CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

ECPAT INTERNATIONAL

WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE

LA STRADA Moldova

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.

International Centre "La Strada" Moldova operates to ensure the respect of the rights and legal interests of women and children in the Republic of Moldova to stay free from violence, at all levels – individual, legislative and executive. La Strada Moldova implements programmes in three distinct areas of activity related to trafficking in persons, especially women, violence against women and domestic violence, child online sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Having a systemic approach, La Strada's work is focused on five pillars: prevention and early intervention, protection, safety and justice, capacity building, public policies, data and research.

CONTENTS

Photo by Jurica Koletic

INTRODUCTION

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.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

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]

---

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 child 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 Moldova

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

Qualitative one-on-one 'conversations' with young people who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online
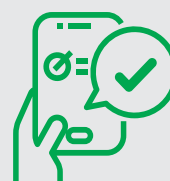
An online survey of frontline support workers who were working with child survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse

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 child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Data from Moldova 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 Moldova. Similar national reports are available for all project countries along with a project report summarising the findings across the six target countries.

METHODOLOGY

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 Moldova, local facilitators prepared over two months with the project expert during a number of coordination sessions focused on the trauma-informed participatory approach, and then facilitated the conversations. The two facilitators worked for the ECPAT member organisation La Strada Moldova. They had a psychology background with extensive experience supporting children who experienced sexual abuse and exploitation.

> In Moldova, local facilitators prepared over two months with the project expert during a number of coordination sessions focused on the trauma-informed participatory approach, and then facilitated the conversations.

---

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

Sample

In Moldova, 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 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, all of them young women between the age of 18 to 21 years old, agreed to take part in the conversations. Nine young women were among survivors who had received support from La Strada Moldova directly while the last young woman was identified through a partner organisation.

These ten young women were among survivors who had received support provided by both non-governmental and governmental organisations. Some of them received support from several organisations at different times, which allowed them during the conversations, to refer to various experiences of interaction with service providers. As expected, when identifying participants, some of the young people invited to participate declined, noting that they preferred not to reflect again on their experiences. It is worth noting that in the preparation phase of this study the facilitators could not identify any young men who had been victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse online and had received support services by neither La Strada Moldova nor any partner organisations. According to the experience of La Strada Moldova, one of the reasons why it was not possible to identify any young men could be the fact that adolescent boys prefer not to disclose the abuse they experienced because they are afraid of being blamed and rejected by society.

The young women who participated in the conversations were from different regions of Moldova, providing a diverse picture regarding experiences of child sexual abuse and exploitation online, as well as diverging opinions and perceptions on the services available to children.

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 women 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 caused by 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. As per the conversations' approach, the young women were able to contribute verbally, but also encouraged to use a range of visual tools to facilitate the conversations. However, the visual representation method was not applied in all cases, as some of the participants had previous negative experiences with these techniques and felt anxious about using it. Their choices were fully accepted and respected.

In the final stages of the conversations, the majority of the participants expressed positive feedback 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 meant lots of interactions 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 women 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 Romanian – 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 women'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 women 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.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

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

La Strada Moldova 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 54 Moldovan 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 opted for in-person administration – though using an online tool with limits and designated required items for a clean dataset. While restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic meant the Moldova administrator, a staff member from La Strada Moldova, had to support participants remotely via an introductory Zoom call and then remaining on standby to support, offer guidance and troubleshoot as the participants completed the survey. The personal connection helped motivate participants to complete the survey. Data collection took place between April-May 2021.

The online survey consisted of 108 multiple choice and short open-answer questions. The draft tool in English language was translated to Romanian and ECPAT International and La Strada Moldova 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 Romanian 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 Moldova. However, the estimates, perceptions and experiences reported here offer valuable insight into the access and quality of social support for Moldovan 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.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

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.

The initially proposed approach for the conversations, which included two in-person meetings – the 'pre-meeting' first and the 'main conversation' a few days later as described above – did not work in Moldova. In particular, the participants did not feel comfortable in meeting the facilitators face-to-face twice, mostly because they would need to skip work or travel long distances. The facilitators overcame this challenge by either conducting the pre-meeting on the phone or in-person but on the same day at a different location of the main conversation. In both cases, during the pre-meetings the facilitators informed the young women about the project, the process, answered queries about consent, and addressed any preferences related to the set up for the conversations.

The facilitators also had challenges in identifying participants who felt emotionally able to engage in conversations. Most of the young women had benefited from the services several years ago, and some of them had not had communication with specialists for a long time. There was also one case in which the offender had recently been released by the court, and this had exacerbated the trauma of the abuse, making the young woman feel fear and anxiety again. Therefore, the team prioritised her psycho-emotional well-being and decided not to involve her in the conversations.

Among the four young women who refused to participate in the conversations, two of them declined because they preferred not to have to explain to their families where they were going and for what purpose. As previously mentioned, no young men who had been subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online and had received support were identified to take part in the conversations.

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 42 participants who began the survey but were disqualified by hurdle questions may have been false positives.

FINDINGS

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 Moldova. 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 Moldova

Gender

Both the conversations with young people and the survey data suggest that there is a higher proportion of girls than boys utilising formal reporting mechanisms and accessing support services in Moldova. For instance, out of the total number of beneficiaries, the share of boys assisted by La Strada Moldova is below 10%. Despite attempts, no young men who had been subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online and had received support were able to be identified in order to take part in the conversations, as previously mentioned. In an open question, survey participants were asked if they thought there were trends related to gender and sexual exploitation (generally and online). As shown in Figure 1, 64% of the respondents said they had not experienced any gender trends and 32% indicated that there are generally more girls experiencing sexual exploitation than boys.

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

n = 54

■ No gender trends identified
■ More girls
■ More boys

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova
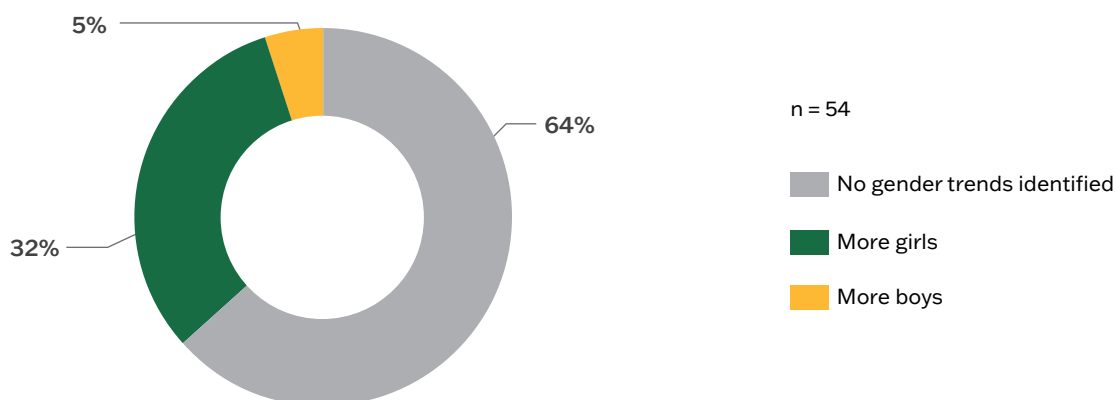
A number of respondents assumed that the low access of support services could be because girls are overwhelmingly seen as more at risk in the country – for a full range of concerns, but also for sexual exploitation. Some of them commented that

> *"I have noticed that girls are more sexually abused and sexually exploited than boys. And if we refer to commercial and/or non-commercial sexual exploitation, then girls represent 100%." and "Girls are more prone to sexual abuse and exploitation."*[20]

Some qualitative responses on the survey suggested a connection between gender trends and exposure to social vulnerabilities.

> *"The girls come from socially vulnerable families; from families with dysfunctional relationships; The boys…not necessarily coming from socially disadvantaged families."*

Seventy-six percent of the workers who completed the survey had provided support to girls (n=41) and most (n=32) had supported girls who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online. But 67% of the surveyed frontline workers (n=36) had provided support to boys and of these, two-thirds (n=24) had supported boys who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online. It therefore seems that while the perception is 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. This would be in line with global research which is showing boys are frequently more represented amongst victims than we previously thought.[21]

Age

The 24 surveyed frontline workers who supported boys who had experienced online sexual exploitation were asked what ages the boys were when the abuse had occurred. The workers reported that more than half of the boys (57%) were sexually exploited online between the ages of 11-15 years old. This aligns with the age of the majority of the boys assisted by La Strada Moldova, who are up to 14 years old.

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

0-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-17 years	n = 24

5%	23%	57%	15%

---
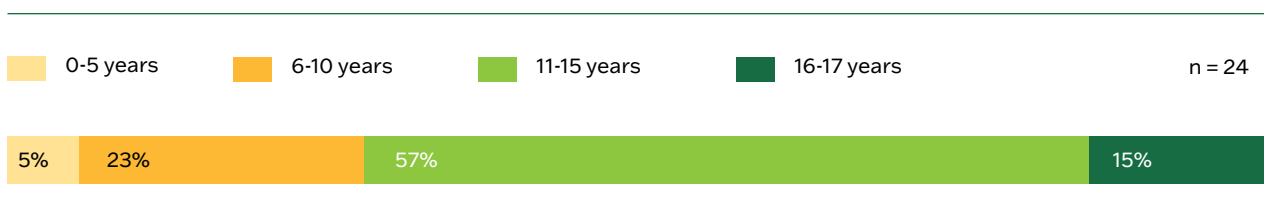
20. Please note that text in green boxes refers to quotes from the young survivors who took part in the conversations. Text in purple boxes refers to the qualitative input shared by frontline workers who completed the survey
21. ECPAT International. (2021). Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys. ECPAT International.

Similarly, the 33 frontline workers who had supported girls reported that more than a half of the girls who had been subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online (55%) also fell within the 11-15 years old category. The ten young women who took part in the conversations were predominantly at a similar age to this majority when they were abused (all were between 12 and 17).

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

0-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-17 years	n = 33

8%	12%	55%	25%
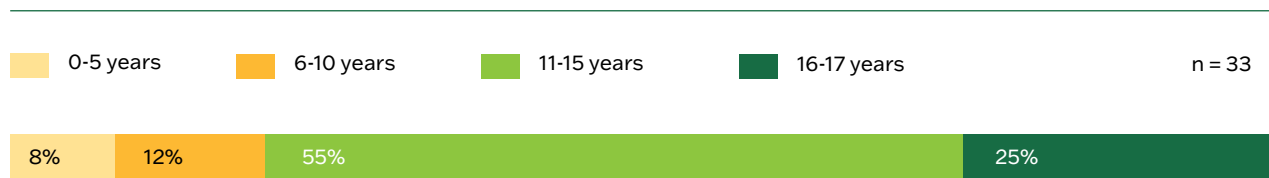
Frequency of sexual exploitation in caseloads

Sexual exploitation of children in general appeared to be a recurring type of violence among the total caseloads supported by the surveyed frontline workers. Ninety-six percent reported that at least some of their child clients had experienced sexual exploitation and 39% said that this was the case for more than half of the children in their caseloads. Seven percent of workers reported that all their clients had these experiences – these are of course likely to be staff from specialist services.[22] These numbers indicate a concern in terms of worker care and support. Cases of sexual exploitation of children are difficult and stressful, and caseloads need monitoring and support for the workers to avoid burnout and vicarious trauma.

Figure 4: Percentage of children supported by the surveyed frontline workers that had experienced sexual exploitation.

None of them (0%)	Some of them (1-25%)	Almost half of them (26-50%)	More than half of them (51-75%)	Almost all of them (76-99%)	All of them (0%)
4%	41%	17%	19%	13%	7%

---
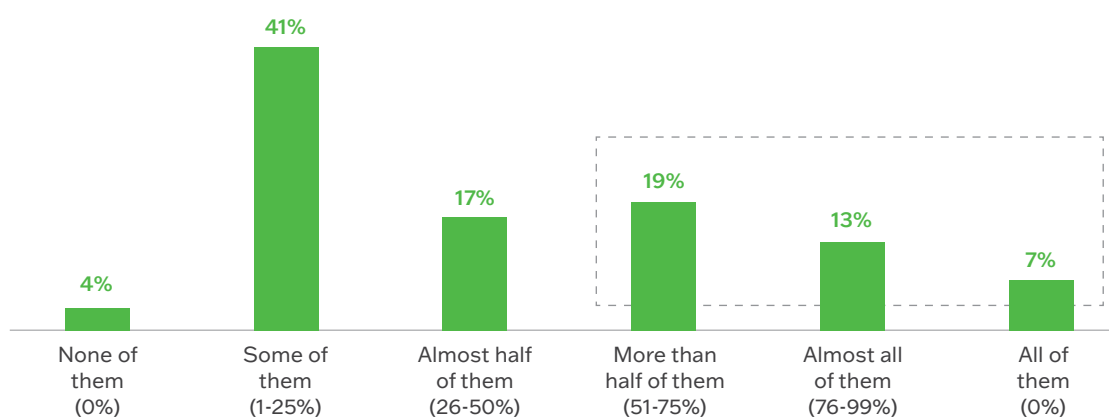
22. Please note that our sampling approach targeted organisations working in child protection so this does not represent sexual exploitation within the general child population. But it does indicate that sexual exploitation of children is frequently seen in cases being supported by child protection agencies.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

The average response from workers about how much of their caseload involved sexual exploitation of children was 42%. Of that, they then told us that around one third of those cases of sexual exploitation of children also involved digital, Internet and communication technology in some way.

Notable differences are observed between the caseloads handled by the surveyed workers coming from government versus non-governmental organisations. Almost half of the cases from workers at non-governmental organisations involved child sexual exploitation and abuse online (47%), while at the government organisations this represented only 22% of the cases.

Reporting mechanisms

Awareness

Conversations with young survivors generally illustrated little awareness of formal reporting mechanisms that are available in Moldova. Among the ten young women who engaged in the conversations, seven mentioned that they did not know about any reporting mechanisms at the time they were subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Two of them found out about these mechanisms from a teacher while one young woman found out about such mechanisms using Google. A fourth young woman shared that she used the Internet to search for an online safety website that she had heard about before during an IT lesson.

The lack of public awareness was reiterated by the frontline workers who participated in the survey, as shown in Figure 5 below. More than a half (61%, n=33) considered general awareness "poor". A smaller fraction of the respondents answered that it was "fair" (32%, n=17), while only four participants said it was "good" and none of them considered general awareness "excellent". Although this question was not specifically related to the awareness of reporting mechanisms, the fact that most of the frontline workers who responded to the survey believe that there is little awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online in the first place confirms what survivors explained:

"I have not heard anyone call on these services. In our village, everyone handles it in the classic way. My mother or father deal with this and other services are not reached."

(VoS-MD-14)

One frontline worker highlighted the need for awareness raising to be prioritised, particularly in rural areas:

"It would be desirable to make more people aware of these illegal acts, especially in rural areas."

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

Figure 5: Level of public awareness of online child exploitation and abuse, according to the surveyed frontline workers.

Legend: Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor

Level of public awareness: Good 7% | Fair 32% | Poor 61%
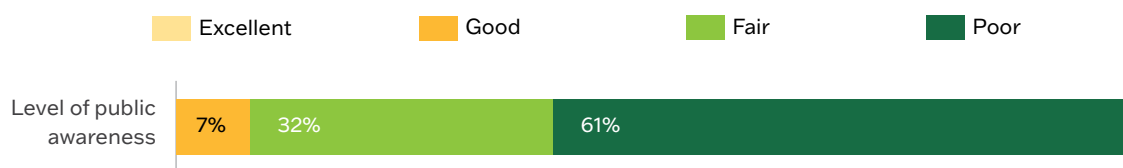
Surveyed workers from both government and non-governmental organisations were critical about the level of public awareness in Moldova. As displayed in Figure 6, 87% of the respondents who worked for non-governmental organisations rated public awareness as "poor", while the responses of those who worked for government organisations were divided between "poor" (50%) and "fair" (44%).

In this regard, one respondent noted that those working for non-governmental organisations would be in a better position to assess public awareness, considering that their work is more linked to awareness-raising activities:

"It is difficult for me to give an objective assessment. Awareness-raising, training and public discussions are largely carried out by non-governmental organisations."

Figure 6: Level of public awareness of online child exploitation and abuse by organisation type.

Legend: Excellent | Good | Fair | Poor

Other organisation: Good 9% | Fair 39% | Poor 52%

Non-governmental organisation: Good 7% | Fair 7% | Poor 87%

Governmental organisation: Good 6% | Fair 44% | Poor 50%
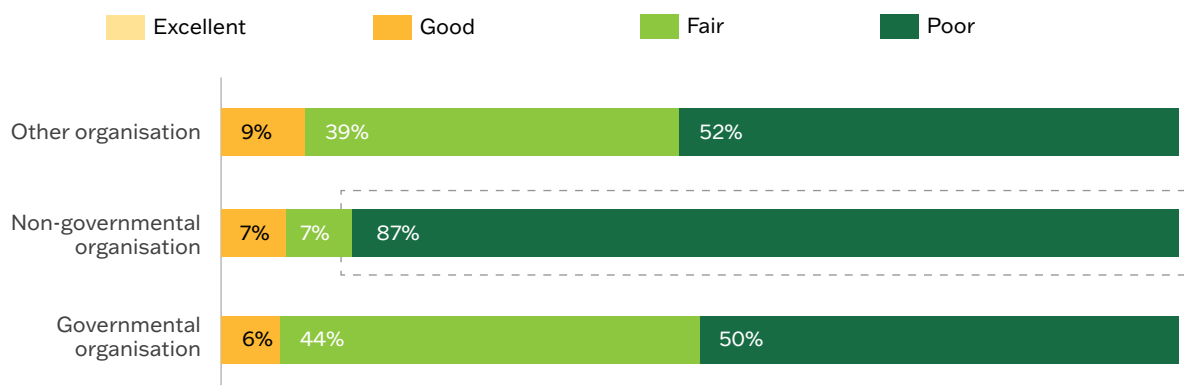
Barriers to disclosure

A number of young survivors said that even if they had been aware of reporting mechanisms at the time of the child sexual exploitation and abuse online, they would not have asked for help because they felt guilty about what happened.

> "Even if I knew I could call somewhere and report, I wouldn't have done it anyway."
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

The feeling of guilt and the fear of being blamed was indeed commonly raised in the conversations when talking about reporting mechanisms. 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.[23] One of the young women said that when the police officers came to take her statements, she felt that she was the one responsible for the criminal acts of the offender.

> "And when I found out that he was imprisoned, I was afraid, I was worried about him. I didn't understand why he was imprisoned, I thought I was the one who was guilty […] I thought I did everything with my own hands, because I sent the photos."
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Scepticism in relation to specific reporting platforms and hotlines was also mentioned by the young women, including web-based platforms and those specifically designed for children, such as SigurOnline.[24]

> "At first I was sceptical, I was thinking, how can a website help me?"
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

Despite this initial scepticism, another young woman explained that the chat platform available on the website proved to be not only extremely useful as a reporting mechanism, but crucial in providing a sense of relief for her.

> "I was told that 'this is not the end, you will see, everything will be fine. Leave it for a while, you'll see, we'll work it out together' […] if it weren't for the psychologists at SigurOnline, I was ready to end my days, because I couldn't see another solution."
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

---

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

24. See: https://siguronline.md/

This young woman recalled being surprised by how quickly she was answered on the chat and particularly appreciated the fact that a psychologist contacted her within one hour after she first asked for help, following up with her several times afterwards to ask how she was feeling and if her situation had changed in any way.

Fear of publication of personal data following the filing of a report was another barrier raised by some of the young women in the conversations. When using online reporting mechanisms, they were not confident about providing personal data, fearing that it would become public.

> *"I have not provided data about myself, I was afraid. I didn't think that would help me in any way."*
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

Barriers to disclosure were also explored in the survey with frontline workers, as indicated in Figure 7. The respondents were presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children's disclosure of online sexual exploitation and abuse. By far, the two most commonly selected barriers (both at 65% or n=35) to disclosure were related to "fears about how others will respond to disclosure" and to a pervasive culture of silence ("the stigma and shame that victims often experience"). Closely related are the third and fourth most common barriers – "difficulties in asking for help" and "the taboo around talking about sex and sexuality".

As part of the survivor conversations, one young woman mentioned that seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma and judgments surrounding the access to reporting mechanisms and support services.

> *"In the society in which we live, these facts are harshly judged. 'It's her fault', 'she's stupid', 'she needed to think'" […] for me, the most important thing was not to judge me."*
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

These views reiterate the impact of shame that children subjected to sexual exploitation feel and how the views of their communities can negatively influence the way that they react after an incident of online sexual exploitation. When asked what were the biggest problems shared to them by children who experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse, the frontline workers said fear, trauma and anxiety (43%, n=23), followed by shame/guilt (41%, n=22) and social isolation/marginalisation (20%, n=11). Providing qualitative inputs to the survey about the biggest problems faced by children, they commented:

> *"Psycho-emotional difficulties; Mental trauma; Blaming and stigmatisation by those who know about the abuse."*

> *"Blaming the child for what happened. The negative attitude of parents, parent's refusal to help their child. Loneliness, impossibility to talk about what happened to people that the child considers a resource."*

Figure 7: Factors that potentially limit children's disclosure.

Fears about how others will respond to disclosure (e.g. blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking) — **65%**

The stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence) — **65%**

Negative attitudes to, fears or difficulties asking for help and support — **33%**

Talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo — **32%**

Lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation — **24%**

Lack of confidence in being able to obtain helpful help — **22%**

The sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the experience — **20%**

Social isolation (lack of trusting relationships with adults and/or peers) — **15%**

Lack of trust in confidentiality of services — **11%**

Children have low status and not respected as having their own rights (Belief that they will not be listened to or valued) — **6%**

High levels of physical of violence against children (e.g. common violent disciplinary practices) — **2%**

Alcohol or drug misuse — **2%**

Police don't accept report — **2%**

Fear of being criminalised — **2%**

Multiple responses permitted, null responses removed

A deeper investigation into the top five barriers to disclosure is presented in Figure 8. Older respondents placed a higher emphasis on the impact of fears of disclosure and the culture of silence. Younger respondents displayed a higher agreement on the item related to talking about sex and sexuality being considered taboo.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

Figure 8: Top five barriers to disclosure by age of the respondents.

Age of respondent ■ 21-30 ■ 31-40 ■ 41-50 ■ 51-60

	Fears about how others will respond to disclosure? (e.g. blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking)	The stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence)	Negative attitudes to, fears or difficulties asking for help and support	Talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo	Lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation
21-30	64%	64%	36%	27%	36%
31-40	59%	59%	36%	46%	18%
41-50	71%	71%	36%	21%	21%
51-60	83%	83%	17%	17%	33%

Notably, taboo and stigma play an important role as barriers to reporting for all respondents. This was particularly evident in small towns and rural areas, as presented in Figure 9 where respondents working in a mix of urban and rural areas more frequently noted the fears about how other people could respond to disclosure, as well as how talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo.

Figure 9: Top five barriers to disclosure vs location of the respondents.

■ Urban ■ Urban and rural

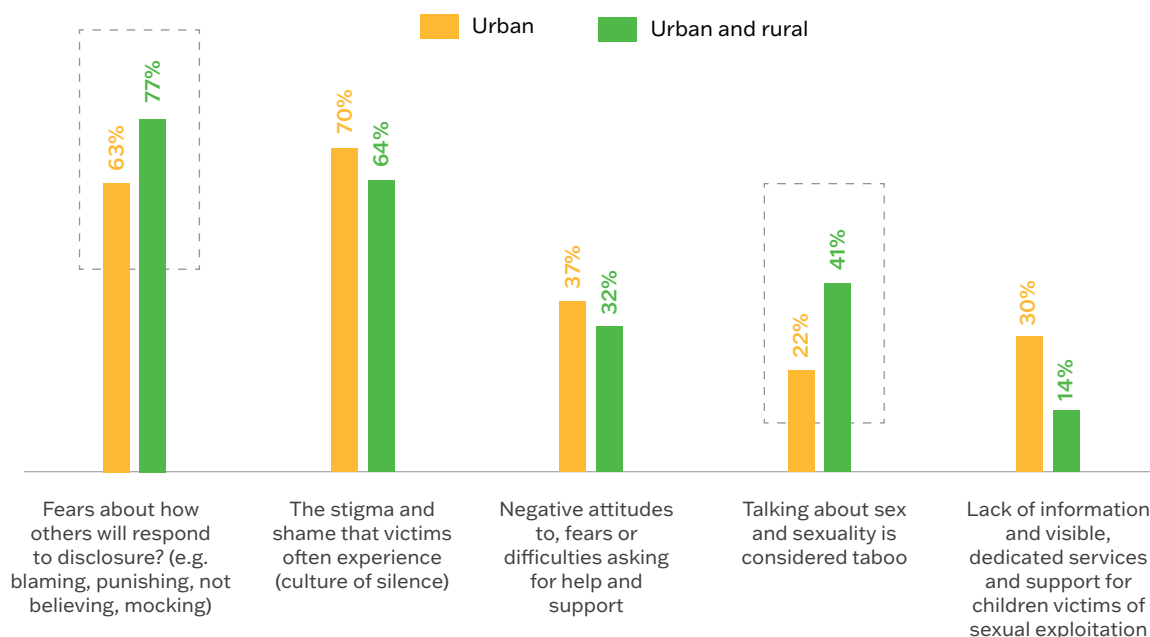|	Fears about how others will respond to disclosure? (e.g. blaming, punishing, not believing, mocking)	The stigma and shame that victims often experience (culture of silence)	Negative attitudes to, fears or difficulties asking for help and support	Talking about sex and sexuality is considered taboo	Lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation
Urban	63%	70%	37%	22%	30%
Urban and rural	77%	64%	32%	41%	14%

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 types of support services provided in Moldova, 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

All of the young women engaged in the conversations said that they received support, some of them from several organisations at different times. Eight out of ten were supported by non-governmental organisations after being referred by the police or prosecutor's offices. However, they all described a complete lack of prior awareness about the support that could be offered for children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.
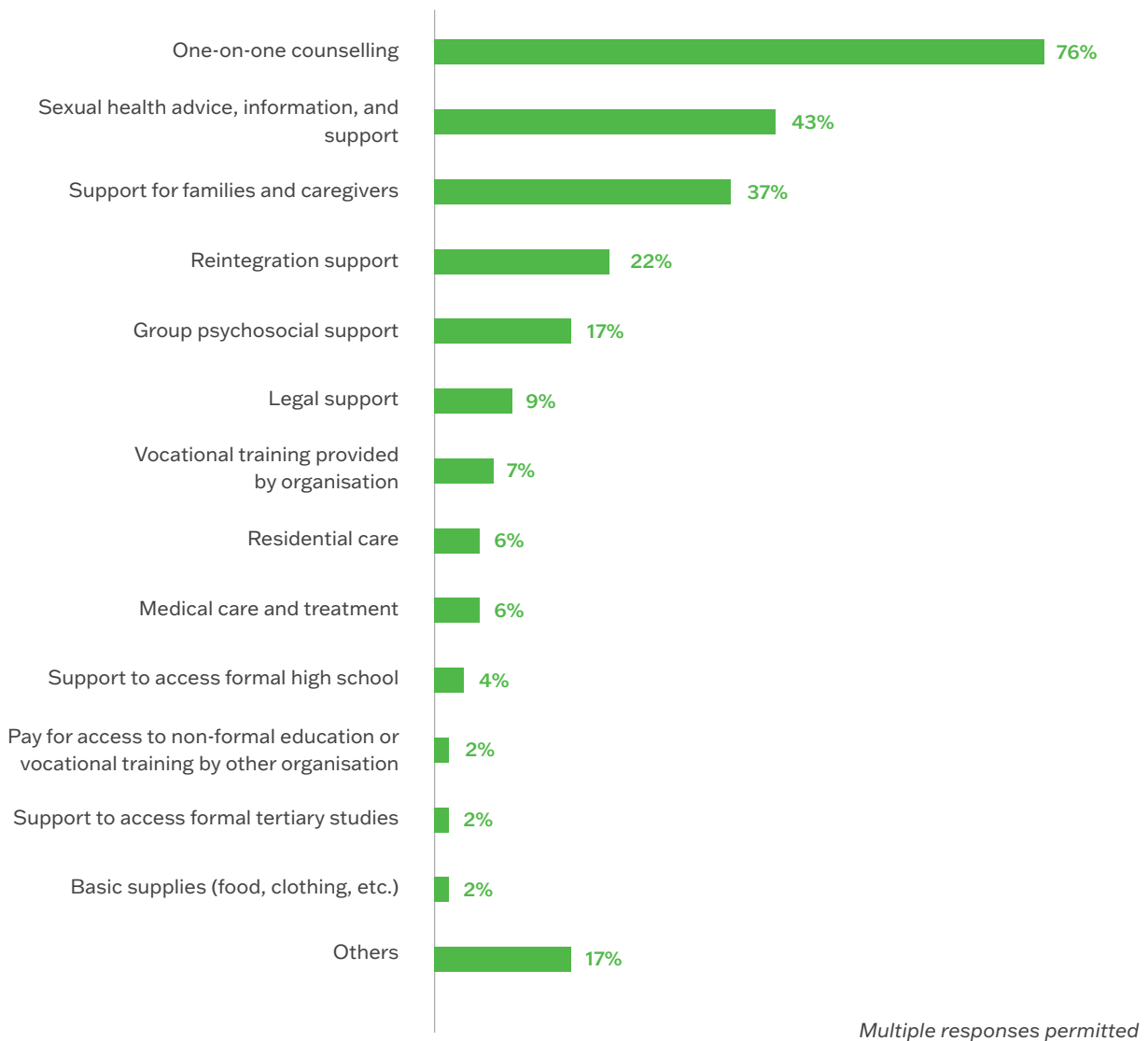
> *"I did not know about La Strada Moldova, not even my parents knew about this Centre."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

The young women said during the conversations that, once they knew about and accessed the services, the availability of support helped them to recover. As previously mentioned in the reporting mechanisms section, a number of participants reported having a good experience with SigurOnline as soon as they reported the violence. They felt that the specialists knew how to talk with children and were informed about the specifies of online forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, and therefore were prepared to support them.

> *"Immediately after I wrote, I felt a relief. They answered me quickly. I didn't have to wait many hours. They were asking me various questions and they told me that they would call me, I therefore felt that it would be resolved, everything would be fine and I would receive the support I needed."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

All of the young women had access to counselling or psychological support provided by at least one non-governmental organisation. Indeed, this was by far the most popular service available across the sample of 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 (76%, n=41).
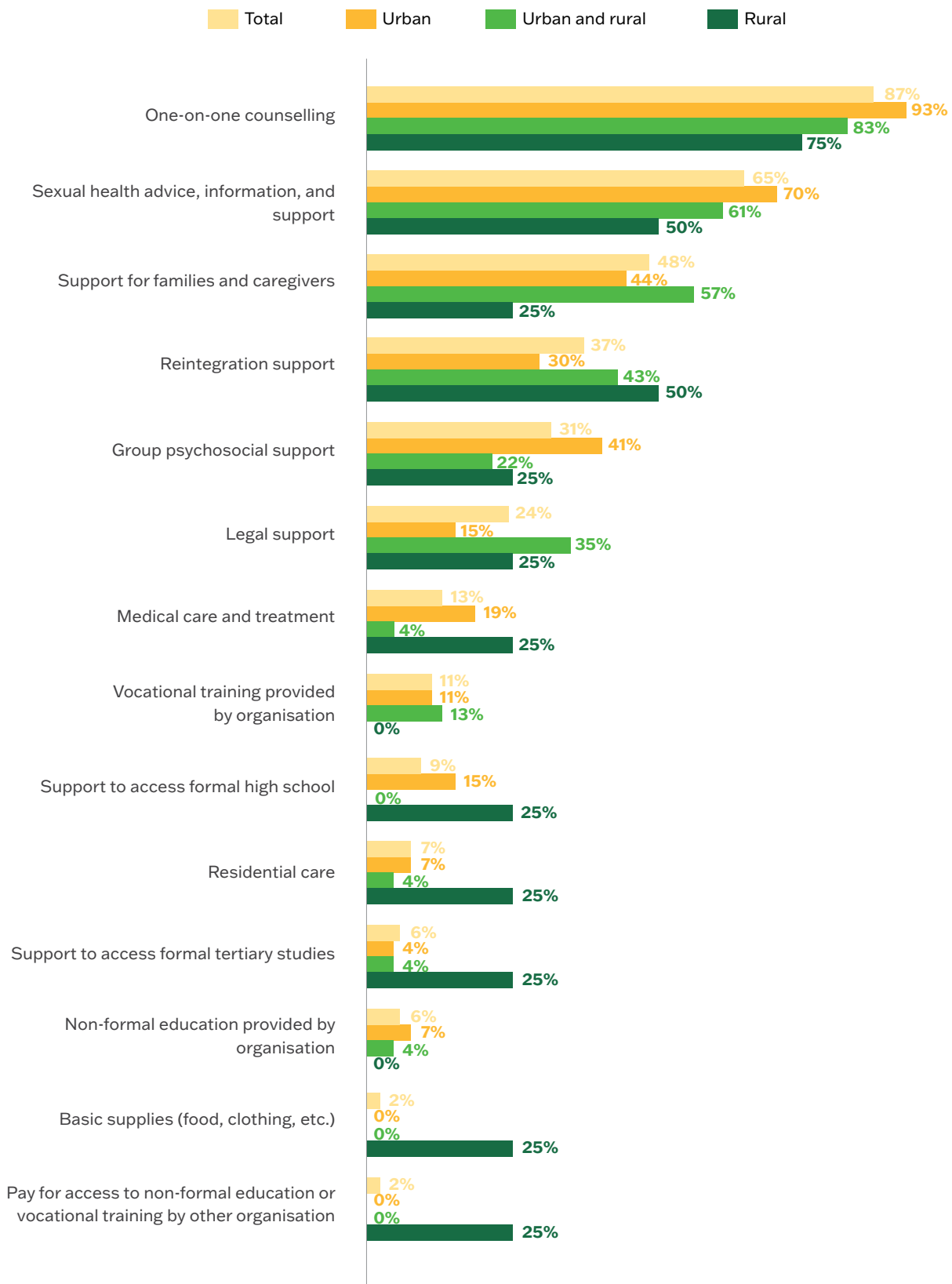
Figure 10: Direct support to children who had experienced sexual exploitation provided by the organisation.

Category	Percentage
One-on-one counselling	76%
Sexual health advice, information, and support	43%
Support for families and caregivers	37%
Reintegration support	22%
Group psychosocial support	17%
Legal support	9%
Vocational training provided by organisation	7%
Residential care	6%
Medical care and treatment	6%
Support to access formal high school	4%
Pay for access to non-formal education or vocational training by other organisation	2%
Support to access formal tertiary studies	2%
Basic supplies (food, clothing, etc.)	2%
Others	17%

Multiple responses permitted

The survey data showed a number of notable differences in terms of services available across respondent locations, as displayed in Figure 11. The urban only organisations were more likely to provide one-on-one counselling and sexual health advice/information, while the urban/rural targeting organisations tended to focus more on a range of services such as support for families and caregivers, reintegration support and legal support. Perhaps where target populations are smaller, organisations cannot specialise as much and have to provide a fuller range of services in one package.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

Figure 11: Organisation support services vs organisation location

Legend: Total | Urban | Urban and rural | Rural

One-on-one counselling
- Total: 87%
- Urban: 93%
- Urban and rural: 83%
- Rural: 75%

Sexual health advice, information, and support
- Total: 65%
- Urban: 70%
- Urban and rural: 61%
- Rural: 50%

Support for families and caregivers
- Total: 48%
- Urban: 44%
- Urban and rural: 57%
- Rural: 25%

Reintegration support
- Total: 37%
- Urban: 30%
- Urban and rural: 43%
- Rural: 50%

Group psychosocial support
- Total: 31%
- Urban: 41%
- Urban and rural: 22%
- Rural: 25%

Legal support
- Total: 24%
- Urban: 15%
- Urban and rural: 35%
- Rural: 25%

Medical care and treatment
- Total: 13%
- Urban: 19%
- Urban and rural: 4%
- Rural: 25%

Vocational training provided by organisation
- Total: 11%
- Urban: 11%
- Urban and rural: 13%
- Rural: 0%

Support to access formal high school
- Total: 9%
- Urban: 15%
- Urban and rural: 0%
- Rural: 25%

Residential care
- Total: 7%
- Urban: 7%
- Urban and rural: 4%
- Rural: 25%

Support to access formal tertiary studies
- Total: 6%
- Urban: 4%
- Urban and rural: 4%
- Rural: 25%

Non-formal education provided by organisation
- Total: 6%
- Urban: 7%
- Urban and rural: 4%
- Rural: 0%

Basic supplies (food, clothing, etc.)
- Total: 2%
- Urban: 0%
- Urban and rural: 0%
- Rural: 25%

Pay for access to non-formal education or vocational training by other organisation
- Total: 2%
- Urban: 0%
- Urban and rural: 0%
- Rural: 25%

Multiple responses permitted

The accessibility of support services was a main challenge for some of the young survivors who participated in the conversations, particularly those who lived in small towns. Even though there are several non-governmental organisations that provide services for children subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online, they are mostly located in larger cities. This was the case for 23 out of the 54 surveyed frontline workers who completed the survey from Chișinău, Moldova's capital city. On top of that, the young women reported having to pay for transportation and these expenses were not always reimbursed. This represented a challenge in terms of accessibility, as some of them did not want or could not spend the family budget in order to access support.

> *"One of the biggest difficulties was that the psychological services were expensive. We had to travel almost 200km for each meeting with the psychologist."*
>
> (VoS-MD-12)

The transportation cost, however, is not the only factor affecting accessibility. In some cases, the young women needed to travel at least three or four hours to get to the service facilities, most of the times accompanied by family members, especially in the cases of younger children.

> *"It was very difficult for me to go to a psychologist so far. Many times, I was ready to give up."*
>
> (VoS-MD-12)

When asked about the quality of government activities to address child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Moldova, frontline workers provided some critical input, particularly on government efforts in providing funding. More than half of the respondents (68%) rated the quality of government funding on this topic as either "poor" or non-existent.

Figure 12: Frontline workers' views on the quality of government activities.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova
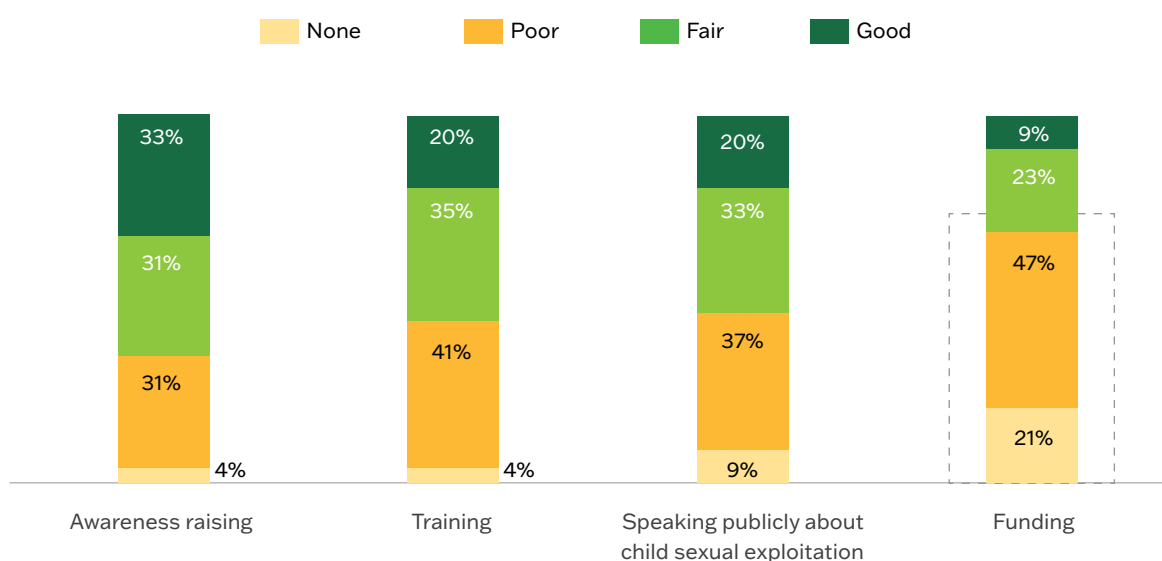
The frontline workers provided their perspectives on both the availability and quality of support services for children who have experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in Moldova. Responses on psychological and legal services were more positive, with around 35-40% of frontline workers rating the availability and quality of these services as "good" or "excellent". This was followed by medical services, with between 26-28% positive ratings. The type of service that appears to need the most improvements, though, is reintegration services, which include planning, support for families and alternative care. As shown in Figure 13 below, 43% (n=23) of respondents rated the availability of these services as "poor" and 52% (n=28) gave the same rating to the quality of such services.

Figure 13: Availability and quality of reintegration services
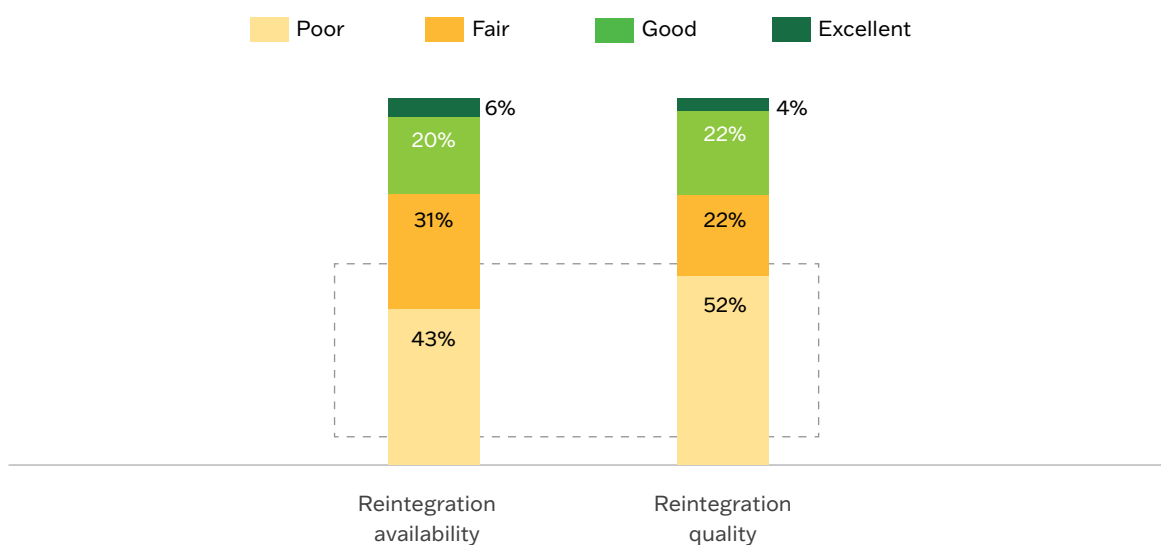
Types of support services

Educational and pedagogical support

All of the young women who participated in the conversations mentioned that they wished they had sex education and discussed at school the risks involved in the use of the Internet.

> *"Children have no idea about sex education. They are not aware of elementary protective measures and easily fall into the net of offenders. Children need to be informed about sex education and everything related to the environment that is unsafe for them."*
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

Unfortunately, according to the young women, topics related to sexuality are avoided by most teachers in Moldova. One young woman mentioned that her teacher asked the class to study the human body on their own at home, without discussing this topic in the classroom. This avoidance is clearly seen as a problem by the young women who engaged in the conversations, as it means that offenders can

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova

offer something that neither the family nor the school offer – conversation and questions answered about sex and sexuality – a technique used by offenders.

Five young women put a particular emphasis on the need of creating a trusting relationship with the teachers:

> *"When a problem arises, the children should not be afraid to tell the teachers that they need their help."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

One of them even recommended that each teacher should take psychology classes, so they could understand the particularities of each child. According to this participant, this would help teachers bonding with the students and creating a more child-friendly environment at school. However, they more often feel unable to talk with the teachers about personal issues, in part because they feel that teachers sometimes are not able to avoid bringing their own frustrations into the classroom.

> *"Teachers are human beings too and if they are upset and something is not going well for them, because for example a window is broken, they get angry with the children."*
>
> (VoS-MD-05)

The important role that schools could play as sources of help in socioeconomically vulnerable areas was also highlighted in the conversations. While the young women believed that educational institutions could play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable children, they also said that in some cases these spaces contribute to harm.

> *"Maybe they go to school to see something good there and find support. But it often happens that this child is also bullied at school. In this case, when the child receives job offers on the Internet they accept them, because they get tired of the indifference in school, they get tired of home where the parents consume alcohol and are indifferent."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

One of the young women reported having a negative experience in interacting with school and police specialists, which in her opinion was due to the fact that she came from a very vulnerable family. She felt that specialists often superficially address the problems of children from poor families:

> *"Both teachers and police officers believe that if the child comes from a vulnerable family, they should not have attention, because no one pays them for it."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

Unfortunately, most of the young women described unsupportive experiences from school staff. They emphasised the urgency of having a psychologist in every educational institution in Moldova, 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.

> *"I did not have such services in my gymnasium, but I think a psychologist should be in every school. The psychologists notice things earlier, they can have one-on-one discussions, they can do some tests to observe the children's condition."*
>
> (VoS-MD-05)

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.

Psychological support

While psychological support services were provided to all the young survivors who participated in the conversations, it is worth noting that there were challenges in accessing these services encountered by most.

Establishing and maintaining trusting engagements was mentioned by a number of the young women. In some cases, the psychologists failed to get in touch with them; in others, they felt distant and indifferent.

> *"[…] there was a psychologist and I talked to her, but anyway I couldn't tell her what was on my mind."*
>
> (VoS-MD-11)

One of the young women said that during the criminal trial, the psychologist changed and another specialist was invited to attend the hearing. However, the new psychologist did not get involved at all and did not communicate with her:

> *"Then another psychologist came to the police. I didn't feel comfortable at all then. She didn't try to approach me either. I was used to the first psychologist who felt closer to me. The second psychologist was distant. He seemed to be smiling, but I didn't feel I could trust him."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

---

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

In addition to that, none of the ten young women attended long-term rehabilitation programmes. Some of them received counselling for a week, others for a few months, but responses indicated that support rarely lasted as long as the survivors needed it:

> *"I went to a psychologist for a week, we can say that's almost not at all."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

This indicates that such programmes are not available to children who have experienced online sexual abuse or exploitation. Even if such programmes exist, they are either for a fee or inaccessible.

Stigma surrounding the access to psychological support services was also a prominent reason why, in some cases, the young women were reluctant to the idea of seeing a psychologist. Because of such a belief, a young woman who took part in the conversations did not benefit from psychological assistance from the moment she reported the abuse.

> *"At first I did not want to go to a psychologist because I thought that the person who goes to a psychologist has problems with his head. I thought that I would go to him and he would make me draw, or that he would make me feel mentally ill."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

While some of them found it challenging to accept the need of psychological assistance, they do recognise the importance of accessing these services.

> *"You know, after all that happened, it's hard to get back to normal and integrate again."*
>
> (VoS-MD-11)

However, psychological services are not sufficiently accessible and available to children who have gone through the experience of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Even if there are services, some young people may fail to benefit from them because of public sentiment about psychology.

Despite these challenges, positive experiences of overcoming trauma were also mentioned in the conversations.

> *"The psychologist was by my side, talking to me, explaining, until the end. I managed to tell everything."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

A successful example of psychological support was given by one young woman who asked her psychologist to help her disclose the case to her parents before reporting the case to the police. Survivors told us that often parents do not know how to deal with such cases and may have aggressive

reactions when learning about it, even blaming the children in some situations. As a result, she felt accepted and supported both by her parent and the service provider:

> *"I could not let my father know. I asked the psychologist to talk to him. When he found out, he called me and told me everything would be fine. I was amazed at my father's reaction. He was very, very calm. After the conversation with the psychologist, the second-best support was from my father."*
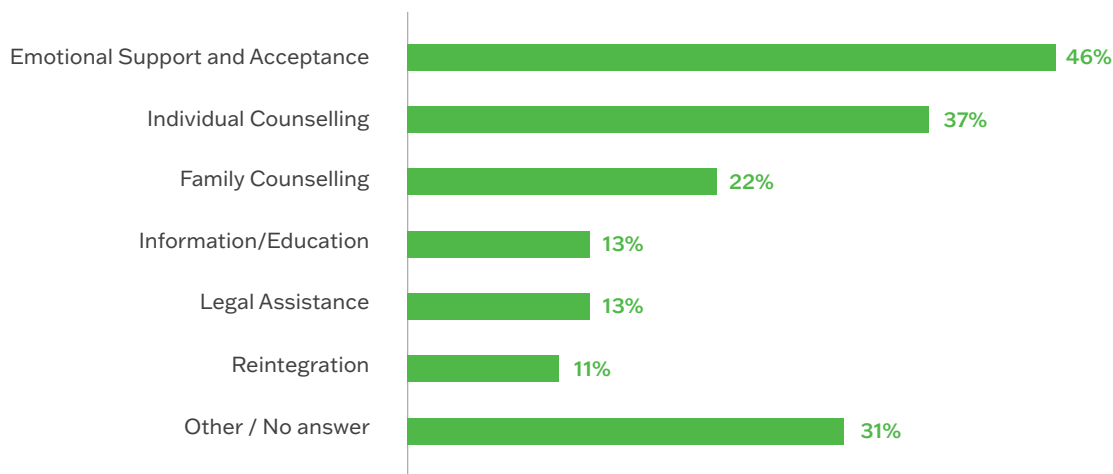>
> (VoS-MD-13)

Indeed, when asked what were the biggest needs for support shared to them by children who experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse, the most commonly identified theme in frontline workers' responses was related to young people's needs for emotional support and acceptance (46%, n=25), followed by individual counselling (37%, n=20). Qualitative inputs included

> *"available and accessible support services; trust and support from parents, teachers, police officers; psychological support and psychotherapy."*

> *"listening, understanding; lack of judgment regarding the child's actions; offering confidence that the given situation can have a successful end."*

Figure 14: Biggest needs that children say that they have, according to frontline workers.

Need	Percentage
Emotional Support and Acceptance	46%
Individual Counselling	37%
Family Counselling	22%
Information/Education	13%
Legal Assistance	13%
Reintegration	11%
Other / No answer	31%

Nine out of ten young women who engaged in the conversations believed that parents or caregivers of children who had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse should also receive support from specialists to understand what happened to the child. From their own experience, the survivors mentioned that their parents and caregivers did not know about these harms, blamed them and considered them responsible, or even refused to support them with engaging psychological support or the police. Young women believed that if carers were offered support to cope, perhaps they would

better understand that the child is not to blame. They described that the attitude of parents towards the child who has gone through such an experience of sexual abuse is related to how quickly and effectively their rehabilitation occurs:

> "The parents should be calm. If they react aggressively, it can make things worse. The child will withdraw and could be traumatised for the rest of his life."
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

Overall, the young women indicated in the conversations that the psychological support services secured their emotional and psychological state in the aftermath of the online sexual exploitation and abuse experience. They expressed appreciation and emphasised the importance of these services for survivors in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

> "The specialists helped me a lot. First of all, to find out who he (the offender) is and to understand that it is not my fault and that he (the offender) will be held accountable for what he did. If I had a magic wand, I would change him (the offender) so he could not make me do what I did."
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Psychological support was also considered essential by the frontline workers who responded to the survey. In all of the scenario-based questions, when asked about the practical steps they would take to help children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online, counselling/psychotherapy was mentioned as the first step to be taken by most of the respondents. Other steps noted included providing emotional support, providing information/guidance and referrals to psychologists.

> "1. Creating the contact with the child 2. Psycho-emotional support 3. Information about online reputation, trusted people in the online environment, risks in the online environment, data theft, online abuse 4. Reporting the situation of abuse to colleagues competent to intervene (CCCI,[26] CNPAC,[27] Siguronline.md) 5. Keeping in touch with the child (monitoring)."

---

26. Centre for Combatting Cybercrime.
27. National Centre for Child Abuse Prevention

Legal support

Among the ten young women who engaged in the conversations, eight received free legal assistance for their criminal proceedings, which made them feel safer when interacting with the police or the justice system.

> *"The lawyer was like a guarantee certificate for my safety."*
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

However, not all survivors benefited from legal assistance on their first contact with the justice system. For example, one young woman said that she was assisted by a lawyer only half a year after the police were notified:

> *"When the lawyer appeared, I understood that he (the offender) would be punished for what he did. I was confident that the lawyer was the person driving my interests, that I would no longer have dark thoughts or that he would not be punished. I had completely changed my mind."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

As previously mentioned, surveyed frontline workers found legal services in Moldova considerably positive, with around 35-40% of them rating the availability and quality of these services as "good" or "excellent".

Figure 15: Perspectives of frontline workers about the availability and quality of legal services

Indeed, most of the young women found legal assistance very necessary and useful to navigate their own cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. According to them, the most useful professionals from the legal system were lawyers, who explained all stages of criminal proceedings,

what would happen at each stage, and accompanied them when they needed to attend procedural actions:

> *"The only thing that gave me peace and confidence is that the lawyer assured me that I would not testify before the offender, but I would be heard only once in a special room"*
>
> (VoS-MD-12)

Financial and residential support

Residential support was necessary for two young women who engaged in the conversations. Both of the young women came from socioeconomically vulnerable contexts and reported that these services were very helpful while they needed them. Professional development was among the services offered in the shelter and was mentioned as essential by one of the young women:

> *"Yes, I was very pleased and they (professionals from the shelter) helped me get a job, and I currently work according to this career path. Without their help, I think that I would not have had the opportunity to find my career path, I would not have learned, I would have stayed at home, and I thank them for that."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

The fact that the shelters offered a caring environment was also very much appreciated by one young woman who engaged in the conversations:

> *"I stayed there for a very short time, a month and two weeks and I became very attached to the people there. When I had to go, it was very painful. I received more warmth from them than from my mother, and I noticed this. Even now, my mother does not offer me what those people from the Centre offered me."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

In Moldova, children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have the right to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings from convicted offenders.[28] In addition to that, the Law no. 137 from 29th of July 2016 stipulates that all child victims of sexual crimes have the right to financial compensation.[29] Unfortunately, this mechanism is not yet functional and victims usually seek financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings.

To assess frontline workers' knowledge about this legislation, they were asked whether children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have the possibility to seek formal financial compensation via civil or criminal court proceedings from convicted offenders or country-managed funds. Responses were very divided between those who believe that compensation can be claimed

---

28. Republic of Moldova. (2009). Criminal Procedure Code, Article 219-226.
29. Republic of Moldova. (2016). Law no.137 on the Rehabilitation of Victims of Crime.

by child victims (44%, n=24) and a further 44% who did not know. Eleven percent responded "no". Qualitative inputs on this question, although limited, noted that child victims can seek moral damages from the perpetrator but not from state funds. One surveyed worker said that

> *"Financial compensation can be claimed from the offender (as well as non-pecuniary damage)."*

Another one added that

> *"They have the possibility to file civil actions, regarding the compensation of the moral and/or material damage suffered."*

Figure 16: Frontline workers opinions on whether child victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse online can seek formal financial compensation.
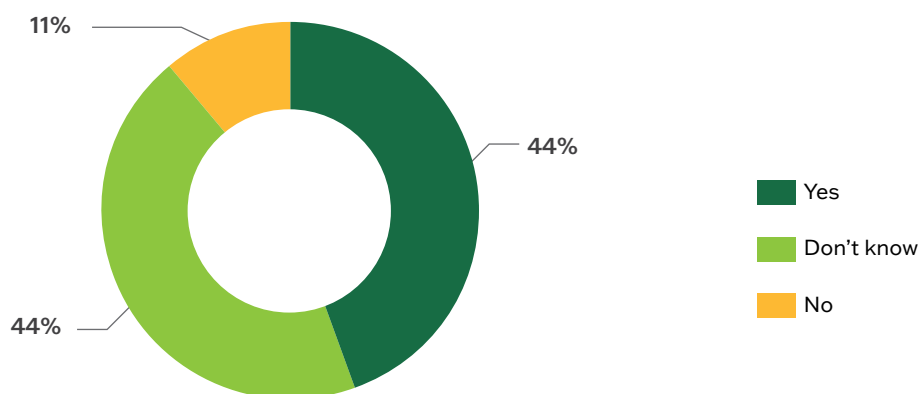
When asked in the survey if they know of any children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and had received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Moldova, only 17% of the respondents (n=9) indicated that they did. Thirty-five percent said that they did not know of any children, and almost a half (48%) did not know how to answer the question.

Figure 17: Based on your work experience, do you know if any child subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse has received compensation for the crimes they suffered in Moldova?

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online:
Survivors' Perspectives in Moldova
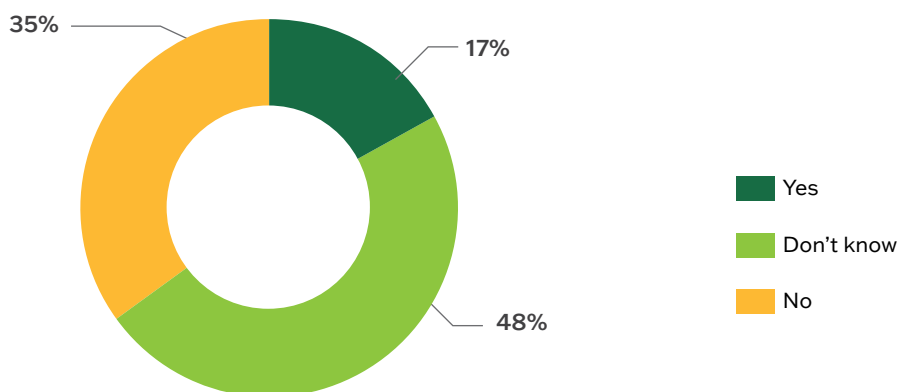
RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented below are primarily drawn from the conversations with the young women 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 about reporting mechanisms

1. **Raise the visibility of reporting mechanisms, including those available via social media platforms.**

Reporting mechanisms should be as visible as possible. For instance, if videos are made for children through which these services are promoted, straightforward language understandable to children should be used. Young women want to talk about abuse directly, without disguising the message.

> *"I often see the word violence used in various situations, but I don't think everyone understands what it is. It would be simpler to describe behaviour that is violent."*
>
> (VoS-MD-04)

2. **Simplify the tools for reporting child sexual exploitation and abuse online and ensure they are child-friendly and allow children to choose the gender of service provider.**

The tools for reporting abuse should be as simple as possible. Once a reporting platform is accessed, it should be clear where and how a survivor can write about what happened to them, without having to search for information.

Suggestions from young women on how these tools could be simplified included the addition of a 'report button' and the inclusion of stories from other children who had been helped by specialists in similar situations. Some of them also suggested that reporting mechanisms would be simpler if they did not request children's personal data.

> *"It would be easier if the child wrote about the problem and the specialists came up with a good answer. The child could tell everything that happened to them, without fear. The name could be provided later, after gaining confidence in the specialist."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

A number of young women also believe that the reporting mechanisms would be more child-friendly if children could choose the service provider they will talk to, particularly on online reporting platforms:

> *"A brief description of the counsellor, age, gender should be available. Thus, the child could choose the person they prefer. If they cannot make contact with a specialist, they can choose another counsellor until they find the person with whom they feel safe."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

This would make them feel more comfortable and able to talk more openly about what happened.

> *"Girls should talk to women and boys to men. I know that a woman may understand me, but men probably no."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

3. Commit financial resources to provide trainings for staff of reporting platforms on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The person receiving the reports, for instance in the chat, should be trained and know about online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. These professionals should know how to encourage the child to talk about what happened and to answer them immediately,

> *"not so that the child writes and they are answered in 2-3 days."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Surveyed frontline workers agreed that capacity building is necessary, recognising the

> *"insufficiency of the specialisation training of specialists, need for sexual education programmes for children."*

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

Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies to ensure they promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material as well as to comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

According to one young woman,

> *"The online environment must be organised in such a safe way that in the future we avoid cases in which children are traumatised by online experiences."*
>
> (VoS-MD-04)

Recommendations about support services

5. Better promote the availability and ways to access a full range of support services for cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Such services should be available and accessible across the country, regardless of location.

Any child who goes through such an experience should know where to report and who are the specialists who can help them.

> *"It would be helpful for children to know about services that can help them in cases of online abuse. More promotion of these services needs to be done."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

These services should be specialised and the professionals should be capable to understand the specifics of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

> *"It would be good to have a centre that would deal only with cases of online sexual abuse."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

The young women also believe that if social workers were more present in the communities, they could discuss risks, particularly with the most vulnerable children.

> *"In villages, there are social workers who communicate with socially vulnerable people. Maybe if the parent does not have time to inform the child, at least a social worker could talk to children about the risks of online sexual exploitation."*
>
> (VoS-MD-07)

Such result could be achieved through the implementation of child advocacy centres (also known as Barnhaus model). This model reduces possible re-traumatisation of children in a number of ways, including by coordinating the relevant professionals around the child so they provide their testimony fewer times and in a safe and confidential space.

6. Provide educational programmes and support services to family members of children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Family members need to be informed about online forms of child sexual exploitation and how to better support children. If carers were offered support right from the first stage, perhaps they would understand better that the child cannot be blamed in this situation:

> *"I think that when they are on the case, the psychologist should talk to the parents, somehow prepare them morally, so that they understand what will happen next and tell them how to talk with the child."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

To enable this, some young women recommended the involvement of teachers in educating parents.

> *"To hold meetings with parents and teach them how to behave with the child."*
>
> (VoS-MD-02)

Indeed, a number of the surveyed frontline workers (20%, n=11) emphasised the negative impacts of unsupportive and dismissive parents and other family members.

> *"Children victims are afraid to talk about what happened, especially the reaction of their parents, which is why they often do not seek assistance. Sometimes children are not heard by adults or adults do not take seriously what happens to children. They lose confidence and stop asking for help."*

7. Efforts should be made to avoid re-victimisation by ensuring psychological support and confidentiality standards at all stages of the justice process and provision of support services.

The young women would prefer to talk only once about what happened to them, and later not to be involved in other procedural actions. One survivor even told how she imagines this process – in which the psychologist talks to the child in one room, and in another room are the officers who listen to the discussion and ask questions.

> *"Children should talk about their experience as in movies. That should happen in a specially designed room that has one wall with a mirror. In the room next to it, people could hear the declarations and ask questions."*
>
> (VoS-MD-13)

In order to avoid re-victimisation, the young women also recommended that service providers should strictly follow the rules of confidentiality.

> *"The specialists should be careful with whom they talk about what happened to the child to avoid the situation where the entire village knows about the abuse."*
>
> (VoS-MD-11)

In addition, children should be given the option to have their first contact with the justice system in the presence of a psychologist. Even when the child files a complaint with the police, they must be given the option to do so accompanied by a professional in a place where they feel comfortable.

> *"The child should first discuss everything with a psychologist, not with a police officer. The policeman is wearing a uniform and that can scare her. The child may close in on herself and say nothing more."*
>
> (VoS-MD-14)

8. Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity building opportunities to service providers on child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Both the young women 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. According to one young woman, this would make it more likely that they would help without blaming.

> *"Professionals should know about these cases and the online environment. Only in this way the specialist could help [the children]."*
>
> (VoS-MD-05)

One surveyed frontline worker pointed to their personal need for capacity building:

> *"Personally, I need more training to provide quality psychological assistance to children who are sexually exploited or abused online."*

ecpat
INTERNATIONAL

LA
STRADA
Moldova

WeProtect
GLOBAL ALLIANCE