



WeProtect
GLOBAL ALLIANCE

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:

Survivors' Perspectives in Albania



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication is based on a research project undertaken by WeProtect Global Alliance, ECPAT International and CRCA/ECPAT Albania as part of the Voices of Survivors project.

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Suggested citation:

ECPAT International and CRCA/ECPAT Albania. (2021). *Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors' Perspectives in Albania*. WeProtect Global Alliance

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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.



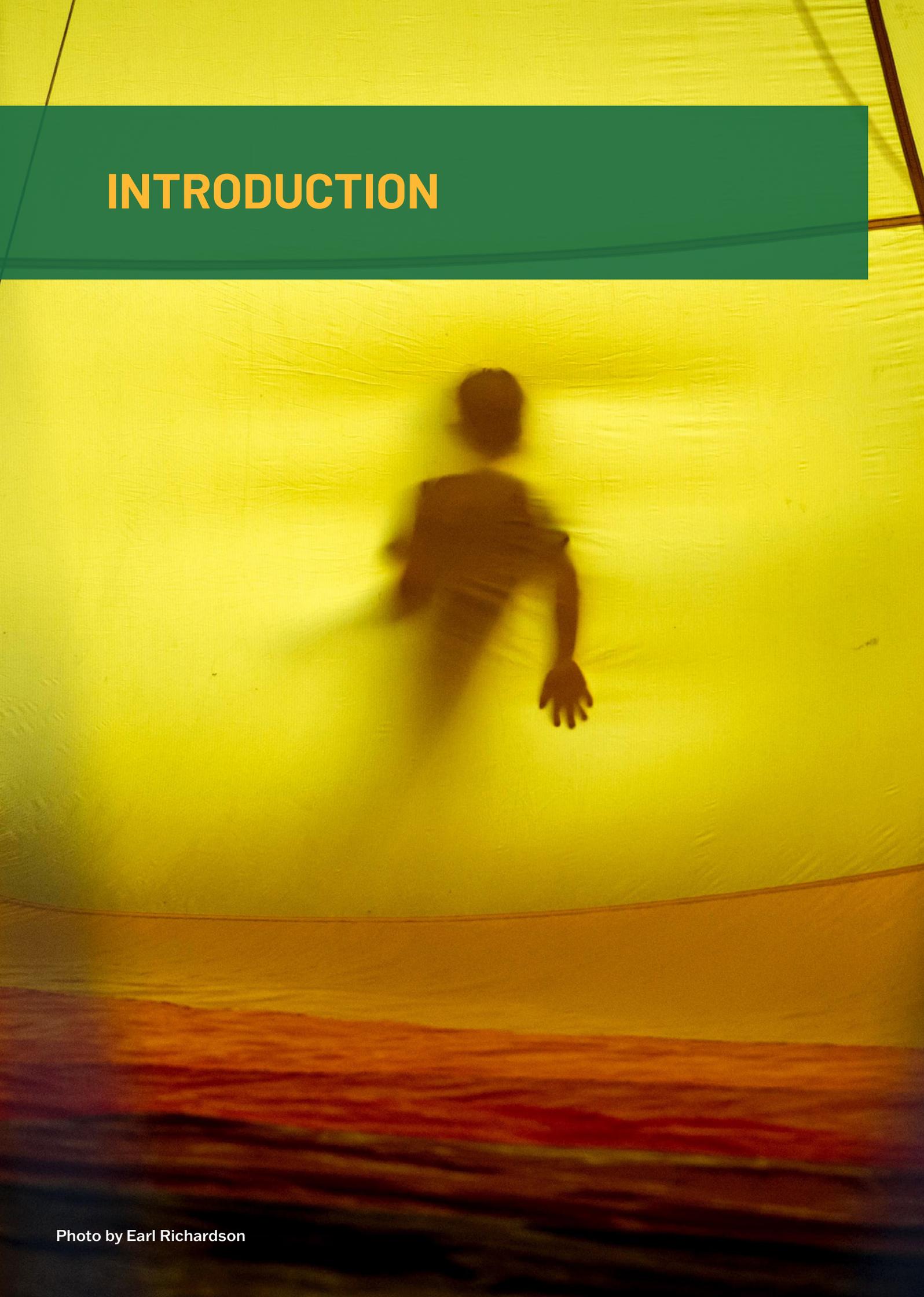
[Child Rights Center Albania \(CRCA\)/ECPAT Albania](#) works to promote the respect of children and youth rights, to protect them from violence, abuse and exploitation, to develop children and youth rights in Albania and to increase child and youth participation at national and local level, through lobby and advocacy, policy and legislation improvement; capacity building, information and research, and establishment of good models of services of child care and protection. CRCA promotes the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and all other national and international human rights standards.

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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 sexualized content, among others.³

1. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International. 18.

2. *Ibid.*, 24.

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

Background

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

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 it is ethically more complex to conduct research with young people who have experienced harm. Yet fully understanding online harms is important in order to inform our preventions and responses. It must also be remembered that in reality, the vast majority of cases of all 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 per cent of that sample also expressed anxieties about being recognised from the images.¹⁰

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.

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 traumatising. Crucially of course, 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 Albania

To explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Albania, 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 Albania was presented – alongside data from five other countries involved in the project¹⁵ 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 Albania. Similar national reports are available for all project countries along with a project report summarising the findings across the six target countries.

METHODOLOGY



Photo by Julia Raasch

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 Albania, 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 three facilitators worked for the ECPAT member organisation CRCA/ECPAT Albania and Barnahus Albania, Internet Safety Hotline (ISIGURT.al) and ALO 116-111, the Albanian National Child Helpline. Two of them had a social work background with extensive experience supporting

In Albania, 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.

children who experienced sexual abuse and exploitation. The third facilitator's professional background included extensive expertise on child and youth participation processes and activities as well as juvenile justice. All facilitators had over 10 years of experience working with children and young people.

Sample

In Albania the facilitators reached out through CRCA/ECPAT Albania's professional and referral networks to carefully identify 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, seven survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online, all of them young women between the age of 18 to 20 years old, agreed to take part in the conversations. These young women were among survivors who had received integrated community and legal support for a considerable period of time (up to one year) from CRCA/ECPAT Albania, ALO 116-111, and BARNAHUS Albania. 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 on the preparation phase of this project 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 CRCA/ECPAT Albania nor any partner organisations.

The young women who participated in the conversations were from different cities in Albania, 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 seven young Albanian 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 because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Albania, the approach for the conversations was endorsed both by the facilitators and young women in closing reflections. They indicated that the approach helped enable complex discussions that are a very difficult proposition for all involved given the psychological and emotional consequences of abusive behaviour.

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 also encouraged to draw as a means of illustrating their feelings and experiences as they spoke.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has meant lots of interactions have had to be virtual, the researchers were adamant that psychological safety would be hard to maintain in such an approach. Conversations were therefore all held face-to-face.¹⁷ Although the research did not seek to determine the specifics of the exploitation and/or abuse that the young 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 Albanian – that focused on specific themes across the seven conversations, such as barriers to disclosing, the quality, usefulness and accessibility of services, and summarized 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.

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 health¹⁸ and social work professions¹⁹ 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

CRCA/ECPAT Albania 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 50 Albanian 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 Albanian administrator, a staff member from CRCA/ECPAT Albania, had to support participants by phone in most cases, they remained 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-June 2021.

The online survey consisted of 108 multiple choices and short open-answer questions. The draft tool in English language was translated to Albanian and ECPAT International and CRCA/ECPAT Albania 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 Albanian 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 Albania. However, the estimates, perceptions and experiences reported here offer valuable insight into the access and quality of social support for Albanian children who have experienced sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ethical considerations

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

Challenges and limitations

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

Regarding the frontline workers' survey, a limitation occurred as a result of our inclusion criteria. Our intent was to include support workers who worked directly at the frontline (not higher up managers). Thus, a hurdle question sought experience of working directly with children "within the last 12 months." As data collection occurred in the first half of 2021, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic had restricted some frontline workers from doing direct client work for some time, so it is likely that some of the 58 participants who began the survey but were disqualified by hurdle questions may have been false positives.

All the young women who engaged in the conversations preferred for the conversations to be held at CRCA/ECPAT Albania premises, as they did not want to expose themselves in other premises in the cities where they live, or in offices of local institutions. They were concerned that someone would see them entering certain premises to meet with the facilitators, and about ensuring confidential spaces for the discussions. Survivors also requested comfortable and safe rooms in which they may be recollecting difficult things and could sit with strong feelings safely if they occurred. The CRCA/ECPAT Albania offices were a familiar environment for the young women involved in the conversations, as they had already received extensive community and legal support there. The setting of these conversations helped this process enormously, as the young people felt 'at home' there.

It is important to highlight that some social norms in Albania impacted on the way the conversations were conducted. For example, females, even when already adults, are often prevented from participating freely in various meetings without informing their parents and receiving their approval. Also, some of the survivors were engaged to be married and their partners were reluctant to agree to their participation.

When the facilitators contacted survivors to introduce themselves and to explain the purpose of the conversations, parents of survivors asked to be present and to get as much information as possible on their statements. In most cases, this request was overcome by explaining that the conversations were aimed at understanding the experiences of survivors, and not to explore the abuse incidents themselves.

Two of the young women would not consent to the interviews if their purpose were not explained in advance to their family members. Five of the young women said they preferred to be accompanied by a family member at CRCA/ECPAT Albania offices.

"I agree to participate in this study, and I have no problems with it, but my parents are concerned about the reasons for this interview, because I've told my parents everything that we will discuss here."

(VoS-AL-01)²⁰

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

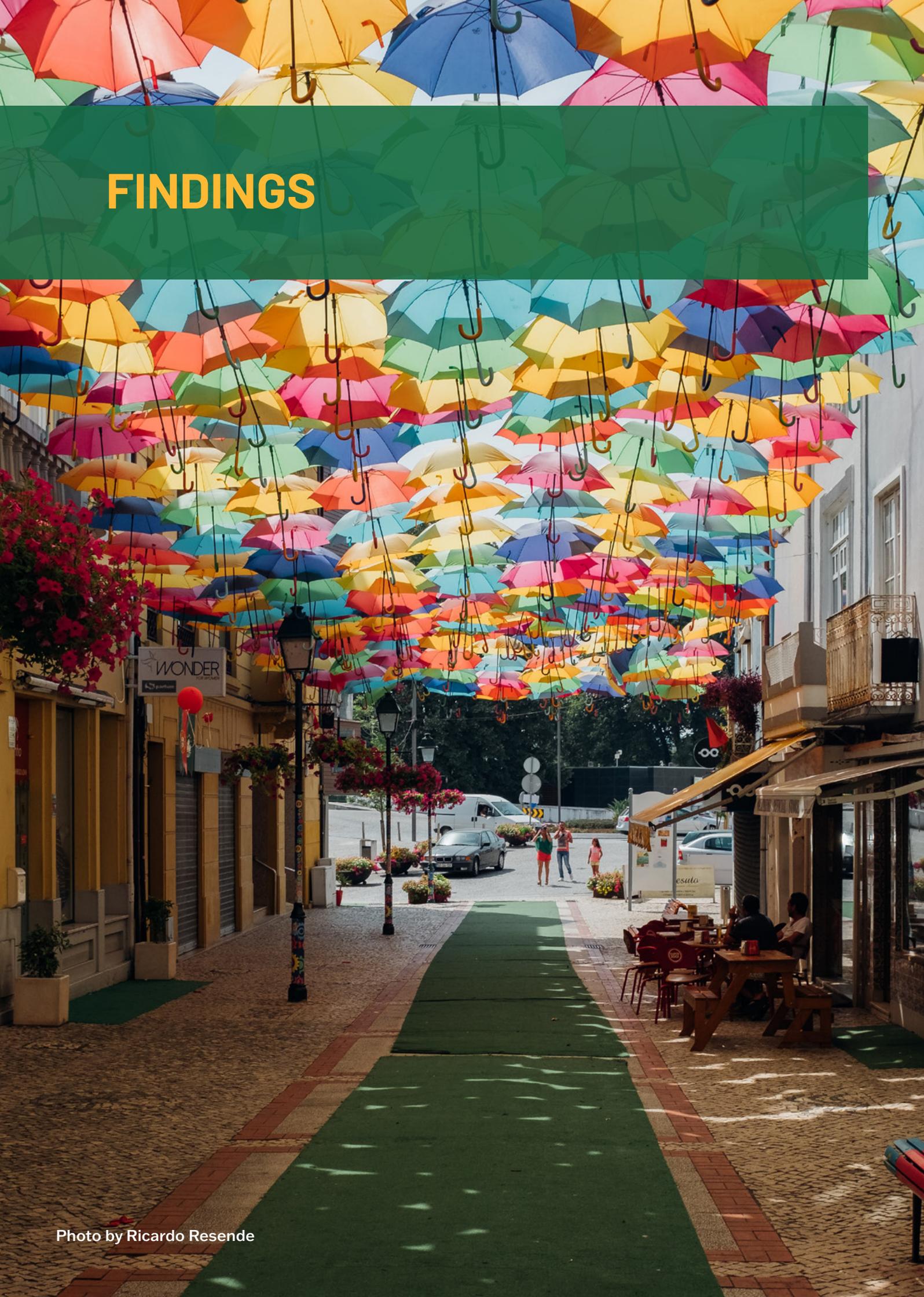
As a result, the seven young women were accompanied to pre-meetings and conversations by family members or by their fiancé. Facilitators thus faced an additional challenge in holding conversations with survivors in terms of confidentiality. Another reason for the presence of family members during the conversations was related to the fact that parents and other close relatives were concerned that flashbacks or recollections during the course of the conversations could unearth new information, which could hurt the girls in the future or retraumatise them.

“The problem is that I live in another city, and it is difficult for me to travel to the offices of CRCA/ECPAT Albania without being accompanied by my father or brother.”

(VoS-AL-09)

Time and care were taken to fully ensure everyone was comfortable with the approach, and the circumstances in which the conversations were to take place. An endorsement of the two-step, pre-meeting approach. Once they assured confidentiality, the facilitators proceeded with the conversation.

FINDINGS



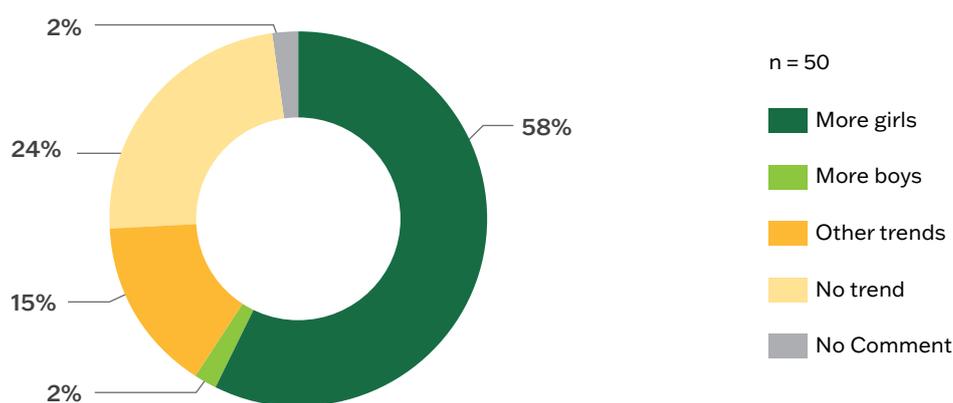
The perspectives of the young people who had direct experiences of harm from child sexual exploitation and abuse online are the primary data used to structure this report. Quantitative and qualitative data from the surveyed frontline support workers is then integrated amongst their perspectives to enhance a comprehensive picture of the on-the-ground situation for preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and abuse online in Albania. 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 Albania

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 Albania. Furthermore, 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. In an open question, participants were asked if they thought there were trends related to gender and sexual exploitation (generally and online). As shown in Figure 1, 58% of frontline workers' responses indicated a sense that there are generally more girls experiencing sexual exploitation than boys.

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



A number of respondents assumed that the low access of support services by boys is probably 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:

“Girls have reported most of the cases of sexual harassment.”

“Girls report a higher incidence rate of sexual exploitation.”

When mentioned, boys were regularly an add-on:

“95 percent of the cases managed by our organisation are females, girls who have been sexually abused, violated or exploited. In very rare occasions we have managed cases of boys that were sexually abused or exploited.”

Interestingly however, some qualitative responses on the survey did suggest that boys were becoming more visible to social support services including for sexual exploitation and abuse.

“Girls become more often the target of sexual exploitation, but we have noticed an increase in the number of cases when boys have been the target of abuse.”

Does this indicate increasing victimisation of boys or that previously hidden victimisation of boys is becoming more visible? The second proposition would be in line with global research which is showing boys are frequently more represented amongst victims than we previously thought.²¹

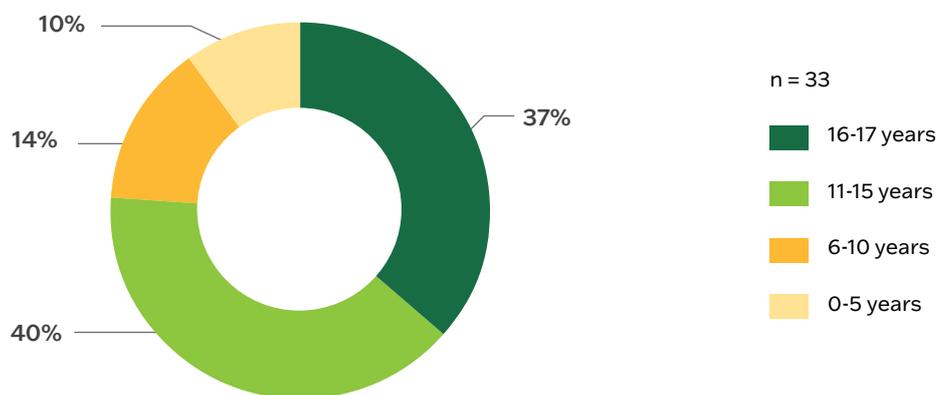
All but two of the workers who completed the survey had provided support to girls (n=48) and most (n=46) had supported girls related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online. But 86% of the surveyed frontline workers (n=43) had provided support to boys and of these, 77% (n=33) had supported boys for 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.

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

Age

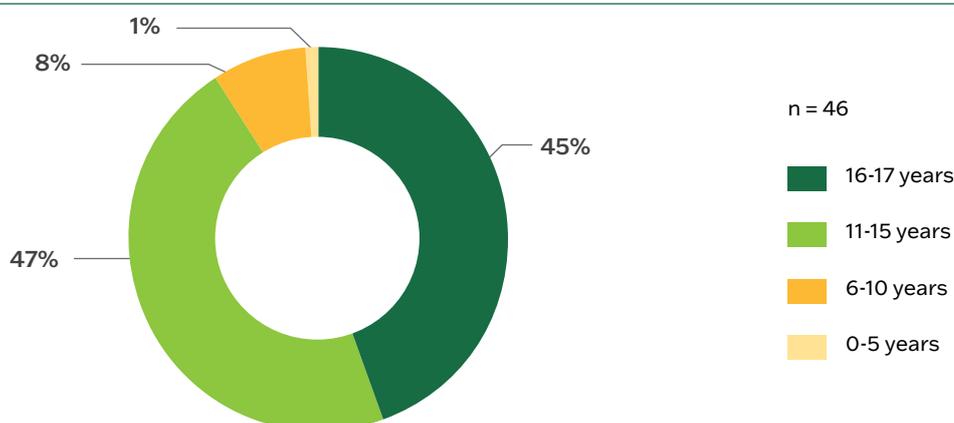
The 33 surveyed frontline workers who supported boys who had experienced online sexual exploitation were asked what ages the boys were when the abuse had occurred. The workers reported that over two-thirds of the boys (77%) were sexually exploited online between the ages of 11-17 years old.

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



Similarly, the 46 frontline workers who had supported girls reported that most of the girls who had been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online (92%) were in the 11-17 years old category. This aligns with the age at time of abuse, between 15 to 17 years of age, of the seven young women who took part in the conversations.

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



However, the data shows that a greater proportion of the boys supported by the frontline workers and who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online are younger. Less than 10% of the reported cases involving girls included children under the age of eleven years old, compared with almost a quarter (22%) of the cases involving boys being under 11.

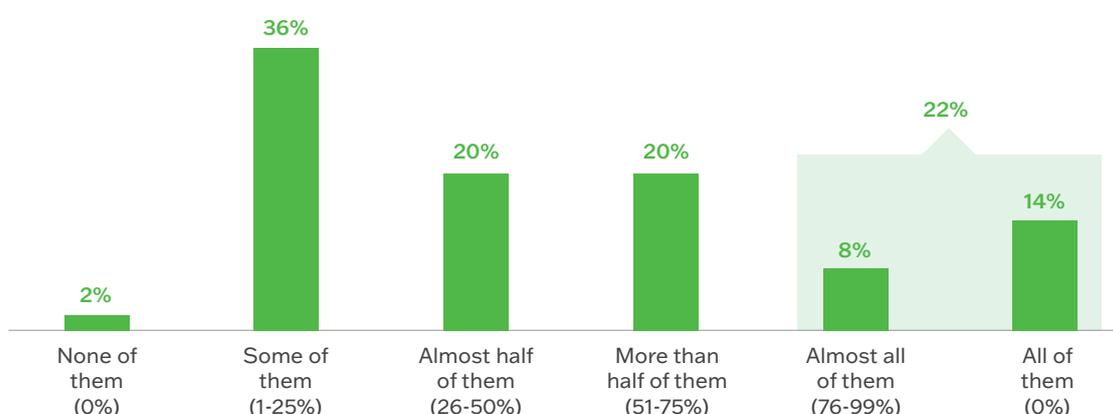
As one worker said, while gender is important to understand, monitoring trends in age is also important for prevention and targeting support services:

“Not so much gender than age. Children’s age is becoming younger.”

Frequency of sexual exploitation in caseloads

Sexual exploitation of children in general seems to be a recurring type of violence among the total caseloads supported by the surveyed frontline workers. All but one worker reported that at least some of their child clients had experienced sexual exploitation. Forty-two percent of workers reported that more than half of their caseload involved sexual exploitation of children. Fourteen 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 of this high proportion 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.



The average response from workers about how much of their caseload involved sexual exploitation of children was 47%. Of that, they then told us that around half of the cases of sexual exploitation of children also involved digital, Internet and communication technology in some way. This represents roughly one in four of all their cases involving online child sexual exploitation and abuse amongst the surveyed workers.

Notable differences are observed between the caseloads handled by the surveyed workers coming from government versus non-governmental organisations. Fifty-five percent of the cases from workers at non-governmental organisations involved online child sexual exploitation and abuse, while at government organisations this type of violence represented 35% of the cases.

Interestingly, amongst caseloads, practitioners with fewer years of experience (which as expected are also the youngest) reported higher proportions of cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse online. Those with 0-5 years of experience reported 58% of their cases of sexual exploitation of children involved online elements. Those with 11+ years of experience reported just 38% of their cases of sexual exploitation of children involved online elements.

22. 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.

Reporting mechanisms

Awareness

The Albanian government and civil society organisations have implemented a number of awareness raising and education measures around child sexual exploitation, some of them actively focused on children.²³ However, conversations with the young survivors generally illustrated little awareness of formal reporting mechanisms that are available. During the conversations, all young people consistently said they had no information about where to look for help when they were subjected to abuse other than the local police.

“In the city where I live there is no mechanism to report my concerns about online harassment, there are no services that would help me in those moments. I did not know where else to go, except the police! However, you should understand that even if you go to the police, at times these officers are prejudicial, and they may even harass you when they learn what you are about to report!”

(VoS-AL-07)

Lack of knowledge of specific reporting platforms and hotlines was also mentioned by the young women, 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)

As discussed further in the *Educational support* section of the report, psychologists are not stationed at schools in Albania. Added to the fact that these professionals are often not available to children when they need support at schools, their capacities to deal with issues related to sexual exploitation and abuse were repeatedly questioned by survivors.

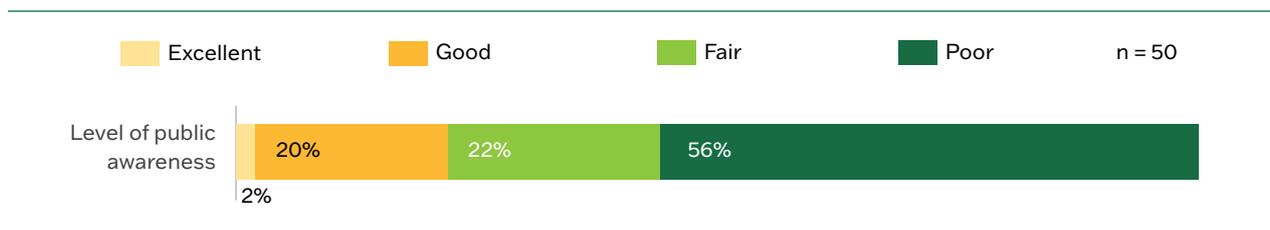
“To be frank, not even our teachers, or the psychologist at my school, have any idea at all on how we can protect ourselves online, or how they can come to our defence. During open discussion classes, we did nothing but discuss fun stuff...”

(VoS-AL-06)

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

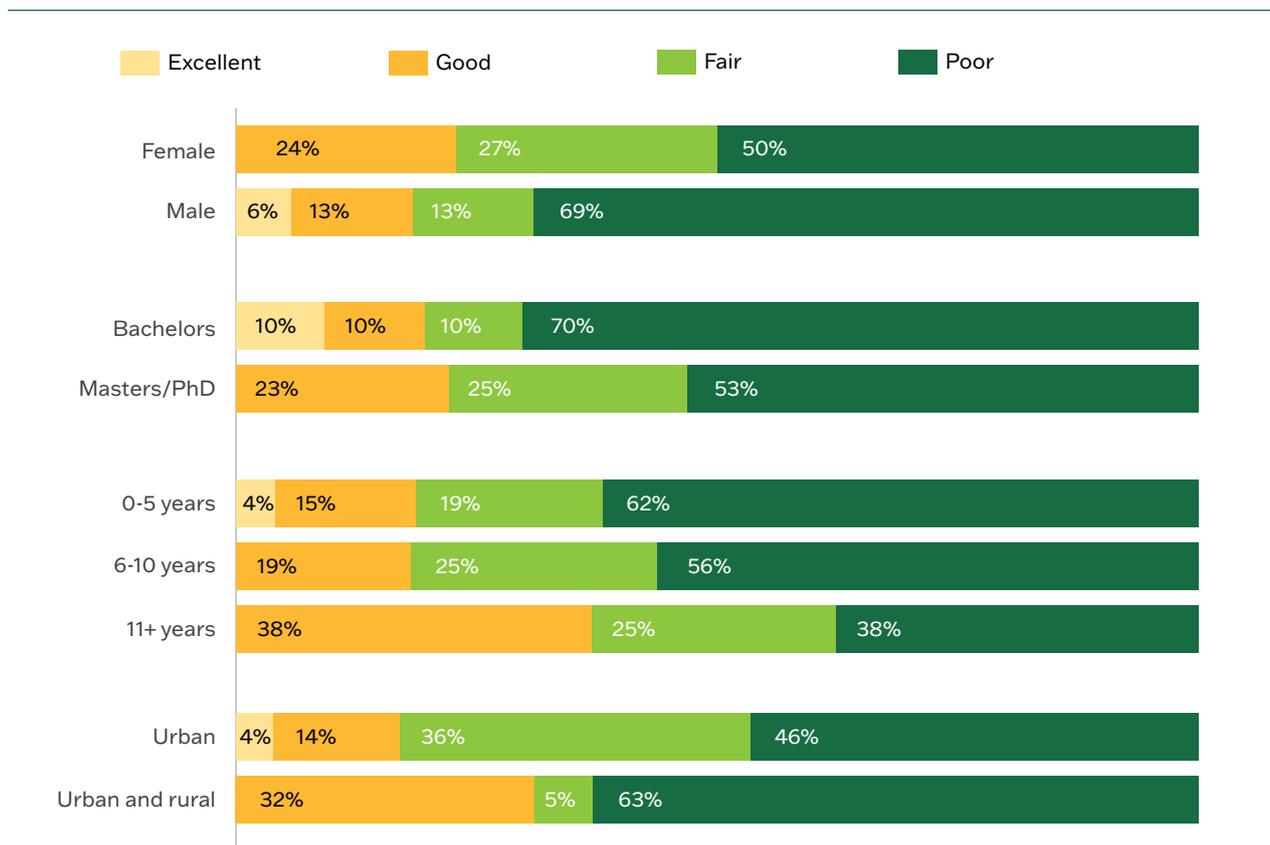
The lack of general public awareness was reiterated by the frontline workers who participated in the survey, as shown in Figure 5 below. When asked about the level of public awareness of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Albania, more than half (n=28) considered it “poor”. A smaller fraction of the respondents answered that it was either “fair” (22%, n=11) or “good” (20%, n=10), while only one respondent considered it “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 online child sexual exploitation in the first place confirms what survivors explained – that there is likely to be very little knowledge on how to report if it occurs.

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



An interesting finding is that the opinions on the level of public awareness vary according to the frontline workers’ profile. Male respondents, respondents with a Bachelor’s degree, respondents with less working experience, and those working in a mix of urban/rural locations were particularly negative with regard to public awareness as presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Level of public awareness of online child exploitation and abuse, according to the surveyed frontline workers by category.



Some of the survey respondents proposed that the lack of information is really about sexual exploitation of children in general – both offline and online forms, not specific to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. One frontline worker commented that

“The vulnerability about child abuse, I think both online and sexual exploitation in general, is mostly related to the lack of information about children’s rights, they are now aware of their privacy and how to be safe while surfing on the net.”

Another believed that social media may be a particularly risky aspect for children, as

“People on social media could give false appearances with other photos, in some cases they have photos of appearing the same age. The fact that they are on social media make them seem distant and children don’t fear them till the time the offenders are a threat to them.”

The “lack of information and visible, dedicated services and support for children victims of sexual exploitation” was also raised by 28% of the surveyed frontline workers as a barrier to reporting, as shown in the next section in Figure 7.

Traditional and social media were also mentioned in the qualitative survey responses from frontline workers as elements that influence public awareness of sexual exploitation.

“The public is fully aware, thanks to media reports and social networks, that often perpetrators of crimes do not receive the punishment they deserve, same situations keep repeating themselves, and therefore the victims become frustrated and are reluctant to report to the authorities.”

Another respondent pointed out the fact that, despite people being aware of the situation in the country, they often believe that it will never actually impact them directly.

“The mind-set of the citizens is that everything that they see in the TV or social media is something that would not happen to them but only to strangers and this lack of empathy is very risky for the society and the prevention related to the issue.”

In a more positive light, some qualitative inputs on the survey rather suggested that there is a growing awareness of sexual exploitation in general, particularly among girls.

“Fortunately, girls have the tendency to report when they are exploited. The level of awareness has improved.”

Barriers to disclosure

Failure to secure anonymity and publication of personal data following the filing of a report was a quality issue raised by four out of the seven young women in the conversations. After reporting the incidents to the police, they experienced data leaking to the public about their case due to law enforcement processes not properly preserving the confidentiality of their statements. Personal information was 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, the survivors 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)

Such leaks without doubt would also constitute barriers for future survivors to report. This was illustrated by one of the young women, who explained that she did not report sooner because of the fear of having her data leaked – a fear that was later unfortunately realised:

“What kept me from going to the police was a case that became public a long time ago, in which the media published the name of the school, the city, the age, faces of family members, school teachers and lots of other details, and as a child I remember being distressed by this whole thing. This kept me from reporting it sooner, because I was afraid that maybe my case would be in the media as well. As a matter of fact, this fear came true because the same thing happened to me when I reported it!”

(VoS-AL-09)

The barriers to disclosure were also explored on 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 most commonly selected barrier (56% or n=28) to reporting was related to a pervasive culture of silence (“the stigma and shame that victims often experience”), and “fears about how others will respond to disclosure” (50%, n=25). Other most selected barriers included “the sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the experience” (40%, n=20), followed by “talking about sex and sexuality is considered a taboo” (34%, n=17).

As part of the conversations with survivors, 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)

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. The social isolation/marginalisation, coupled with shame/guilt and other emotional impacts, were key problems raised by frontline workers when asked to provide qualitative inputs to the survey. A number of respondents commented that

“feeling judged for what happened causes self-isolation”

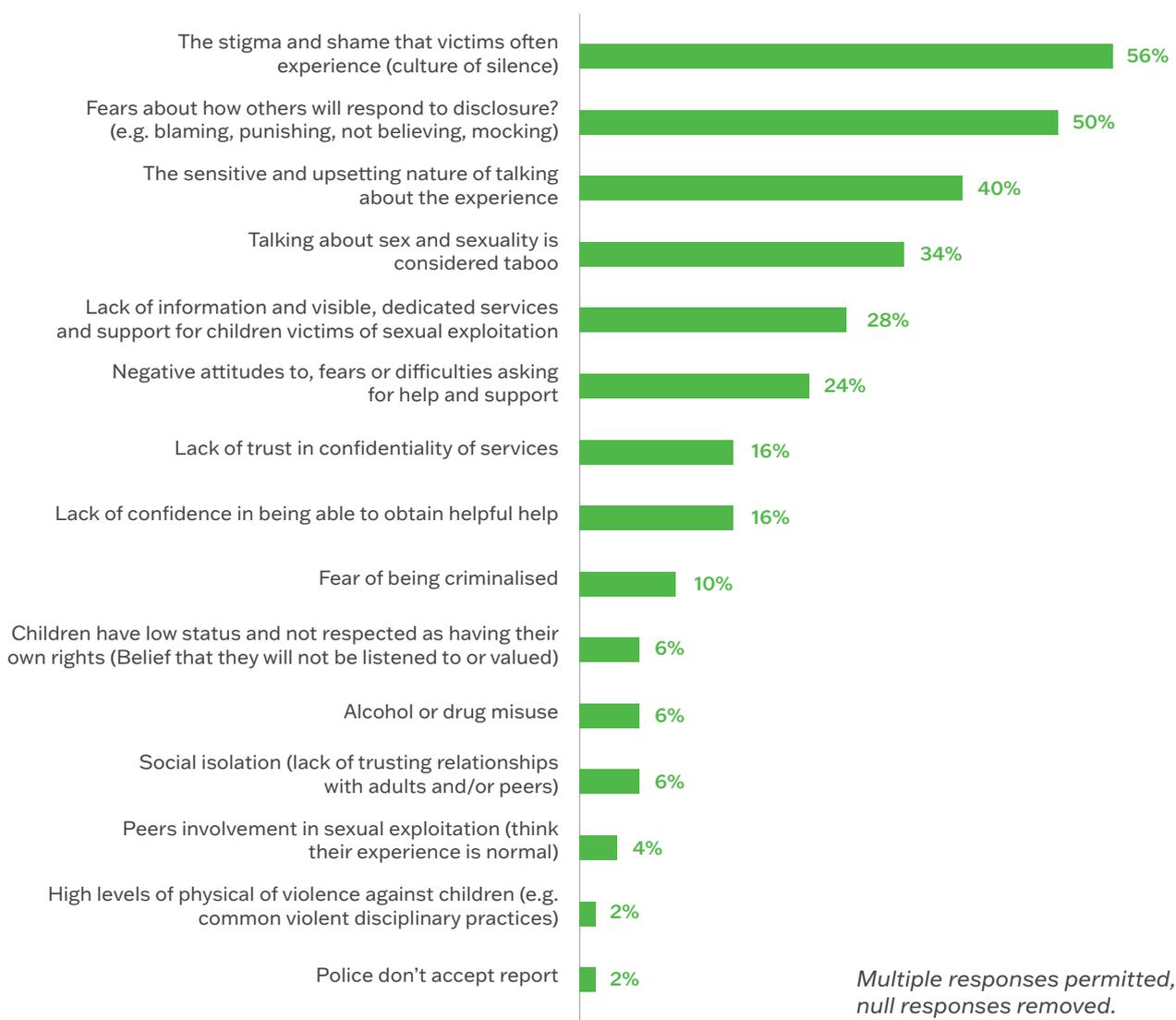
and that children

“have difficulties to reintegrate into society”

They furthermore mentioned that the isolation can be the cause of

“emotional issues, social isolation, prejudices”

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



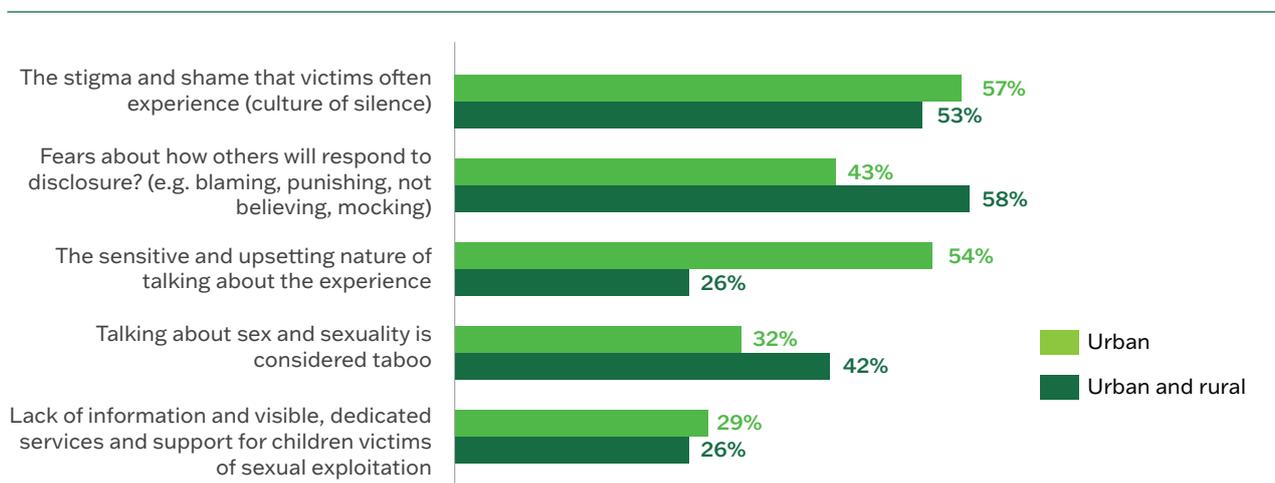
A deeper investigation into the top five barriers to disclosure is presented in Figure 8 below. Older respondents displayed a higher agreement with statements regarding stigma and shame experienced by survivors, and the sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the exploitation and abuse. Younger respondents displayed a higher agreement on the item related to talking about sex and sexuality being considered taboo (36%-44% compared to just 9% among respondents aged 41 and above). Younger respondents also displayed a higher agreement on the impact of limited information or visible, dedicated support services.

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



Notably, taboo and stigma play an important role as barriers to disclosure for all respondents. This was particularly evident in small towns and rural areas, as presented in Figure 9. On the one hand, respondents working in a mix of urban and rural areas more often noted the fears about how other people could respond to disclosure, as well as how talking about sex and sexuality is considered a taboo. On the other hand, for those who work in urban-only organisations, the sensitive and upsetting nature of talking about the experience was more commonly raised, when compared to other respondents.

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



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 Albania, 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 once they reported their experience of exploitation or abuse to the police. They all also said that these services had been useful and very effective in rehabilitating and mitigating the consequences of their online and offline sexual abuse. This is illustrated by one of them:

“My life is now back on track; I have a job and I’m trying to pay the rent on my own and support myself with daily expenses in [...]. Once in a while I am even able to support my family with some cash, however little it may be”

(VoS-AL-01)

In situations where the survivors and their families left their communities to avoid re-victimization, the support services were also useful and effective, and viewed as positive contributions towards their rehabilitation. A number of young women gave examples of how the support services helped them in coping with trauma and reintegrating with the school and community:

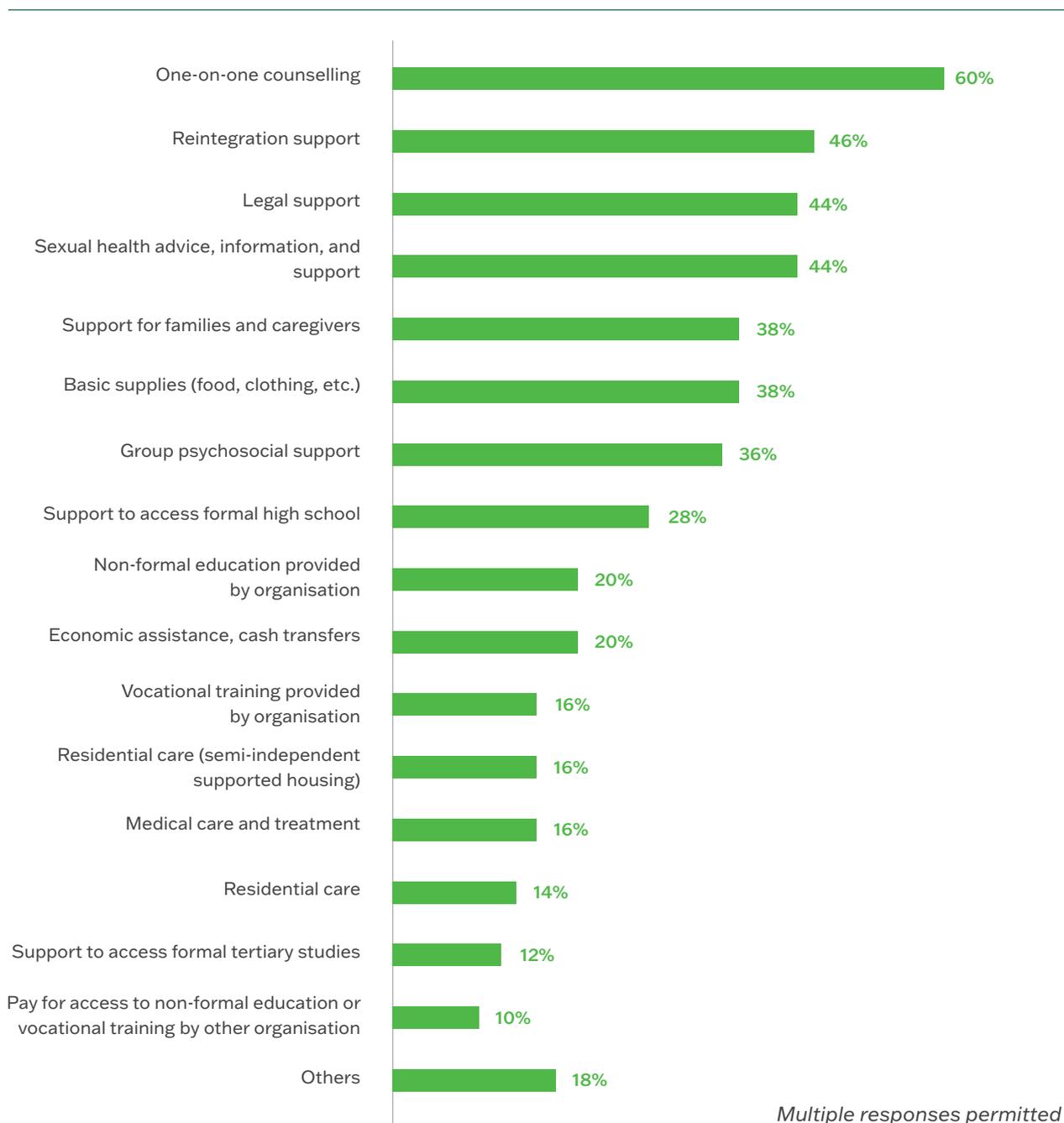
“If I were to compare how I felt back then and when I reported the incident to the police, I can only say that it’s like night and day. In those moments I lost interest in everything, school and everything else. I could not speak to anyone, because I would just get upset and cry. On the other hand, I am now in a completely different state, thanks to the psychological support I received from CRCA/ECPAT Albania. There have been difficult moments even after I came to live in [...], as it took time to readjust to society, new surroundings and friends, etcetera. However, over time I recovered and now I feel very well. When it comes to the past, I do not reminisce and I do not even want to think about it, and for this reason I very rarely visit my hometown!”

(VoS-AL-08)

All the young women said during the conversations that, once they knew about and accessed the services, the availability of support over a long period of time helped them to recover and feel better. They found the psychological support and counselling the most useful services, which were freely available to them at any point helping to get through moments when they would feel overwhelmed.

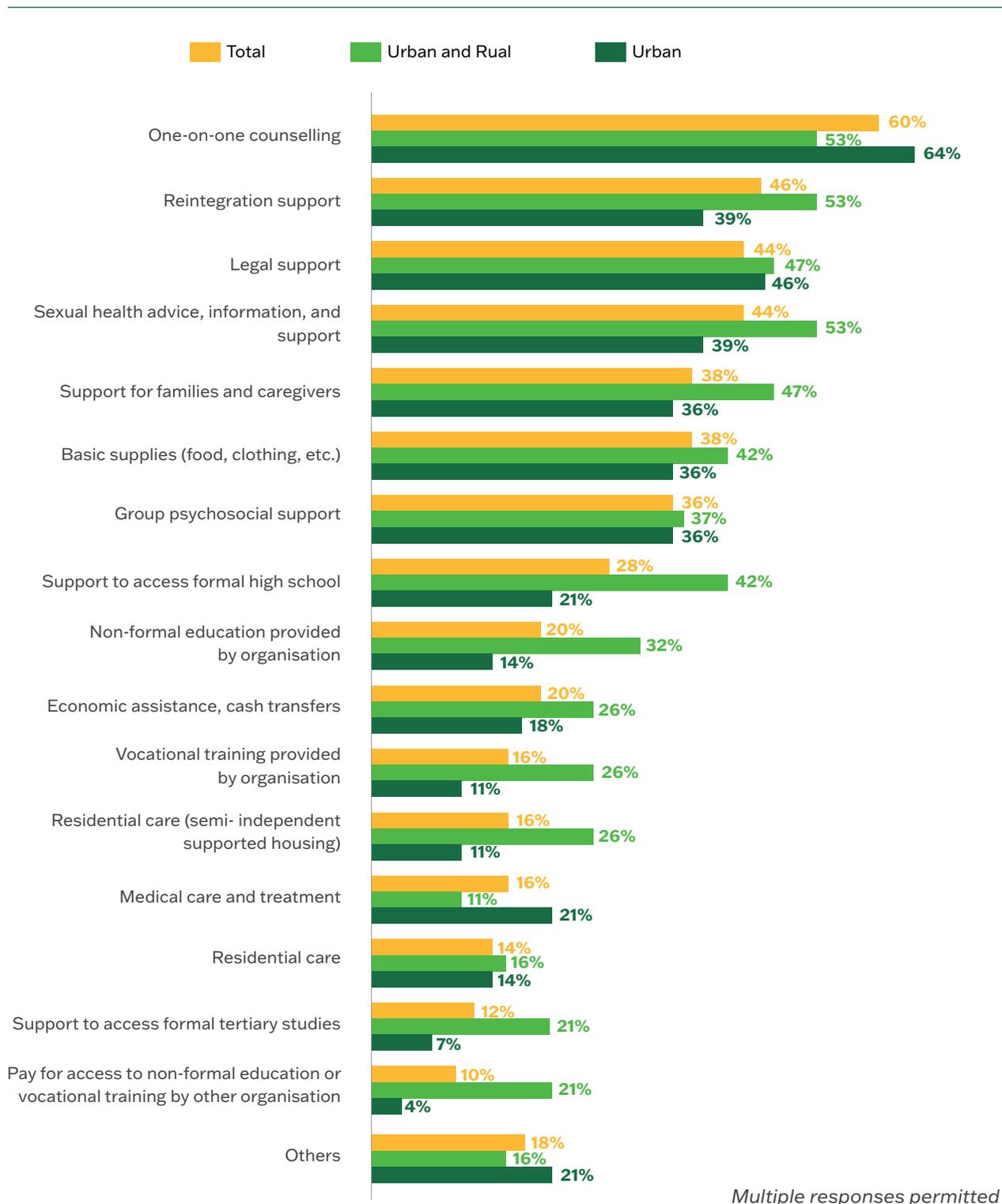
In fact, when the surveyed frontline workers were asked about the different types of direct support services provided by their organisations to children who have experienced sexual exploitation, about two-thirds reported offering one-on-one counselling (60%, n=30) as shown in Figure 10. This was by far the most popular service available across the sample of frontline workers and clearly an appropriate service given the extremely positive valuing of this by survivors.

Figure 10: Direct support to children who had experienced sexual exploitation provided by the organisation.



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

Figure 11: Organisation support services vs Organisation location



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. As further explored later in the Psychological support section, young people living in rural areas reported having less access to support services than those living in urban areas.

A complete lack of prior awareness about the support that could be offered, particularly by the municipal Child Protection Officers,²⁴ was explained by all the young women who participated in the conversations. None of them were introduced to these professionals prior to their experiences, neither through informative open classrooms at school, or social, cultural and awareness-raising events.

“Only when everything had happened, I learned that out there it is a social worker who was supposed to take care of children and provide protection to them. No one had told me about the existence of this social worker, not even her!”

(VoS-AL-08)

“I did not know anything, I did not know that right there, next to my school, by the Town Hall building, there was the office of a public employee who was supposed to deal with child protection. Who should have informed me about the existence of this support provider?”

(VoS-AL-05)

“In the meantime, I have heard that there may be some public officials working for the municipality on child protection, but it is not like I have ever seen them do anything. In short, they are not trustworthy, and I would never trust them and share my concerns with people I do not trust.”

(VoS-AL-06)

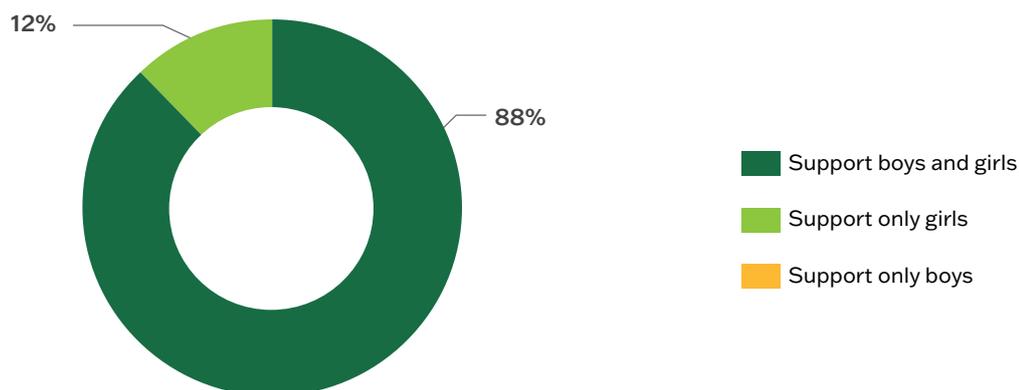
Aligned with these trends, the young women mentioned that, if the services they received after reporting were available in their hometowns before or when the incidents occurred, they would have felt more confident, more supported and safer to report and respond to their experiences of child sexual exploitation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

The women who engaged in the conversations spoke about how their families tended to be the main base of support to them, especially when support services were not available. All of the seven young women stated that their families put pressure on public institutions demanding more support.

Already touched upon earlier in this report, gender differences in accessibility of services were evident in the survey data. In total, nearly two-thirds of children supported by the frontline workers are female. In addition to that, while 12% (n=6) of workers limit their support to girls only, none of the surveyed respondents limit their support to boys only.

24. Child Protection Officers perform the function of case manager for children in need of protection from the moment of identification or referral. Their duties include, among others, proactively identifying cases of children at risk; assessing the risk level of every referred and identified case of a child in need of protection; drafting an individual protection plan for the child and monitoring its implementation; participating in court proceedings and facilitate and support the child and/or the family of the child in fulfilling the actions or duties set in the Individual Protection Plan. Republic of Albania. (2017). [Law No. 18/2017 On the Rights and Protection of the Child](#). Articles 53 and 54.

Figure 12: Genders of children accessing support services.



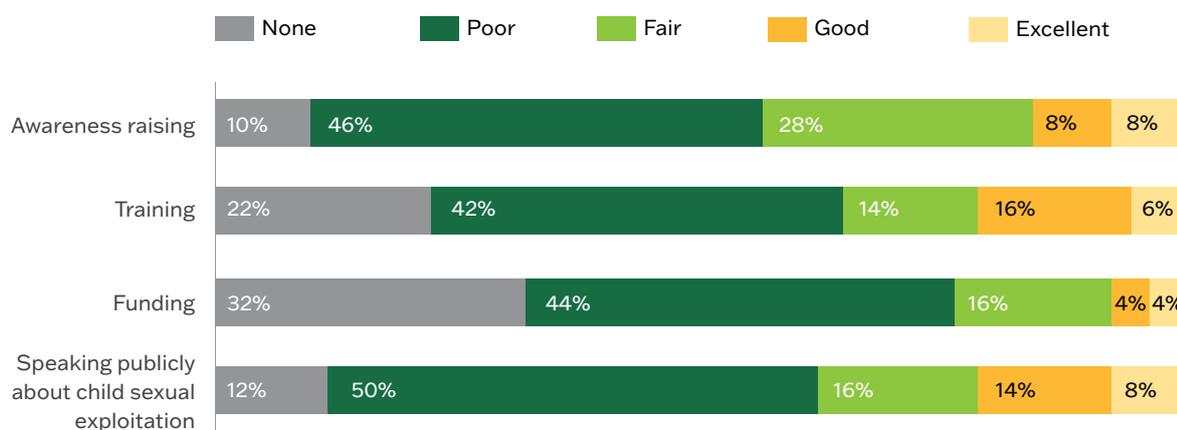
Of course, these gender differences might simply convey that girls seek help more often than boys. For instance, among the reasons mentioned explaining why their organisations only support girls, some workers noted that this is because no boys seek help.

“During my experience and the period of work, I have not had cases of boys who have been victims of sexual exploitation.”

Nevertheless, it is really important to remember that not seeking help is not an indication of no problems. Increasingly boys are being recognised as victims of sexual violence worldwide. This does not mean this is a new experience, just that boys have not sought support – perhaps as services are not welcoming to them, or even aware that they need support.²⁵

When asked about the quality of government activities to address online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Albania, frontline workers provided some critical input, particularly on government efforts in providing funding. Over three quarters of the respondents 76% (n=38) rated the quality of government funding as either “poor” or “none”, as displayed in Figure 13.

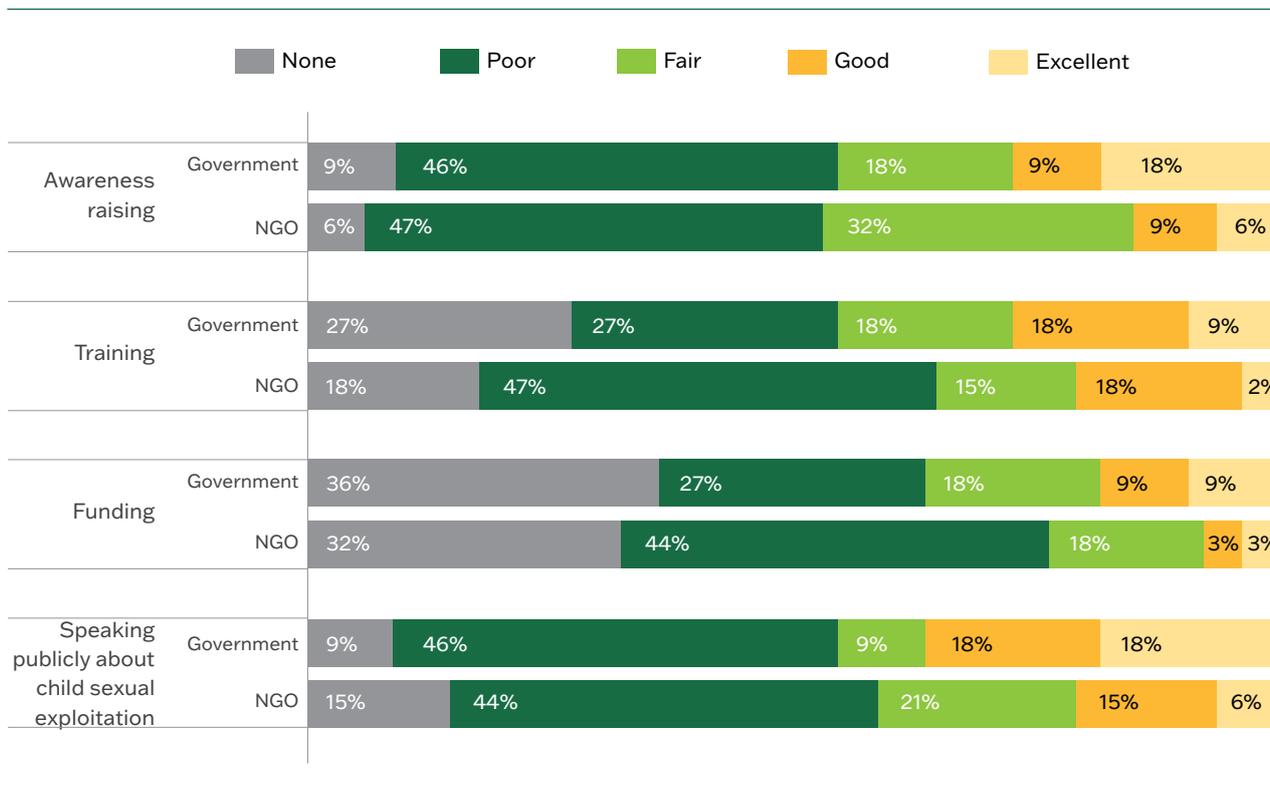
Figure 13: Frontline workers’ views on the quality of government activities.



25. Josenhans, V., Kavenagh, M., Smith, S., & Wekerle, C. (2020). [Gender, Rights and Responsibilities: The need for a global analysis of the sexual exploitation of boys](#). *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 110.

Frontline workers at non-governmental organisations were generally more negative about the quality of government activities to prevent and address child sexual exploitation and abuse online compared to frontline workers at government organisations. When disaggregated by non-governmental organisations versus government, opinions did follow similar trends.

Figure 14: Frontline workers' views on the quality of government activities by organisation type.



Types of support services

Educational and pedagogical support

All of the young women who participated in the conversations were attending school when the online abuse and exploitation occurred. As previously mentioned in this report, all survivors stated that it was very difficult for them to discuss their concerns on child sexual exploitation and abuse online 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 psycho-social 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. During the course of the conversations, four of the young survivors mentioned that they were very happy that when they had to change schools, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth and regional educational directorates helped a great deal to smooth their transition to new schools. In the new schools, the girls spoke of finding safe, friendly and inclusive environments.

The frontline workers' survey included a hypothetical scenario involving educational institutions.²⁶ Some of the frontline workers (22%, n=11) expressed that the school should be informed whenever a child is subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. When asked about the practical steps that should be taken to deal with such situations, one of the respondents answered:

“Alert immediately the principal’s office at the school regarding Spiro’s case; Notify education institutions, including the Ministry of Education; Report the case to the police to initiate criminal proceedings against the teacher; Notify the school psychologist and the supervisor of Child Protection regarding the case; Provide psychological and emotional support to the girl.”

However, school teachers and the pedagogical staff were mentioned by the young women who engaged in the conversations as not supportive of or cooperative with children in their experiences. Instead of guaranteeing protection and providing support, four participants of the conversations reported being treated with prejudice and blamed for the abuse by the pedagogical staff.

“I did not open up to my teachers because you know very well that in small towns if you talk about sex you are branded as a “whore” who is well past salvation. To them it was inconceivable that a girl my age would discuss sexual relations, and even if a girl were to speak up, others would think that “you like it like that”... Imagine for a moment if I were to tell them “they want to force me to have sexual relations against my will”!!! But why? Because I’ve had sex with my boyfriend when I was 14 or 15 years old! Ahhhh!”

(VoS-AL-01)

The lack of access to school psychologists and the perceived inadequate supports were raised by some of the survivors in their conversations. 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.²⁷ Without easy access to these professionals, gaining entry to the support structures can be difficult, particularly as children simply do not know how and where to start.

In Albania, psychologists are not stationed at individual schools, they rather provide coverage to several schools simultaneously. These professionals are not at the schools on a daily basis and, as a consequence, are not always known and accessible to children and young people. Five out of the

26. Scenario question: Zana is a 17-year-old student. Zana has struggled to make good grades this year and is worried that Spiro, a teacher who is a close family friend, will tell Zana’s dad. Zana offers to send Spiro naked pictures if he promises not to talk to the family. Do you think that Zana is a victim of online child sexual exploitation and abuse? Spiro accepts. Do you believe that Spiro has committed online child sexual exploitation and abuse? What practical steps would you take if you were the service provider supporting 17-year-old Zana?

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

seven young women who participated in the conversations reported not being aware that the school psychologist could help them formally reporting concerns, defending and supporting them from such situations and threats, even when these professionals were at their schools.

“To be honest, until the moment when the incident happened, I had no information about any services available to me, and I did not know who could help me. It is not like I had talked to the psychologist at school, because she showed up once in a month or two, and even when she was there, she did not do anything...!”

(VoS-AL-05)

Psychological support

The seven young women were supported by psychologists long term and based on their needs, gained access to individual programmes and techniques based on psychological assessments, in full accordance with the protocols of Individual Protection Plans²⁸ drafted and approved by the Intersectoral Technical Groups and Child Protection Officers.

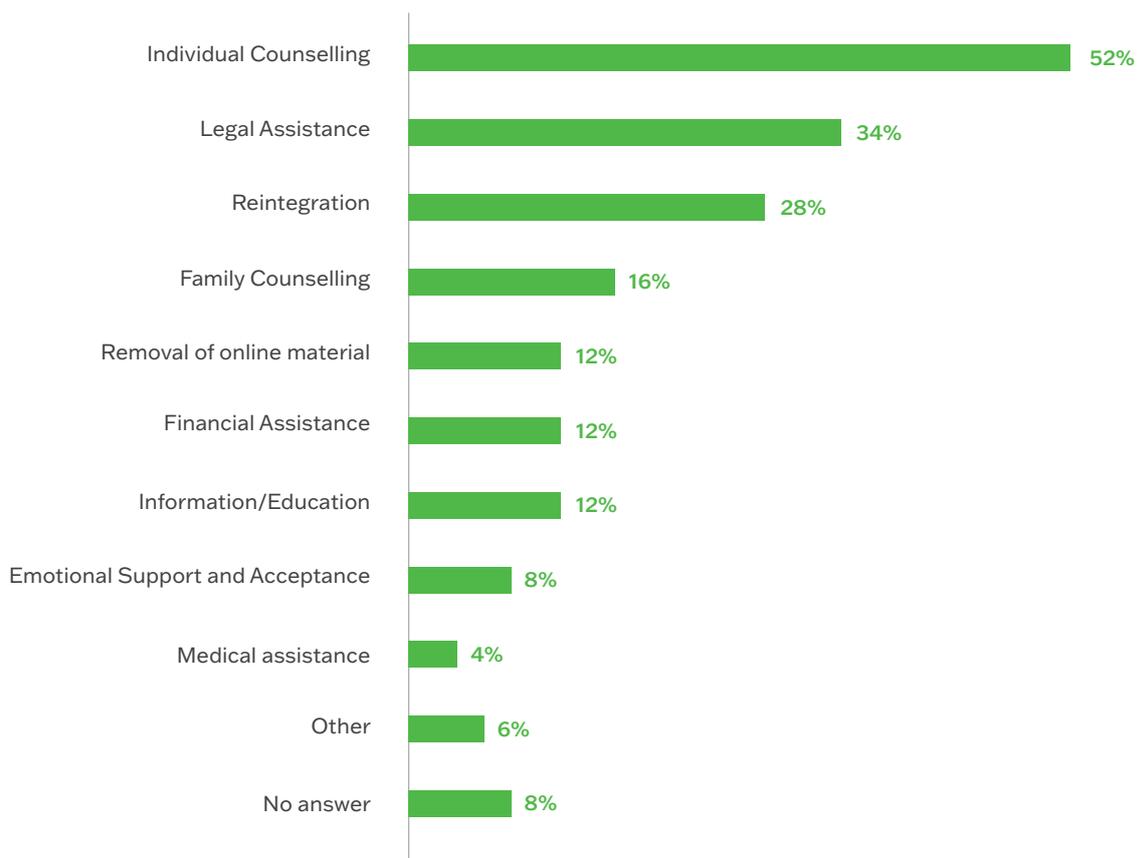
Although all of the survivors who participated in the conversations received psychological support, free/government subsidised psychological assistance is not broadly available in Albania. The survivors who took part in this research, as well as some of their family members, received long-term psychological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

Indeed, 70% (n=24) of the non-governmental organisations workers who completed the survey provided one-on-one counselling compared to just 27% (n=3) of those working at government organisations.

When asked what were the biggest needs for support shared to them by children who experienced sexual exploitation and abuse online, the most commonly identified theme in frontline workers’ responses was related to individual counselling (52%, n=26), as shown in Figure 15.

28. Individual Protection Plans outline protection measures needed for a child that has been identified as at risk, and include measures for medical aid, psychological, legal, social or other necessary rehabilitation or reintegration services, according to the needs identified during case assessment. The Individual Protection Plans also should include activities for education, learning and entertainment of children, measures for parental recovery, support programmes and assistance to the parent, legal guardian and members of the extended family.³ All measures outlined in the Plans must be provided free of charge. Republic of Albania. (2017). [Law No. 18/2017 On the Rights and Protection of the Child](#). Article 55.

Figure 15: Biggest needs that children say that they have, according to frontline workers.



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

“I felt much better after I talked to a psychologist and told her everything that had happened to me. Those conversations helped me a great deal back then, because I was in such a state that I had no idea what else could happen to me.”

(VoS-AL-01)

Psychological support was also considered essential by the frontline workers who responded to the survey. In 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. Among the other suggestions given, workers mentioned as assisting to remove content from the Internet, referring the child to specialist psychological and social services, and notifying the Child Protection department.

“First of all, I would request the immediate removal of the video that was shot without her knowledge. Then I would send her to see a psychologist to evaluate her condition.”

“Firstly a first counselling with both children about the situation, after that we will encourage Zana and Spiro to tell their parents and to delete all the images and videos at the same time, expressing the legal responsibility and the damage that can bring the sharing of them. In all cases the Child Protection Officer will be noticed to monitor the children and their families during these steps.”

While psychological support services were provided to all the young survivors who participated in the conversations, it is worth noting that there were logistical challenges encountered for three of them – mostly due to the distance of their homes from the services, particularly during the winter.

The young women reported on the conversations that the long distances became an issue also for the workers providing support who were themselves working on a voluntary basis for civil society organisations.

A number of survivors commented this situation and seemed to feel grateful when the support providers travelled long distances to help them:

“I feel very relieved, because at the moment when I most needed help, you came and provided support.”

(VoS-AL-07)

Really encouraging to see that in some cases, geographical barriers were overcome innovatively with support offered remotely using digital platforms – particularly psychological support and counselling.

“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)

Legal support

All of the seven young women mentioned in the conversations that they had no prior information about the availability of legal assistance before they connected with a supporting organisation. Regardless of the fact that organisations offer a wide range of integrated community and legal support services, these girls and many of their peers have little knowledge about the existence of these facilities.

It is worth mentioning again that each of the seven young women had received the necessary legal assistance from organisations based on the Individual Protection Plan drafted by their Child Protection Officer and the Intersectoral Technical Groups overseeing their cases. This illustrates that while legal assistance does exist, public visibility and awareness is minimal. Access to these services is really limited to referral via support services which probably makes sense practically. But the lack of public awareness does represent a likely barrier to children disclosing – it is that much harder to seek help if you have no conceptualization of whether services exist that you could utilise. It is like calling out to an empty room, not aware if there is anyone there to respond.

The solution, according to the young women, could be either increasing public awareness that legal (and other) support is available, or ensuring faster and better access to support services so young people can be referred/connected immediately to the specialised services that they need.

“After all that happened, and after I received the necessary assistance and support, including the free-of-charge lawyer from the organisation CRCA/ECPAT Albania, or various services from the Emergency Centre PLAN & GO, etc., I am now familiar with many services, mechanisms and organisations that could have protected me in those moments when I desperately needed help.”

(VoS-AL-09)

“My family was able to hire a lawyer to follow the court proceedings. At first we were concerned about what was going to happen because we knew nothing about legal issues. Afterwards a municipality worker met with us and told us that CRCA/ECPAT Albania could provide us with a free lawyer.”

(VoS-AL-01)

Medical support

Medical services are unquestionably critical in the recovery of many survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Five out of the seven young women who participated in the conversations needed medical assistance and all five received the medical support that they needed. In Albania, such medical supports are mainly provided in hospitals, where any medical examinations or care for children and young people subjected to sexual violence can be accessed for free.

The medical assistance provided to these young women included forensic examination, tests for sexually transmitted infections, general blood tests, urine tests for traces of various narcotics that offenders may have used, as well as psychiatric tests. It is worth mentioning that in addition to the forensic examination, which in Albania is a mandatory procedure in cases of abuse, other medical examinations were coordinated by the child protection system, which filed various requests to health institutions.

“As soon as I reported the case to the police, they performed a forensic medical examination at the hospital to check and verify whether anyone had abused me, and how far this abuse had gone. I would also like to say that I was taken to the psychiatrist immediately after I filed the report, because in those moments I wanted to kill myself given everything that had happened to me...”

(VoS-AL-01)

“I did receive medical assistance in [...] at the [...] Centre, where they performed a forensic examination, including blood and urine tests, because that is what the institutions needed to carry out their investigations. Also, if I am not mistaken, I had general tests done in the city of [...], where I now live, to check general health parameters. All of this assistance was carried out in the presence and with the support of the CRCA organisation and the Child Protection Officer.”

(VoS-AL-09)

Financial support

Financial support was necessary for three out of the seven young women who took part in the conversations, in order to implement their protection and recovery plan. These plans included integrated community and legal services to support, rehabilitate and reintegrate. These young women stated that few public institutions had provided financial support and services, while the support that they received was provided by civil society organisations.

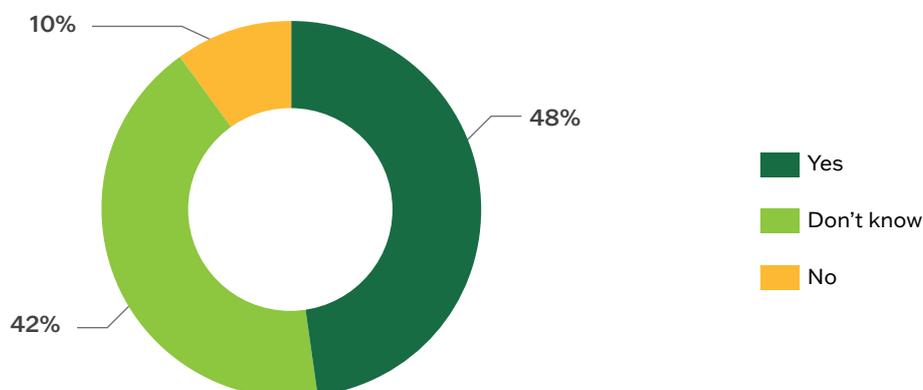
“I am happy that immediately after I reported to the police, the CRCA staff was ready to take me to [...] and provide accommodations in a shelter where I stayed for 21 days. As soon as I left the shelter, CRCA, together with the municipality, made sure that I and my family of eight members could move from the village where we lived to another town. We received help with the rent for one year, the furnishing of the house because the apartment was empty, finding work for my parents and my older brother, as well as deliveries of food packages. Also, a psychologist from CRCA helped me a great deal to get through the situation I was in back then.”

(VoS-AL-09)

In Albania, the right for child victims to claim damage compensation for all criminal offences is established under article 45 of the Criminal Justice for Children Code.²⁹ However, as of October 2021 there have not yet been any cases of children subjected to sexual exploitation successfully claiming compensation.

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 perpetrators or country-managed funds. Responses were very divided between those who believe that compensation can be claimed by child victims (48%, n=24) and those who did not know (42%, n=21). A further 10% (n=5) responded “No”.

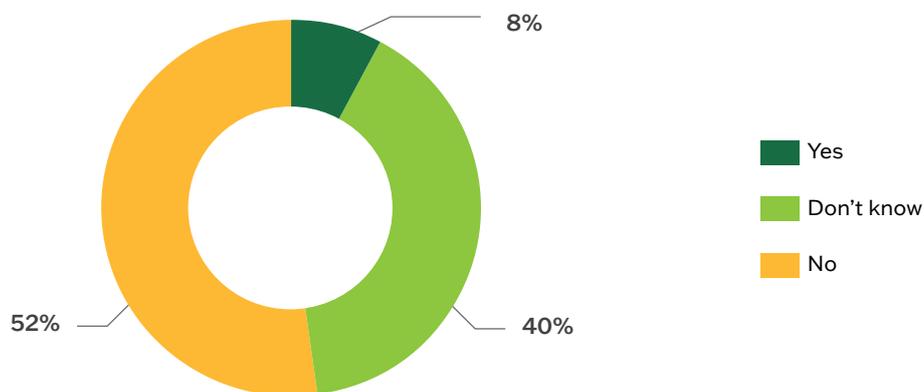
Figure 16: Frontline workers' opinions on whether children victims of online child sexual exploitation and abuse can seek formal financial compensation.



29. Republic of Albania. (2017). [Criminal Justice for Children Code](#). Article 45.

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 Albania, more than half of the respondents (52%, n=26) indicated that they did not know of any children, and 40% (n=20) did not know how to answer to the question.

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



RECOMMENDATIONS

we can be
HEROES
JUST FOR
One day.
DAVID
BOWIE

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 centre 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. 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.³⁰

“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)

2. 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.

A frontline worker pointed out that children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse should be better informed about their rights:

“Victims of sexual abuse are not informed about the rights and duties [...], about the rights provided by the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Republic of Albania as victims of criminal offences.”

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

3. 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.

This recommendation was supported by the surveyed frontline workers. When provided the opportunity to share any last thoughts at the end of the survey, a number of them emphasised the lack of awareness as a major issue in Albania:

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

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

“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)

“If nothing really “messy” happens, the police drag their feet, telling you “Come today, come tomorrow”... So, nothing gets solved!”

(VoS-AL-05)

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

These professionals are key gatekeepers that can connect children to and enable referral to necessary 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)

“To be honest, only visiting psychologists and support organisations from Tirana have some insights on these things, but such support is not available in my town!”

(VoS-AL-08)

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

All the young women who engaged in the conversations stated that Child Protection Officers should be more visible in the community, closer to children and young people, so they can be in touch regularly and report any situations when needed.

“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)

Recommendations about support services

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

These support services should be available at any time to children and young people who have survived online sexual exploitation and abuse. It is also recommended to provide more support to civil society organisations that offer psychological and community assistance to children and young people who have been subjected to online and offline sexual abuse and exploitation. The innovative use of remote/digital platforms to work around geographic barriers 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)

“When it comes to young victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation, it is very important to have specialised psychological support. It is very important that psychologists who provide psychological support and counselling to victims of sexual abuse are trained and have the necessary experience on these issues. I’m saying this because there have been psychologists that I have spoken to who just went on and on saying general things, and they would exhaust you by asking questions rather than help you.”

(VoS-AL-04)

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.

This could be done through the establishment of dedicated centres where various support services could be provided to children and young people survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse.

“Establish support services that can help victims of sexual violence recover, and teach young people how to avoid falling prey to online and offline sexual abuse. I believe that it is very important to keep under monitoring and observation a child or a young person who has once been a victim of sexual harassment, because there may be people who may take advantage of them.”

(VoS-AL-09)

“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)

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 amongst the young women who engaged in the conversations and the responses from the frontline workers, it was evident that there is a need to improve the knowledge and skills of the professionals whom victims come into contact about this topic. Training on the implications of online risks and harms is urgently needed.

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.”

Furthermore, one of the young women questioned the approaches of some school psychologists, linking their engagements to her fear of trusting them with her disclosure:

“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)



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