SUMMARY OF THE EXPERT ROUNDTABLE ON
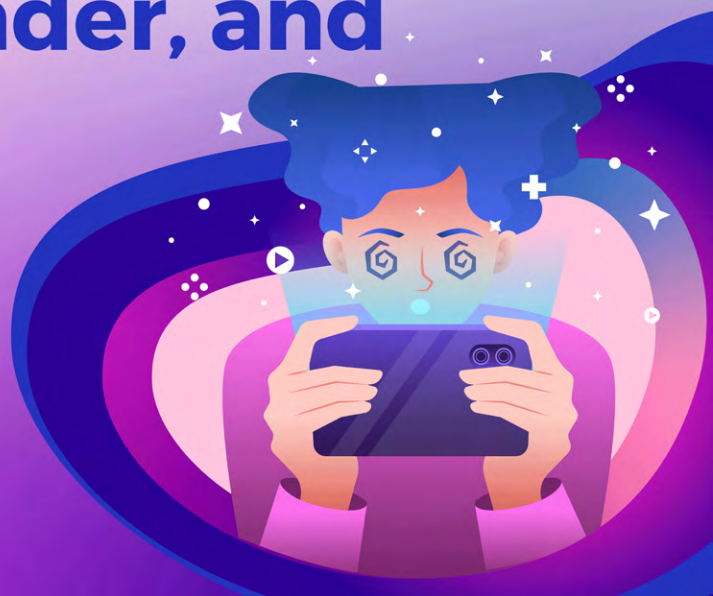
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF BOYS

ECPAT

Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Gender, and Online Gaming

Introduction

The world of online gaming has a vast and unique reach across the world, offering opportunities for gamers of all ages to interact in positive ways. At the same time, concerns about safety stem from insufficient research into risk and harm, as well as the lack of regulation in gaming environments. The diversity and large scale of the gaming sector also presents challenges in terms of knowledge about online identity and safety issues for children of different ages and sexual or gender identity.

In December 2022, ECPAT International and ECPAT UK gathered experts from the gaming sector, academia, government and civil society for a 2-day roundtable. Participants at the roundtable identified key learnings, challenges, proposals for risk mitigation and recommendations for policy and research in the online gaming environments.

The aim of the roundtable was to examine the nature and gender dynamics of child sexual abuse and exploitation in online gaming environments. Discussions addressed gender-sensitive approaches to the prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation of boys, girls and children with diverse sexual orientations or gender identity and expressions (SOGIE) in online gaming environments. Participants agreed on the need for guidance on gender-sensitive prevention and response interventions, as well as for continued, deeper engagement and partnerships moving forward. The roundtable discussions highlighted the need for innovative approaches for engaging children in a meaningful way about child sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as the importance of balancing healthy risk with the positive impact of gaming.

Key Considerations

Five key considerations were identified through the roundtable discussions:

1 As the online gaming sector is constantly changing, gaming companies, governments and the child safety sector **need to scale up a nuanced approach** to online gaming, for example, accounting for gender diversity, age and specific motivations to play.

2 It is important to consider that the online gaming environment **fosters a strong sense of belonging due to the importance of building communities** which reflect and challenge norms in person. Users represent a community which can range from large to micro-communities which are based on shared interests and values

3 Online gaming platforms can be **safe spaces for children to explore sexuality and gender identity** with strangers compared to in person, for example. Due to ideas of masculinity and gender norms, boys struggle to seek out help regarding cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, as evidenced in ECPAT International's Global Boys Initiative. It is essential to find a balance between enabling positive explorative and supportive conversations and interaction online while also ensuring clear safeguards against forms of exploitation such as grooming in less monitored spaces.

4 The online gaming environment **poses risks and exacerbates specific vulnerabilities for SOGIE children**. These risks and vulnerabilities include factors such as the socio-cultural environment, cognitive abilities and generational gaps. The exposure of children to risk can also depend on the setting and the level of engagement children have with a game and any additional features accessed via the game. It is crucial to consider power dynamics and factors in relation to intentional and unintentional harm. This includes abusive behaviour to exert control, different gaming cultures and the use of harmful language. Hence, drawing the line between healthy exploration of children of their sexuality and gender identity through online gaming and what can represent harmful or abusive behaviour is complex and nuanced.

5 **Gender stereotyping and lack of diverse representation are underlying challenges** in online gaming. Gender stereotypes and ideas of masculinities in person are then perpetuated in online game settings as this is what children and adults see in society more broadly. The gaming industry needs to acknowledge and address the lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion to challenge harmful traditional gender norms that underpin gender-based violence online and in person.

Key Recommendations

Risk Mitigation

Technology, policy and design-based risk mitigation measures are needed to ensure the safety and empowerment of children and young people in gaming environments. It is important to identify risk mitigation measures that contribute to the prevention of harm including user and/or age verification, user reporting, artificial intelligence, sectoral collaboration for shared learning, education, awareness and support for communities, and diversity, equity and inclusion in online gaming spaces.

Policy

A key recommendation highlights the need for improvements in platform safety policy. Specific recommendations include incorporating a broader set of safety policy and action measures (e.g., age-appropriate content, information, and contact, supported by age verification) within the gaming environments, as well as developing and adopting standards and codes of conduct.

Another key recommendation relates to regulations such as accountability regimes for the failure to keep children safe, minimum standards for transparency reporting and conducting a child rights impact assessment. The ethical and meaningful consultation of children should be integrated as standard into law and policy development.

Further Research Gaps

It is important to research social and cultural aspects of children and young people's lived experiences and perceptions, particularly of gaming and community-building, as well as of risk and abuse. This is particularly important to document manifestations of grooming, for example, to understand the dynamics of child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetration in different online gaming environments.

Conclusion

Nuanced and sustainable response strategies are needed to prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation and abuse in online gaming environments. The world of gaming is distinct from other online environments due to community spaces which are more socially driven for younger generations. It is also important to create spaces for exchange between different sectors and perspectives to incorporate a more gender-sensitive and evidence-informed approach. While the online gaming sector can be a space that reinforces toxic behaviour, there is also great potential to support positive practices for children's safety as well as the safe exploration of sexuality and gender. The intersection between social sciences and technology can be harnessed to use social science to support behavioural change. All sectors can work together to understand risk and develop a range of technological and behavioural strategies to prevent harm and ensure the safety of all children in online gaming environments.