

## PRESS RELEASE

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## Research reveals two out of three children in Europe have experienced online sexual harms, highlighting the urgent need for governments to support new EU legislation aimed at protecting children in the digital sphere

**12 June 2023** - WeProtect Global Alliance, a global movement of more than 250 governments, private sector companies, and civil society organisations dedicated to transforming the global response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online, has released a ground-breaking study conducted by Economist Impact. The study sheds light on the widespread and alarming issue of online sexual harms experienced by children across Europe, revealing urgent concerns that demand immediate attention and action.

- **Children across Europe are facing online sexual harms, with two out of three experiencing at least one type of online sexual harm.**
- **Private image or video-sharing services have emerged as prominent avenues for online sexual harms, highlighting the pressing need for regulation and protective measures.**
- **Girls (79% compared with 57% of boys), LGBTQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by online sexual harm. Targeted support and intervention are needed to address these disparities.**
- **Governments must take immediate action to address the alarming extent of online sexual harms against European children caused by adults by supporting the new EU legislation, implementing national measures, and allocating resources to protect and support children.**

The study surveyed 2,000 18-year-olds from France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland, revealing distressing findings. This closed online survey revealed:

**France:** 85% of 18-year-olds in France's experiences of someone trying to talk to them about sexually explicit topics or send them sexually explicit material occurred on private image or video-sharing services.

**Germany:** 73% of 18-year-olds in Germany had experienced at least one type of online sexual harm during childhood, the highest percentage among the four countries surveyed.

**The Netherlands:** 43% of respondents in the Netherlands had experienced someone sharing sexually explicit images and/or videos of them without their permission, compared to an average of 30% across the other three countries surveyed.

**Poland:** Of the 57% of respondents in Poland who reported encountering a stranger or a known adult engaging them in sexually explicit conversations or sending explicit material, 27% had experienced this at the age of 12 or younger.

The research into childhood experiences of 18-year-olds exposed the profound impact of a range of online sexual harms they endured. These experiences involved receiving sexually explicit content from adults while growing up, having explicit images of them shared without their consent, being asked to keep sexually explicit online relationships with adults a secret and being asked to do something sexually explicit online that they were uncomfortable with.

*"WeProtect Global Alliance stands united in its unwavering mission to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online," said Iain Drennan, Executive Director at WeProtect Global Alliance. "Europe has become the epicentre of hosting child sexual abuse material in recent years, but now has the opportunity to lead global efforts to fight this pervasive and borderless crime. We encourage political leaders in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and all EU member states to show their commitment to protecting children by supporting the proposed EU legislation and taking decisive action at the national level to tackle this urgent and rapidly growing threat."*

The significance of prioritising the safety of children from the growing threat of online sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be overstated. With an unwavering commitment to safeguarding children, WeProtect Global Alliance calls upon political leaders in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and all European Union (EU) member states to unite in support of effective and thorough EU legislation to combat online child sexual abuse.

The European Union is an international leader in digital regulation and has made great strides in making the internet safer for Europeans in recent years. Collective backing is crucial to ensure that children across Europe receive the necessary support, facilitate prompt identification and reporting of child sexual abuse material on online platforms, and foster stronger collaboration between institutions like the European Commission and technology companies. The organisation urges governments across Europe and the rest of the world to come together and actively implement the following crucial measures:

- **Robust internet regulation:** that is effective and age-appropriate to serve as an international shield, protecting children from the long-term harm of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.
- **Comprehensive legal framework:** to enable the swift identification and removal of images and videos depicting child sexual abuse, support the prosecution of offenders, and provide safeguards to protect children from online grooming and sexual exploitation and abuse online.
- **Future-proof legislation:** prepared to be adaptive to innovation and emerging technologies and responsive to evolving offender behaviour. There should be no exemptions granted for specific technologies, ensuring a relentless pursuit of justice and protection for vulnerable children.

## Supportive quotes

*"I thank WeProtect Global Alliance for this important research which confirms the need to urgently adopt the Commission's proposal to prevent and fight child sexual abuse. The majority of children*

are exposed to sexual harm online – especially girls. The vulnerable – LGBTQ+ people and ethnic minorities – are most at risk. If we do not act, detection of child sexual abuse in online messages will be forbidden next year when current legislation expires and efforts to detect abuse and stop predators from grooming children online will come to an end in the European Union." -says **Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs.**

"Children today have regular access to the internet from the age of 11 and experience their first sexual harm online from the age of 13", comments **Mié Kohiyama, SAGE member of the Brave Movement and co-founder of BeBrave France.** "This is a chilling observation, especially as the use of new technologies is becoming more and more democratic and accessible to younger and younger people. Sexual abuse knows no limits or borders. With millions of children affected around the world, we must act and ensure that the internet is regulated at both national and European level."

"It is high time to face the staggering reality. 73% of affected children and young people in Germany - that's the majority of young people we've let down. For too long, politicians and society have happily preached more media literacy, forgetting that this always includes life skills. We have neglected to hold providers accountable for digital child protection. That has to change. Immediately. In light of these findings, we must act. Now. It is an urgent imperative to protect children effectively both online and offline," explains **Julia von Weiler, Chair of Innocence in Danger e.V**

"The protection of children from online sexual exploitation and abuse must without doubt be made an absolute priority. The alarming figures from the survey speak volumes: two in three children in Europe have been victims of online sexual harm. Now is the time for collective support and decisive EU legislation so that children across Europe get the urgently needed protection they deserve," said **Corinne Dettmeijer, vice-chair of the supervisory board of Child Helpline International and former National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence against Children.**

**Julie Verhaar, Director Terre des Hommes,** added: "The disturbing findings of the survey highlight the urgent need to prioritise the protection of children from online sexual exploitation and abuse. As Terre des Hommes, we call for concerted action and support for new EU legislation to increase child safety online. Children across the EU deserve our unbridled commitment and dedication to create a safe digital world for them and with them"

**Wibke Müller, political scientist, and child rights activist from the Brave Movement** said "In Germany, 73% of 18-year-olds surveyed report that they experienced at least one form of online sexual violence during their childhood. We urgently need more international cooperation because the internet is borderless and online crime is a borderless crime. In the polarised debate in Germany about the CSA legislation, child protection and data privacy must not be played off against each other. The study shows that even very young children experience sexual harm and violence online. No child can protect themselves alone. Adults are responsible to protect children. I therefore call on the German government to support the CSA legislation making it mandatory for platform providers to detect, report, and remove childhood sexual violence material. The EU would set a new global standard of child protection that could serve as a model worldwide. We need safeguarding concepts in the digital space."

"Protecting children online is essential to building a safer digital world. This report is timely and highlights the many harms our children face online," says **Louis-Victor de Franssu, co-founder and CEO of Tremau.** "Robust regulation of the internet, such as the Digital Services Act, is an

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*important step in ensuring that their rights are protected. We must now ensure that the fundamental rights of all users are protected and that everyone has the opportunity to report any harmful behaviour they may encounter. Following the example of the Christchurch Appeal to combat terrorist content online, France has the potential and the conviction to spearhead the protection of children on the Internet."*

**Aagje Leven, Missing Children Europe**, adds, *"Missing Children Europe's network of the 116000 hotlines has observed a concerning surge in reported instances of missing cases associated with online child sexual abuse. This alarming trend aligns with the findings of this new study, which reveals that two out of three young people in Europe experience online sexual harms. These distressing experiences can have severe consequences, with the worst-case scenario being a child's disappearance. It is imperative that we take immediate action to address this urgent issue. We strongly urge political leaders across France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and all EU member states to lend their support to the proposed EU legislation. This legislation offers a comprehensive legal framework and promotes enhanced cooperation between institutions and technology companies."*

**Katarzyna Staciwa, an expert cooperating with the WeProtect Global Alliance, Head of the Team: Research, Development and Innovation at the NASK National Research Institute.** *"The findings address a phenomenon that is far too rarely discussed in Poland. While topics related to other types of threats or heist in cyberspace has been operating in the public space for more than a dozen years, the subject of child sexual abuse in this dimension is still inaccessible to a wider audience. There is definitely a need for interdisciplinary dialogue, involvement of experts from various fields, monitoring and research of the phenomenon, in order to shape the response to the problem based on the results, reach out to parents, teachers, shape the media message aimed primarily at supporting the harmed child. I encourage you to read the entirety of the findings of the study and treat them as a starting point for further measures to prevent and combat the phenomenon of sexual abuse of children in cyberspace, both at the national and international levels, in the legal, organizational and technological areas,"* says

To download the full reports please visit <https://www.weprotect.org/european-survey/>

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## Notes to Editors

### **WeProtect Global Alliance:**

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from over 250 members across governments, the private sector, and civil society 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.

In 2020, WeProtect Global Alliance relaunched as an independent organisation, combining the European Commission and US Department of Justice's Global Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Online and WePROTECT Children, established by the UK Government as a global multi-stakeholder response to combating online child sexual abuse.

The Alliance consists of 101 governments, 65 private sector companies, 91 civil society organisations, and 9 intergovernmental organisations. Learn more at [www.weprotect.org](http://www.weprotect.org)

### **Definition of 'child sexual exploitation and abuse online'**

Child sexual exploitation and abuse that is partly or entirely facilitated by technology, i.e. the internet or other wireless communications.

### **Definition of 'online sexual harms'**

The research asked respondents about their exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors during childhood. Questions centred on four online sexual harms, defined as:

- Being sent sexually explicit content from an adult they knew or someone they did not know before they were 18.
- Being asked to keep part of their sexually explicit online relationship with an adult they knew or someone they did not know before a secret.
- Having sexually explicit images of them shared without consent (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).
- Being asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with (by a peer, an adult they knew, or someone they did not know before).