

# Briefing Paper

This briefing paper has been compiled using information included in the report *Child sexual exploitation and abuse online: Survivors' Perspectives in Albania*.<sup>1</sup>



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



Child Rights Center Albania (CRCA) / ECPAT Albania works to promote the rights of children and youth rights, to protect them from violence and exploitation, and to increase child and youth participation at national and local level, through advocacy, policy and legislation; capacity building, information and research, and effective child and youth protection services.



## CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE: Survivors' Perspectives in Albania

The Voices of Survivors research project aimed to explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in six countries, including Albania.<sup>2</sup> Presenting the perspectives of young survivors within the research were paramount.

Two best-practice activities were undertaken:



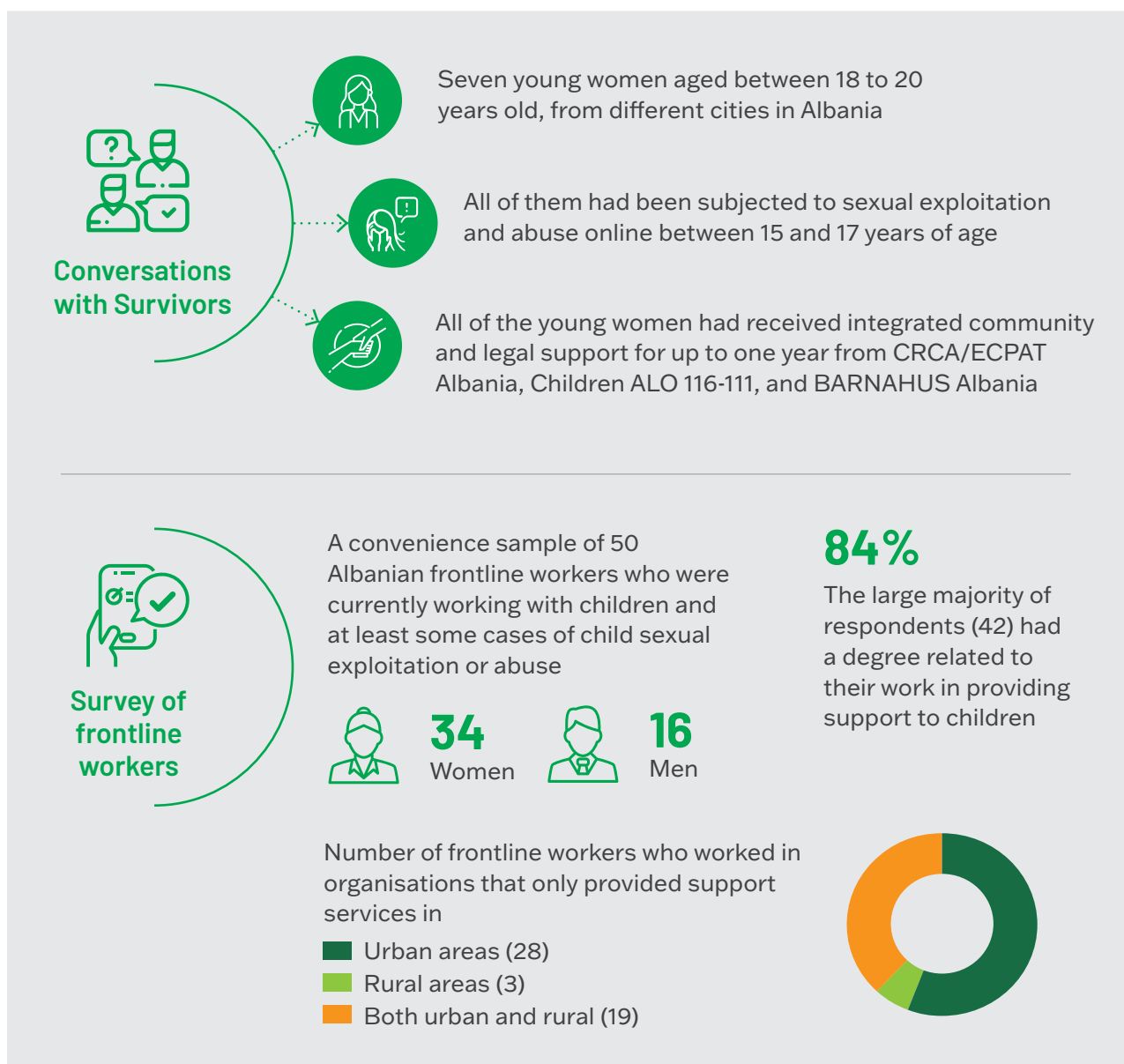
Qualitative one-on-one 'conversations' with young people who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online



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

1. ECPAT International and CRCA/ECPAT Albania. (2021). Child sexual exploitation and abuse online: Survivors' Perspectives in Albania. WeProtect Global Alliance.
2. A total of six countries were involved in the Voices of Survivors project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru.

## Who participated in the project?



## Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

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

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

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

# Main findings and recommendations

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

## Reporting mechanisms

### 1. Promote information and awareness campaigns in and out of schools about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services when harms occur.

The young women who engaged in the conversations demonstrated little awareness of the formal reporting mechanisms available, even though the Albanian government and civil society organisations have implemented a number of awareness raising and education measures around child sexual exploitation and abuse, some of them actively targeting children.<sup>4</sup> They also mentioned a lack of knowledge of specific reporting platforms and hotlines, including web-based platforms and those specifically designed for children, such as the Albanian national hotline ALO 116-111.

*“Back then I did not know that there was a helpline for children such as ALO 116-111 where anyone could call and ask for help, all the while they protect your confidentiality, or the platform ISIGURT.al. I only learned about that from you after what happened to me.”*

(VoS-AL-04)<sup>5</sup>

A lack of awareness was reiterated in the data from the frontline workers, 56% of them indicated that public awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse online was poor. They emphasised:

*“Albania is really behind in understanding the seriousness of the child sexual abuse and exploitation online and offline.”*

### 2. Increase the visibility and presence within communities of the Child Protection Officers.

None of the young women were aware of the municipal Child Protection Officers before being subjected to child sexual exploitation and abuse online, neither through being introduced in informative open classrooms at school, or via general awareness-raising events about available community supports for young people.

4. ECPAT International. (2020). [ECPAT Country Overview: Albania](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

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

*“These workers should go out in the field, meet children and young people, introduce themselves, share information and hand out leaflets on how we should protect ourselves from these bad guys who abuse children and young people. To put it bluntly, that job should not be just about “come see me in my office!”*

(VoS-AL-05)

The role of the Child Protection Officers was also considered key by the frontline workers who responded to the survey. When asked about the practical steps they would take to help children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, one said that

*“[...] in all cases the Child Protection Officer [should] be noticed to monitor the children and their families during these steps.”*

### **3. Legislation is required that specifically focuses on the protection of children in the digital environment.**

Currently, the Criminal Code of Albania does not adequately provide for the criminalisation of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>6</sup>

*“First of all, I would like to say that those people who threaten and blackmail and then sexually abuse innocent people should receive the punishment they deserve, and not get just a slap on the hand, just to add a number to the convicted column! They should adopt harsher measures, and change those laws that prescribe little or no punishment at all for those people that do harm online.”*

(VoS-AL-04)

### **4. Once reports are made, it is important the victims receive clear information about the processes to be followed and their rights throughout. These rights must be the paramount consideration when proceeding with investigations and court processes.**

In addition to this, the law enforcement processes need to properly preserve the confidentiality of their statements. Four out of the seven young women who engaged in the conversations had personal information published by the media, such as their address, initials, names of parents and school, interviews showing the face of their parents, and photos of their houses. As a consequence, they revealed a real loss of faith in the institutions.

*“I do not understand how the police can share information that I provided to them when I reported the case! Why should the police do this? Who gives them the right? They did the same thing with my case!”*

(VoS-AL-01)

6. ECPAT International. (2020). [ECPAT Country Overview: Albania](#). 21. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

## 5. Commit financial resources to provide training to law enforcement officers that enables improved investigation and prosecution of online sexual crimes against children.

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

*“The police should take seriously any reports of online sexual abuse and exploitation, because some of the cases are dropped due to lack of evidence. I’m sorry, but what good are the police and the prosecutors if they expect us to find the evidence?!”*

(VoS-AL-06)

The frontline worker survey data emphasised this point – with 52% of those surveyed indicating that they did not know of any children who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse and had received financial compensation for the crimes they suffered.

## 6. Explore and promote ways to better enable access to psychosocial support in schools.

All of the young women who participated in the conversations were attending school when the online abuse and exploitation occurred and all of them stated that it was very difficult to discuss their concerns in these settings – with psychologists or teaching staff.

Four young women explained that their school was not made aware of the situation, but nor were the teaching staff or psychosocial support services in the schools attentive to changes in the girls’ behaviours at the time. The other three young women said that even though they were aware of what was going on, their schools did not provide appropriate assistance.

Psychosocial professionals are key gatekeepers that can identify children with concerns and enable referral to necessary support services.

*“It is very important to have specialised psychologists and organisations that provide psychological support at all times for these children, to provide relief in moments of emotional and psychological distress.”*

(VoS-AL-09)

## Support services

## 7. Subsidised/free access to psychologists trained and experienced in supporting children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse in general and online.

The young women who took part in this research, as well as some of their family members, received long-term psychological support – for three months, six months or one year – provided free-of-charge by civil society organisations. However, free/government subsidised psychological assistance is not broadly available in Albania.

These support services should be available at any time to all young people who have been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online. Some young people explained that some support workers had negotiated geographic barriers to accessing care using digital forms of engagement. This was encouraging to see and should be further enabled so that it can be done appropriately, confidentially and ethically.

*“It is necessary to have child-friendly services available to children and young people victims of online and offline sexual abuse in small towns as well. For example, it is very important to have specialised psychologists and organisations that provide psychological support at all times to these children, in order to improve their emotional and psychological state at times of great distress. However, I feel it is very necessary for me to say this: ‘these services should definitely be available on a regular basis, and not just provide support at particular moments when an issue goes viral in the media, and then totally forget about it!’”*

(VoS-AL-05)

*“Even though the psychologist of the organisation was always ready to communicate with me, it was not always possible to get together because of damaged roads, or very cold weather. So, together with the psychologist we agreed that in those circumstances we could talk on the phone, and because of that I never really felt alone.”*

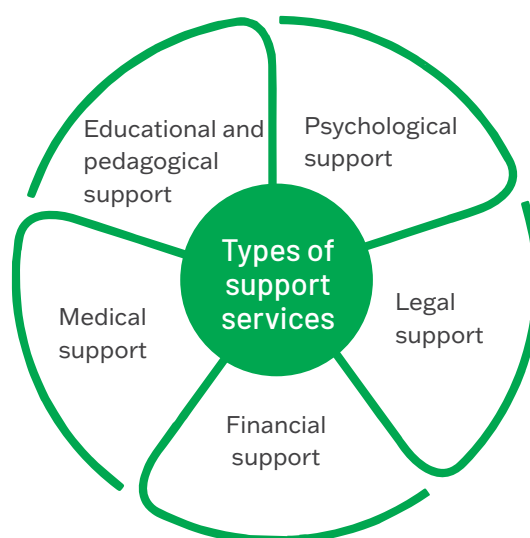
(VoS-AL-01)

From the survey data, frontline workers concurred. Many services provided a range of services, but these differed in types of and breadth between non-governmental and government organisations. Frontline workers also noted that location influenced accessibility of services for young people.

## **8. Enable full range of support (psychological, social, legal, medical) to be available to children subjected to sexual exploitation in general and online regardless of location.**

All the young women said during the conversations that, once they knew about and accessed the services, they were very useful and the availability of support over a long period of time had helped them to recover. However, the accessibility of these services was a significant challenge for some of them, particularly those who lived in small towns or rural areas.

A number of them mentioned that, if the services they received after reporting were available in their hometowns before or when the incidents occurred, they would have felt more confident, more supported and safer to report and respond to their experiences of child sexual exploitation and abuse online.





These services could be made available through the establishment of dedicated centres where various support services could be provided to children and young people subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse.

*“There should be more community centres, including in small towns, to provide multidimensional services and support so that one can recover from their ordeal.”*

(VoS-AL-05)

Such result could be achieved through the expansion of Barnhaus Albania to further locations. 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.

The need to increase support services’ availability to all children, regardless of where they live, was also raised by the surveyed frontline workers:

*“[...] there is a big difference between services in urban areas and rural ones. There is a lack of trust to children to seek help as the confidential services don’t work very well.”*

## **9. Commit funding that enables training opportunities for law enforcement officers and social service providers on topics related to 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. One of the young women questioned the competence of the school psychologists, linking their lack of professionalism to her fear of trusting them:

*“The psychologist would show up once every two or three weeks and he was basically blurting out “Do you have any problem to report? If yes, let me know”. His level of professionalism was zero, so how could I entrust him with my story?”*

(VoS-AL-05)

One surveyed frontline worker described their own lack of knowledge about child sexual exploitation and abuse online as follows:

*“Because the cases are few, the experience is small and it seems as if we are suddenly faced with the unknown.”*

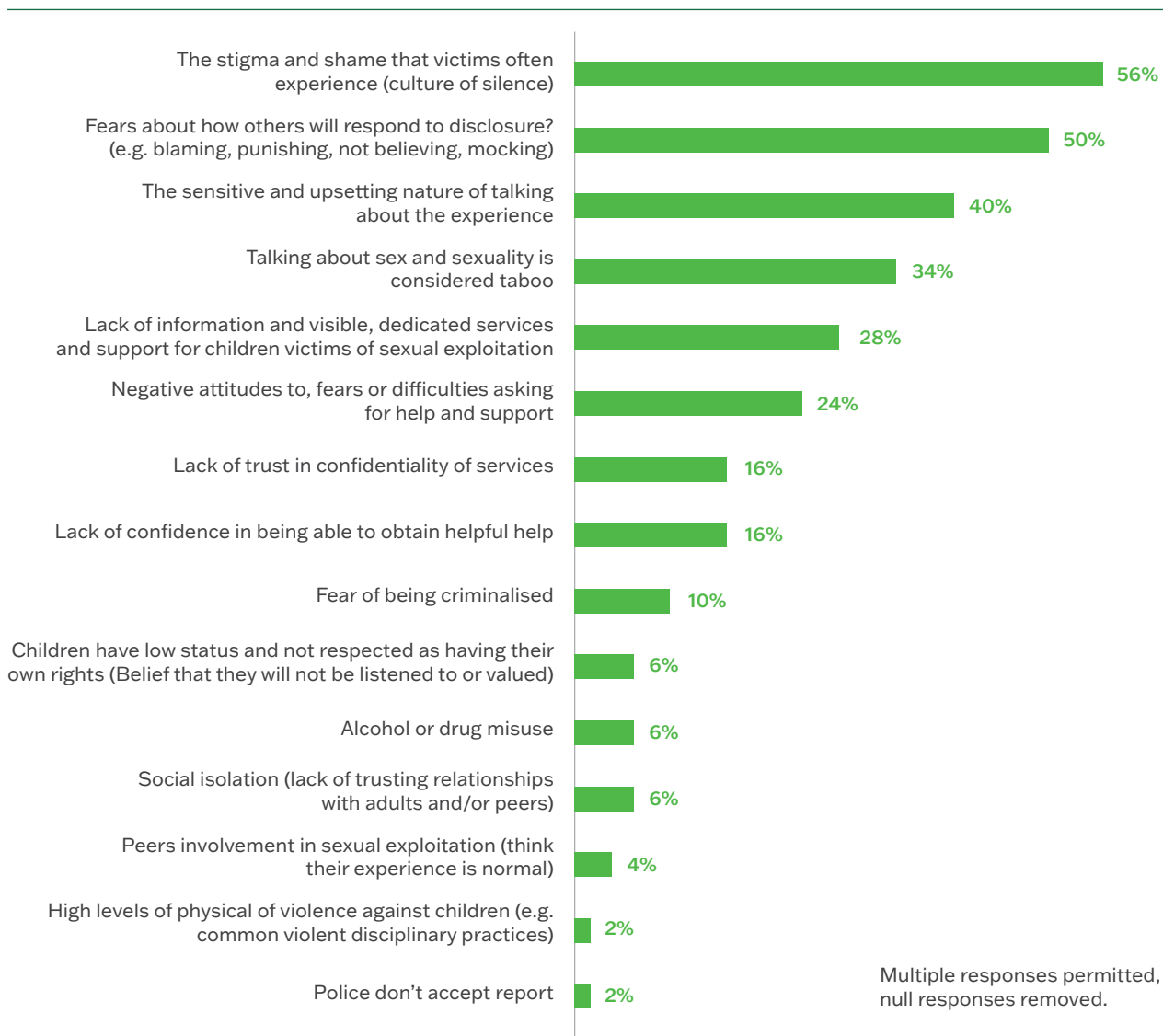
## Stigma and shame

### 10. Fund, develop and deliver campaigns that dismantle stigmatisation of the victims of sexual crimes by educating the community that it is always the fault of adults who exploit children, and that false claims from offenders that children ‘actively participated’ are baseless.

A number of young women mentioned that seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma of using reporting mechanisms and accessing support services. Indeed, all of the young women preferred the conversations to be held at the CRCA/ECPAT Albania premises, because they did not want to be seen in local institutions in the cities where they live.

Stigma was also mentioned by the surveyed frontline workers as a major issue. When presented with a list of 18 factors that could potentially limit children’s disclosure of online sexual exploitation and abuse, the most commonly named barrier to reporting selected by the surveyed frontline workers was a pervasive culture of silence (“the stigma and shame that victims often experience”), (56% or n=28) and “fears about how others will respond to disclosure”, (50%, n=25).

Factors that potentially limit children’s disclosure.





These views reiterate the impact of shame faced by survivors, and how community attitudes can negatively impact them and their help seeking. One young woman mentioned that seeking help may be a challenge due to the stigma surrounding the access to reporting mechanisms and support services:

*“Given that my peers believe that if you see a psychologist, it means that you are crazy, I had never before mastered the courage to talk to a psychologist. I understood the true importance of talking to a psychologist only after what happened to me.”*  
(VoS-AL-08)

The fear of social marginalisation, coupled with shame and other emotional impacts, were also key problems raised by frontline workers. A number of respondents commented that

*“feeling judged for what happened causes self-isolation”*

and that children

*“have difficulties to reintegrate into society”*

They furthermore mentioned that the isolation can be the cause of

*“emotional issues, social isolation, prejudices”*