimes."

Figure 4: Level of public awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, according to the surveyed frontline workers.



When asked about their views on law enforcement's knowledge and awareness of crimes related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online and their ability to respond to such crimes, nearly 60% of the frontline workers rated both of these items as either "poor" or "none". This indicates that support providers are not always ready to respond to these situations, which in many cases is translated into indifference and normalisation of violence, as explored in the next section.

Some of the survey respondents proposed that the general lack of awareness about child sexual exploitation and abuse online may make children more vulnerable to violence. When asked how

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

they thought that online forms are different from general child sexual exploitation and abuse, one participant said that

> *"When sexual exploitation is online, children are not very aware of the risk it represents."*

According to another, easy and often unsupervised access to technology may be a particularly risky aspect for children:

> *"I believe that children may be more vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and abuse online due to the easy access they have to technology, especially during the pandemic as they spend more time at home and many of them have Internet access."*

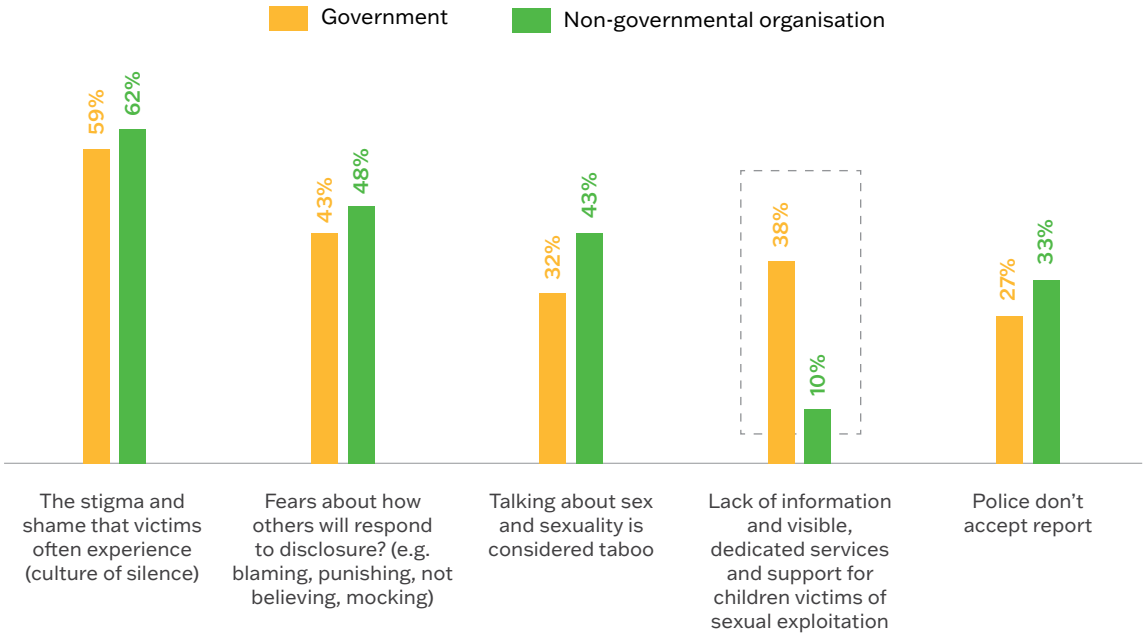
Barriers to disclosure

The young people in the conversations largely said that opportunities to disclose their experiences were simply not there. The main barriers they noted included lack of trust in the service providers, stigma and shame often experienced and very slow processes.

> *"It is important to make the reporting process more accessible. The attention must be the same no matter if it is for 1 or 100 people and this attention must be given as fast as possible. Those who listen to the complaint should build trust and at the same time know the topic."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

An interesting survey finding was that frontline workers in non-governmental organisations generally did not believe that a lack of awareness about reporting mechanisms was a leading barrier to disclosure – only two of the respondents working for such organisations selected this factor, though 38% (n=24) of surveyed government workers selected it. This reinforces the data indicated in the previous section – that awareness of mechanisms must go hand-in-hand with ensuring the mechanisms are child-friendly and accessible. As illustrated in Figure 5, the main barrier to disclosure was stigma and shame often experienced by survivors: flagged by 59% of government workers and 62% of workers of non-governmental organisations as the main barrier. Closely related is the second most common barrier – 'fears about how others will respond to disclosure', selected by 43% of workers in government and 48% in non-governmental organisations.

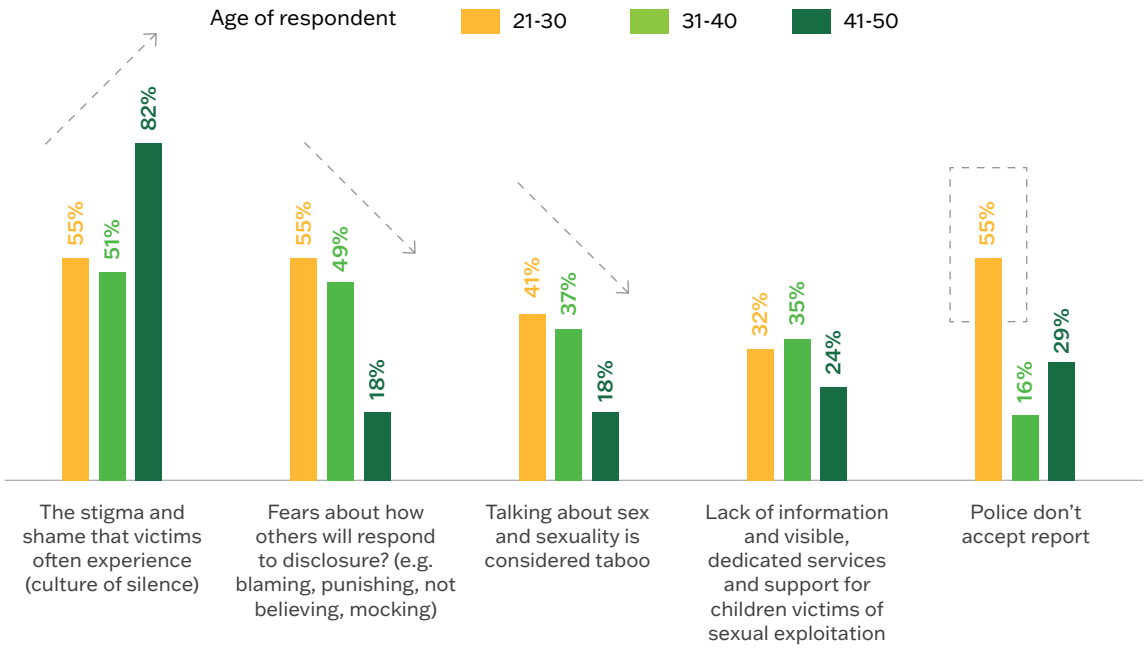
Figure 5: Top five biggest barriers to disclosure by organisation type.



With regard to the age of the respondents, the average of the sample was 36 years old, ranging from 22 up to 56 years. That said, more than half of the sample falls between the ages of 31-40 (52%, n=47). As shown in Figure 6, younger frontline workers displayed higher levels of agreement with the statement on fear of how people will respond, the taboo involved in talking about sex and sexuality, and on police not accepting reports being prominent barriers. For one young woman who engaged in the conversations, the age of the service provider seemed to play a role on how the case was dealt with. She felt that because the police officer supporting her was young, they clearly understood the nature of the sexual exploitation and abuse online that she had experienced, which sped up the process and made her feel safe:

> *"In my case, I was attended by a young person who understood very clearly my complaint (digital violence), so I really had no problem, my complaint was taken in 40 minutes... I was young and he kind of gave me the security and trust I needed, which I really appreciate..."*
>
> (VoS-MX-07)

Figure 6: Top five biggest barriers to disclosure by age bracket.



Seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma and judgments surrounding the access to reporting mechanisms and support services.

> *"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)

Unfortunately, these judgments often come from those who were supposed to protect and support children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. A number of young people felt indifference and normalisation of violence when they tried to report their cases to specialised prosecutors, some of whom also seemed to blame them for the sexual exploitation and abuse they were subjected to:

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

One young woman who participated in the conversations had never filed complaints for the online sexual abuse she was subjected to, however, she shared an experience with reporting mechanisms that she had years before. She was a victim of rape and was blamed by the service providers when trying to report. The medical examiner told her that she was not a virgin and therefore it was not rape, while also criticising her for having bathed after the incident:

> *"I got there and felt raped twice..."*
>
> (VoS-MX-05)

These accounts confirm the fears of anticipated shame and stigma associated with sexual exploitation and abuse. The attitudes and responses of those people charged with receiving these disclosures may have enormous impacts on children. When asked what were the biggest problems raised by child clients who had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse, the most mentioned were fear, trauma and anxiety (24%, n=22), followed by social isolation/marginalisation (23%, n=21) and lack of assistance/information/services (21%, n=19). One worker commented:

> *"Fear of telling the truth of the facts, fear of the offender and fear of the authorities, because they have to remember and repeat the experiences and, in many cases, they do not have the best handling of them."*

Support services

It is essential to understand the perceived quality, usefulness and accessibility of support services related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. This section presents some insights on these elements, followed by a more detailed overview of the different types of support services provided in Mexico, taking into account both the experiences of young survivors within these services as well as the views of frontline workers providing them.

Usefulness, quality, availability and awareness of support services

The young people engaged in the conversations received support from different organisations and professionals, including a specialised shelter for victims of human trafficking, the above-mentioned social collective supporting women subjected to digital violence, private psychologists and governmental support services. The four young people supported by the shelter particularly appreciated the accessibility of support. They were not aware of the existence of this service until they were referred by authorities, but once they arrived there, they had access to comprehensive services including educational, psychological, medical and legal support, among others.

"Upon arriving at the private shelter, everything was different because I realised that I felt better, I felt safe, I felt calm, I could talk about what happened to me, they provided us with a psychologist."

(VoS-MX-01)

However, those supported by other services indicated barriers to accessibility, mentioning particularly the lack of responsiveness from government workers who served as the first line of attention to people subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. In some cases, young people had limited access to support yet even when the support was not consistent or ongoing, those who were able to access psychological services described it as very useful for their recovery process, helping them to

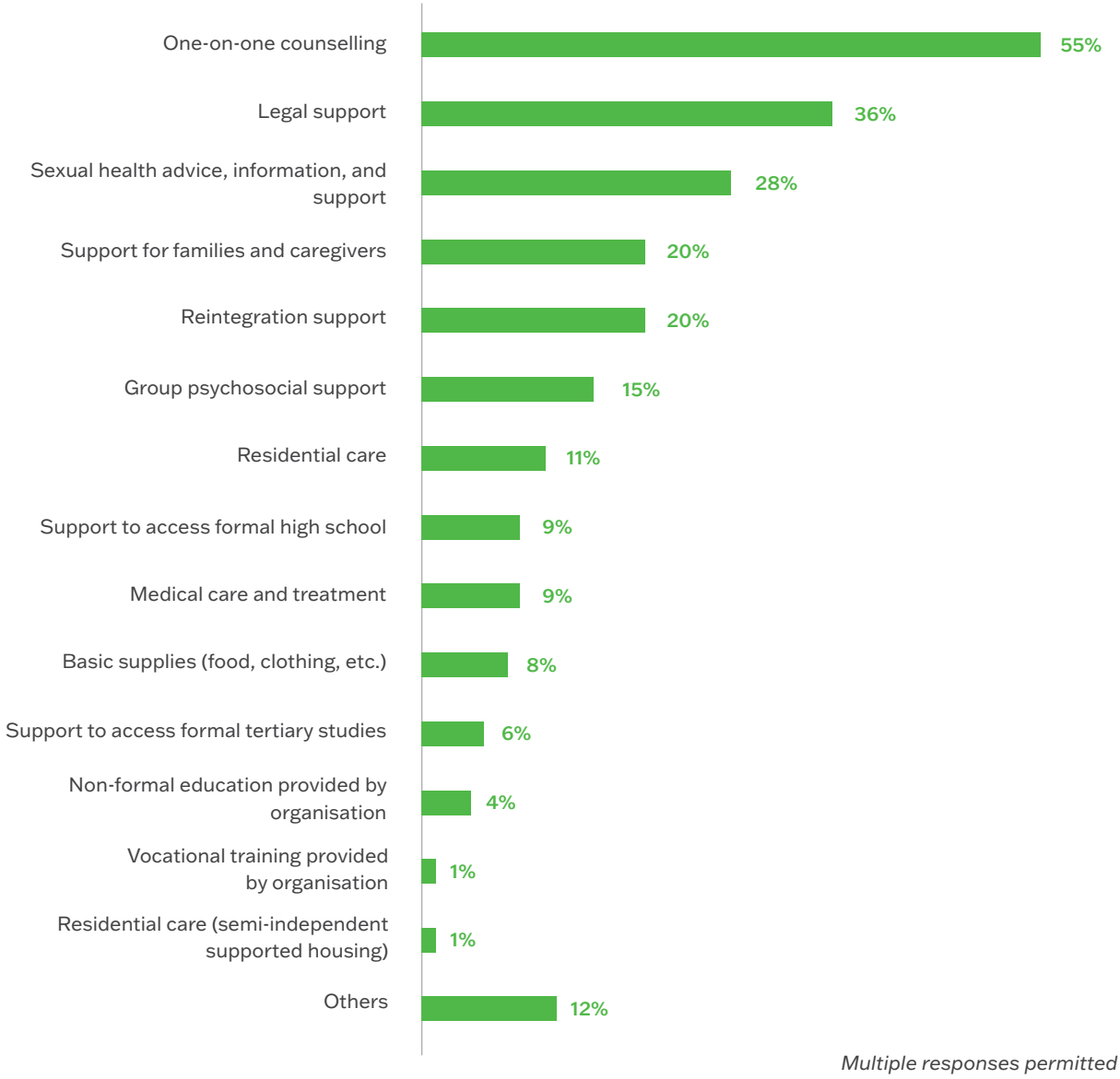
"let go, be calmer."

(VoS-MX-10)

Coincidently, psychological support was the most frequently provided service according to the frontline workers. When asked about the different types of direct support services provided by their organisations to children who have experienced sexual exploitation, most of them reported offering one-on-one counselling (55%, n=50). Describing the type of service provided, one surveyed frontline worker said:

"I provide psychotherapy by making the children feel sure of themselves, accompanying them to become aware of their body sensations in the face of various emotions and to trust these sensations to get away from whoever makes them feel uncomfortable. We also work on the resignification of the traumatic event through breathing, art therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy."

Figure 7: Direct support to children who had experienced sexual exploitation provided by the organisation.

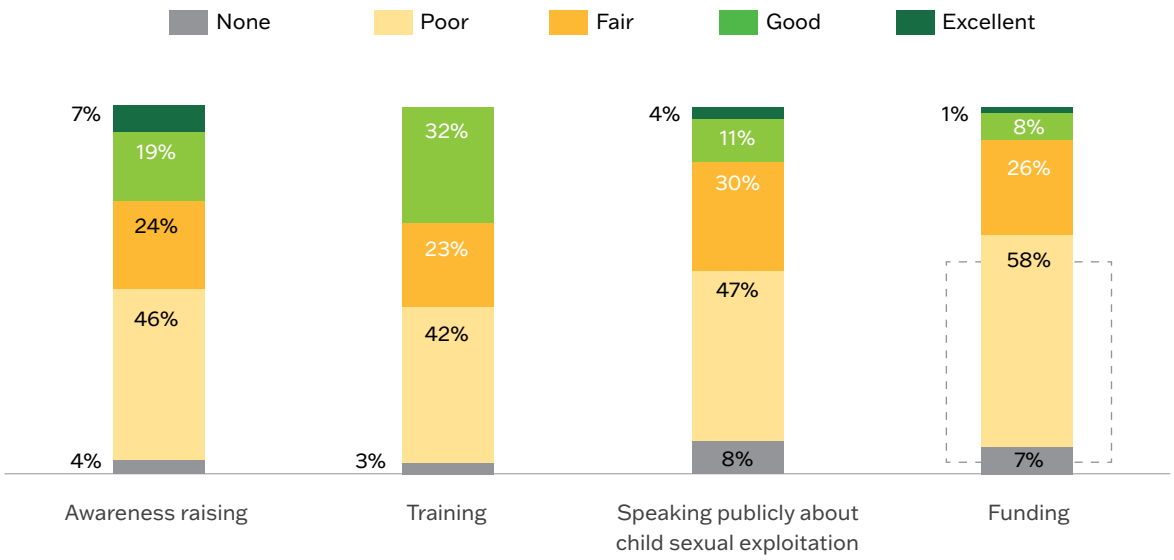


When asked about the quality of government activities to address child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Mexico, frontline workers provided some critical input, particularly on government efforts in providing funding.

> *"Since 2018 it has been practically impossible to access government funds to support child victims of abuse by non-governmental organisations, there is little that can be done, only support in the accompaniment and listen to them."*

More than a half of the respondents (65%, n=59) rated the quality of government funding on this topic as either "poor" or non-existent.

Figure 8: Frontline workers' views on the quality of government activities.



The frontline workers also provided their perspectives on both the availability and quality of medical, psychological, legal and reintegration services for children who have experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in Mexico. All four sets of services were rated as "poor" in terms of availability and quality by a third or more of frontline workers, suggesting a broad need for improvement. One of them commented that

> *"The challenges that I face when working with children who have been victims of sexual abuse and exploitation online are that resources and supports are not enough to be able to provide support for children."*

Types of support services

Educational and pedagogical support

All ten young people who participated in the conversations were attending school when the online abuse and exploitation occurred. They all stated that it was very difficult for them to discuss their concerns or seek help about child sexual exploitation and abuse online in these settings. A number of them rather mentioned the school environment as a space of indifference and revictimisation. One of them told a teacher and instead of addressing the situation, the teacher said

> *"'You have to seek help' was all that was said, nothing more."*
>
> (VoS-MX-05)

Some participants said that neither the teaching staff nor psycho-social support services in schools were attentive to changes in children's behaviours at the time.

> *"Self-cutting is not something to attract attention, it is a message of help from your student. Something is happening. Open your eyes teachers!"*
>
> (VoS-MX-05)

According to these young people, there was no attention to signs such as decreasing school performance, isolation and self-harm.

> *"Several times I came to school with punch marks, both on the face and on the body and it was never like they worried, they saw me coming with a black eye, whatever it was, but they never stopped to ask me 'are you okay? Is something wrong with you?'"*
>
> (VoS-MX-02)

One survey question included a hypothetical scenario involving educational institutions.[24] Respondents were asked to provide qualitative input on what steps they would take to respond to this situation. Only 9% of the frontline workers expressed that the school should be informed whenever a child is subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. They rather selected very child-focused (rather than system-focused) responses like counselling/psychotherapy (55%, n=50) legal action (41%, n=37), information/guidance (27%, n=25) and emotional support (19%, n=17) as the most important types of services needed. It is surprising that such a small number of respondents believed that the school should participate in the response to sexual exploitation where school staff are involved. At worst, such a case indicates severe safeguarding concerns, but in the best cases, schools can represent useful support systems for children needing support and care.

Indeed, one young woman whose sexual exploitation involved a teacher, described that she felt the school staff were complicit with the offender:

> *"Really, all the high school knew that he was a stalker [her teacher/offender]. All the high school knew that he was a rapist, and nobody said anything ... He would sneak me out with the permission of the principal, but for the same reason that everyone there knows it was just 'I'll be back soon' and he took me out."*
>
> (VoS-MX-09)

In a survey question about facilitation of sexual exploitation, two frontline workers mentioned the fact that schools and teachers are sometimes the facilitators of perpetration.

24. Scenario question: *Carmen is a 17-year-old student. Carmen has struggled to make good grades this year and is worried that Juan, a teacher who is a close family friend, will tell Carmen's dad. Carmen offers to send Juan naked pictures if he promises not to talk to the family. Do you think that Carmen is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse?*

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

In addition to that, responding to a question about caseloads involving online grooming, a number of frontline workers highlighted cases where both girls and boys were solicited by teachers at school.

"In schools, they [the boys] have suffered solicitation by teachers and other school staff, without receiving adequate help from the directors at the time."

Another said that

"In schools it is very common for teenage girls to be harassed by their teachers."

School psychologists are often the first point of call for young people and can facilitate referral to other services. Additionally, the education system should work as a protection mechanism for children, enabling a sense of belonging and stability.[25] Without easy access to these professionals, gaining entry to support structures can be difficult, particularly as children simply do not know how and where to start.

The important role that schools could play as sources of prevention was also highlighted in the conversations. Some young people mentioned the need to address the risks of young people's online engagement within the school curriculum, as well as forms of preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.

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

(VoS-MX-01)

Unfortunately, most of the young people described very unsupportive experiences from school staff. They emphasised the urgency of having an active and engaged psychologist in educational institutions, as they believe that these professionals could help creating awareness about the risks of online exposure and support children who experienced sexual exploitation and other forms of violence. One young person suggested that school authorities should

25. London Metropolitan University. (2017). Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Professionals in school settings. 5.

"recognise the importance of psychological attention in secondary and high school as a constant activity."

(VoS-MX-09)

Another one wished

"that the school psychologists have more interaction with the students, that they do not wait for them to look for them in their office."

(VoS-MX-10)

Psychological support

While psychological support services were accessed by all the young people who participated in the conversations, it should be noted that they did so at different times, with limitations and most encountered access barriers. In some cases, they were unable to obtain the required referral to access public psychological services, and as a result they needed to seek private support.

Stigma surrounding the access to psychological support services was an issue faced by many young people who participated in the conversations.

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

(VoS-MX-09)

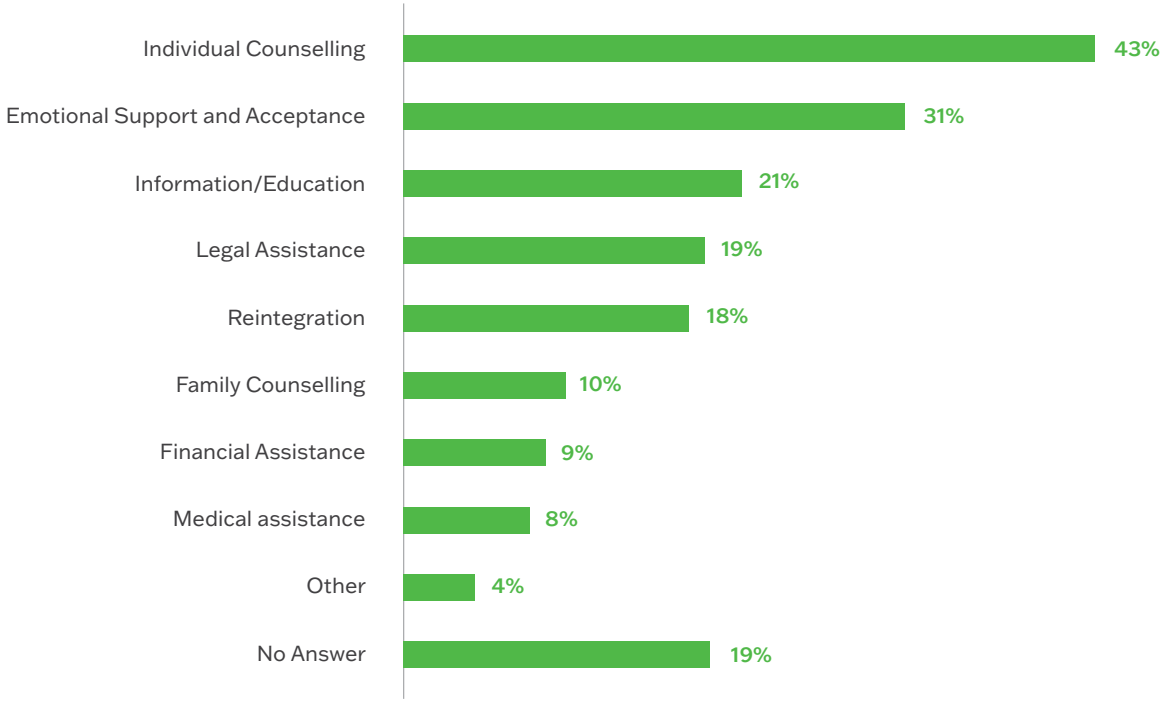
Frontline workers said that children who experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse most commonly identified that they wanted support like counselling (43%, n=39) and emotional support and acceptance (31%, n=28). A respondent elaborated that children need

"Psychological therapy; that they are not pointed out as guilty; that they are informed about risks."

Another one mentioned that children seek

"therapeutic work not only for the victim but for the caregiver."

Figure 9: Biggest needs that children say that they have, according to frontline workers.



Psychological support was also considered essential by the frontline workers who responded to the survey. In all of the hypothetical scenarios, counselling/psychotherapy was frequently noted. For example, providing qualitative input on one of the scenarios,[26] a worker said that it would be necessary to

> *"Give her psychological attention, to explain that what Bernard did is not correct and that she is not guilty of it, that she was deceived, give her confidence so that she can open up and share the facts."*

Family support

A number of young people mentioned that their parents and caregivers refused to support them with engaging psychological support, as social norms in Mexico perceive this service as acceptable only for those who are mentally ill.

> *"My parents ... they think that seeing a psychologist is something serious, very serious, that you are already crazy."*
>
> (VoS-MX-10)

26. Scenario question: *Bernard, who lives in Australia, pays a 16-year-old in Mexico, Ana, to undress while they are on a video call. Do you believe that Ana is a victim of online child sexual exploitation or abuse? [...] What practical steps would you take if you were the service provider supporting 16-year-old Ana?*

From their own experience, some young people mentioned that their parents and caregivers blamed them and considered them responsible for the offence.

> *"My thoughts were, 'my parents are going to scold me', and I had this idea of what they always told me 'we are going to put you in a convent' […]"*
>
> (VoS-MX-04)

As previously mentioned, the feeling of guilt and the fear of being blamed was indeed commonly raised. In fact, the literature on child sexual exploitation and abuse shows that children often feel critical of themselves and have strong feelings of loyalty towards their offender.[27] Reflecting about this feeling, in the conversations they demonstrated being aware that those subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse are not to blame:

> *"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)

Legal support

Young people who took part in the conversations reported feeling indifference and normalisation of violence when trying to access legal services, as earlier mentioned. In accessing justice systems, they often reported feeling revictimised by professionals questioning their statements and doubting their complaints. Referring to her experience with the public prosecutor, one young person said:

> *"They did not provide us with the help we needed, we told them what was happening and they asked us 'how long ago was it?' "... well, this was something that happened many years ago, since I was 5, and by then I was 16, which is why they told us that they could no longer do anything, that it was no longer a crime because it had already been a long time... So basically, they didn't help us to file a lawsuit and everything this involved… until we went to another State."*
>
> (VoS-MX-02)

When interacting with legal service providers, some young people reported feeling ignored, which they attributed to their young age. They felt left in the dark as those providing legal services assumed that, because of their age, they were not able to understand the status of their processes so didn't bother to explain.

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

"I felt that they lacked transparency in my case; they failed to tell me how things were. I felt that because of my age, they did not tell me things as they were, because they thought that I was not going to understand them; so, I would have liked more transparency, maybe."

(VoS-MX-04)

One young woman, even though supported by a private lawyer, decided to withdraw the complaint due to the delays of the process.

"I withdrew it because of the answer I received. I think I withdrew it around the middle of February… as I told you this was, if I'm not mistaken, at the beginning of November and well, November passed, December passed, January passed and even February, […] I did not have any news from the authorities, I never had information about what the progress was, the only information I had was 'we do not have access, Twitter denied us' and at that moment I no longer wanted to go through with that."

(VoS-MX-08)

A successful example involving the provision of legal services was illustrated by one young woman who received support from the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas), which offered legal support for her case and also supported her with the processing of her identification documents so she could access upper secondary education.

"They have helped me a lot because the lawyer is always like "if you have any questions, tell me", when I am going to make my statements, he is like "I recommend you say this, this right now does not work here because they are going to use it like this", they have always advised me very well."

(VoS-MX-04)

Financial, residential and medical support

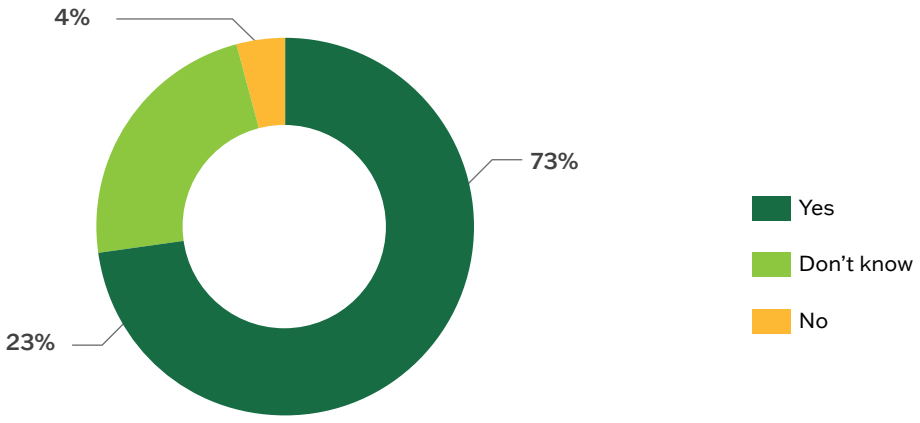
As mentioned earlier in this report, four young people who engaged in the conversations were supported by a private shelter, through which they had access to comprehensive services including educational, psychological, medical and legal support, among others. The fact that the shelters offered a caring environment that comprehensively met their needs was very much appreciated:

> *"They offered everything, even physically, I began to see a change because I was exercising, they fed us well, which was then reflected in my body; I lost weight, my hair grew more, my face improved. You start to realise when your physical and internal aspects gradually change..."*
>
> (VoS-MX-01)

They said that this place not only provided them with services but also offered financial support for one young person, for medical expenses. Another young person mentioned being referred by the shelter to a gynaecologist at a state women's hospital.

Frontline workers were asked whether child victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse have the possibility to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings, whether from convicted offenders or country-managed funds. More than two-thirds of respondents (73%, n=66) stated that compensation can be claimed by child victims, and just under a quarter (23%, n=21) didn't know.

Figure 10: Do child victims of online child sexual exploitation or abuse have the possibility to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings from convicted perpetrators or country-managed funds?



In Mexico, the General Law on Victims establishes compensation measures for child victims and access to a state aid fund.[28] According to surveyed frontline workers, child victims can claim damages from the offenders as well as from state funds, although it must be sanctioned by the law or courts.

> *"In the case of a conviction, there is always a mention to damage reparation and if it is not possible, there is a support fund for victims."*

28. Government of Mexico. (2013). Ley general de víctimas. Last amended in May 2021.

The qualitative input further outlined that compensation can be received for financial damages to the victims.

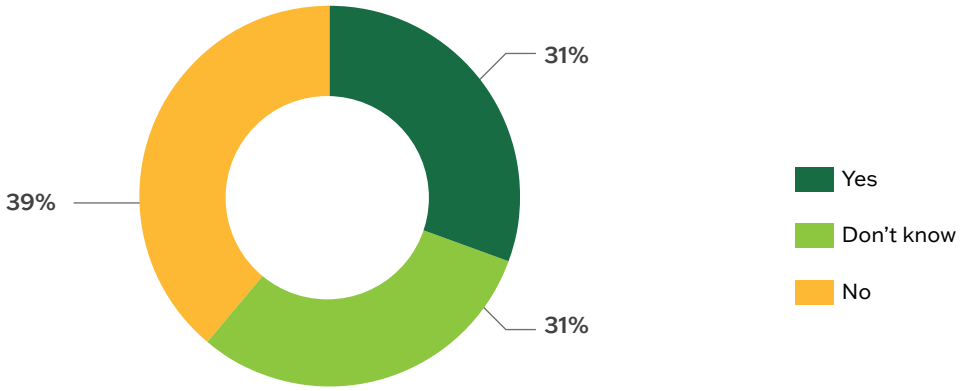
> *"Within the criminal proceedings, the repair of the damage is sought in addition to the penalty of imprisonment for which a financial indemnification is made to the victims."*

Those subjected to moral and psychological damages can also receive compensation, according to some of the respondents

> *"It is considered as the reparation of moral damage, which is supported by psychological opinions, as well as in high-impact crimes, victims are given the status of victim, for a possible economic remuneration in case of reparation of moral damage".*

When asked in the survey if they know of any children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and had received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Mexico, 31% of the respondents (n=29) indicated that they did. Thirty-nine percent said that they did not know of any children, and 31% (n=29) did not know how to answer the question.

Figure 11: Based on your work experience, do you know if any child subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Mexico?



RECOMMENDATIONS

Photo by Roman Lopez

The recommendations presented below are primarily drawn from the conversations with the young people who took part in the conversations. While the survey with frontline workers raised important issues and supported the analysis, this report seeks to privilege the voices and perspectives of survivors. Additional clarification and explanations from the analyses are provided in places from the project partners contributed during the analysis and write-up stage.

Recommendations on 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.

"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)

This recommendation was supported by the surveyed frontline workers. When provided the opportunity to share any last thoughts at the end of the survey, almost one third (32%, n=29) emphasised the lack of general public awareness related to this topic 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)

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 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)

Social media platforms should also 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)

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.

> *"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)

Recommendations on 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 in the conversations 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 conduct 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."*

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