

ACTION REPORT

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE TO BUILD A CULTURE OF CHILD SAFETY IN ONLINE GAMING



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This briefing summarizes a multi-sector roundtable that took place in Seoul in February 2024 on the topic of child safety in online gaming environments. Experts from South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Taiwan, Australia, the US and Europe were able to contribute their unique perspectives on child online safety in their national context as well as comparatively across the world. With emphasis on the role of culture and language, it complements and builds on previous discussions in London (2022) and New York (2023) focused respectively on research and data, and safety insights and good practice in addressing risk and harm with a gender lens.

What we have learnt

1. Online games play a crucially important role in the lives of children¹ across the globe. Games enable children to fulfil their right to play, and they represent important spaces for healthy risk-taking, boundary testing, entertainment, relaxation, learning, socializing, and joy. They can be highly competitive but also highly collaborative spaces where children make connections, become part of communities, ask for help and support outside the parameters of the socio-cultural and gender norms that shape their lives;
2. Despite their vast reach, the positive power and value of online games often remain under-appreciated outside of gaming communities. This creates a disconnect between young gamers and their parents, caregivers and other trusted adults that may impact children's behaviour, resilience and sense of responsibility while playing games;
3. Especially for children without trusted adults or safe, secure communities in their physical surroundings, gaming communities can help reduce isolation and loneliness. In many societies, including in South Korea and other parts of East Asia, adults tend to see games very differently from children and might report that their children have issues of addiction to the games, rather than understanding what these environments can provide. Many parents also display biases against online games because they appear to lack an educational component;
4. While the online world can seem homogeneous and globalized, in fact, children bring their culture and socialization experiences into online environments, also applying them in relation to identity, behaviour and gender norms. Gaming spaces are often places where children can challenge rigid gender norms and explore their sexuality and gender identities. Research has shown that some children feel safer asking for help in gaming settings precisely because they are behind a screen. Young gamers may confide in and seek advice and help from peers, older gamers, and influencers via gaming platforms, game adjacent and social media channels;

¹ Children are people under the age of 18, as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this report, the focus is on adolescent girls and boys (teenagers, between the age of 13 and 18).

5. For the same reasons that online games are places of exploration, enjoyment and connection, gaming environments can also be places of risk and harm for children. Recent research² also shows that adults who seek sexual contact with children are experts in exploiting and capitalizing on these environments of connection, and identifies an overlap in processes of grooming for violence and grooming for sexual exploitation. This points to the potential for common approaches to the disruption of different types of violence in and through gaming platforms;
6. Adult assumptions about the risks and benefits of online games for children can lead to safety education that falls outside of children's experience or frame of reference. For example, it may emphasise 'extreme' risks instead of utilising culturally appropriate approaches to preventing violence and incivility such as abuse, harassment and bullying that are carried over from children's physical environment to the online environments in which they interact;
7. The scale, diversity and pace of connected online games presents real challenges for content and community moderation. Regional differences also play a role here, since there are regional differences in how children access games and are exposed to risk – whether through a console, personal computer, or mobile device. As with social media and other online services, there is an increasing need to apply Artificial Intelligence and automated approaches, to work alongside human moderation at scale. Ensuring both privacy and safety requires careful and transparent algorithmic design, and the sharing of technical solutions and know-how within industry is vital to scale safety mechanisms across gaming companies of all sizes and types;
8. Regulation can provide clear frameworks for action by gaming companies, and insights from civil society can help companies understand pathways to harm that children experience. However, generational gaps, a tendency towards moral panic and limited sharing of domain expertise has limited meaningful collaboration between the gaming industry, government and civil society. While civil society often gets caught up in the language of children's rights and legislation, government may emphasise legal obligations and harm disruption over the accompanying educational and preventive measures needed to create safe gaming cultures. And too often, adults are not creating sustained and action-oriented spaces for children to share their views and experiences.

2 Elizabeth D. Kilmer and Rachel Kowert (2024), available at: <https://gnet-research.org/2024/02/08/grooming-for-violence-similarities-between-radicalisation-and-grooming-processes-in-gaming-spaces/>

Avenues for Exploration

- Despite often having vast and diverse user bases, most online platforms have limited information about the identity of their users, often due to privacy and data protection considerations, or because demographic questions are not asked. This is no less true in online gaming environments, yet existing research does show high levels of gender and age obfuscation by gamers for reasons including harassment, misogyny, and the desire to play without the constraints of the identify labels that society places upon them. We need to know more about the experiences of young gamers, disaggregated by age and gender (at the very least). Faced with growing trends in violence targeting boys – such as for financial sexual extortion - and girls for gender-based violence and misogyny, nuanced insights into gender and gaming are crucial for harm disruption;
- Greater understanding is needed of the proactive role of games masters, community moderators, influencers and others could play in driving safety in gaming communities, as well as what support they would need to play that role;
- Limited exchange of knowledge and domain expertise also limits gaming developers' understanding of how design choices perpetuate toxic gender norms and prevent the creation of safe, healthy gaming experiences, without removing the excitement of some gaming genres;
- There is insufficient knowledge sharing between sectors about pathways to violence that children of different genders, identities and ages experience, and the influences that drive their community-forming, risk-taking, and help-seeking behaviour. As content and community moderation evolve to deal with scale and new modalities of interaction such a voice chat, more insight is needed into the role of AI in detecting and enabling safe, age-appropriate and gender-appropriate ways to report harm.



A Roadmap for Gender-Sensitive Child Safety in Online Gaming

Despite existing challenges and resource constraints, a roadmap is emerging for a gender-sensitive approach to child safety and empowerment in online gaming environments. Its principles include:

- 1) Shift the narrative and develop a common language to unlock the positive power of games and protect children from harm
 - Civil society organisations can help shift the narrative around online gaming to engage parents and communities on the benefits of gaming and related online interaction for children, while continuing to monitor and educate about the risks and harm;
 - Civil society and gaming companies can increase dialogue to create a common language around children's gaming behaviour, child safety and opportunities to help children navigate and challenge rigid gender norms and stereotypes;
 - Civil society organisations and gaming companies can work together to support parents, families and caregivers in navigating online gaming environments and create inter-generational dialogue.
- 2) Mainstream child and youth participation to gamify safety in and through gaming
 - Civil society and gaming companies can work together to create meaningful and sustained channels of participation by children and young people to reduce toxicity, increase wellbeing, and grow safety, diversity, inclusion and gender equity in online gaming communities;
- 3) Broker knowledge, collaboration and capacity building between domains of expertise
 - Gaming developers can help civil society organisations to understand game design, how the architecture of digital platforms actually functions, and what is and is not possible or quick to implement;
 - Game developers and adjacent platforms can also help civil society understand the language and features, and offer insights into children's gaming behaviour;
 - Civil society can partner with the gaming sector to offer evidence-based guidance around child protection, safety, education, and rights, as well as around the knowledge, attitudes and practices of children and young people in different contexts;
 - Cooperation between civil society, gaming platforms and law enforcement is also crucial to understand and shape a response to perpetration of online violence including sexual exploitation in gaming environments.

4) Build a community of communities between initiatives with similar activities and goals

➤ In recent years, several initiatives have emerged that are focused on safety and wellbeing in online gaming, game adjacent and social media platforms. These have been spearheaded by individual organizations or collectives from across the different sectors. Ensuring lines of communication and exchange between such initiatives will be crucial to amplify successes and harmonize efforts.


Final Thoughts

The world of online gaming is as vast as it is diverse, and the joy and adventure of online games crosses cultures and generations in unprecedented ways that are often misunderstood outside of the gaming world. To make the online world safe, we may need to confront the moral and social frameworks through which we view and understand social interaction by children of all gender identities in different online environments.

When discussing child safety in online gaming environments, two principles seem clear:

- 1) Gaming environments are spaces for healthy risk-taking, boundary testing, entertainment, relaxation, learning, socializing, and joy. However, these reasons also make them spaces where children are exposed to negative risk, violence and other forms of harm, and this is often deeply influenced by rigid gender norms;
- 2) Harnessing the power of games to protect and empower children of different ages and gender identities is not only possible, it is essential. This requires ongoing engagement from children who game, close collaboration between sectors, and a new language and frame of reference.

ECPAT International is excited to be part of this new frontier in child safety from violence. Join us and all the partners, we are working with to shift the narrative and build innovative solutions with and for children so they can stay safe and go on gaming.



For more information or to join us on this initiative, please contact Amy amyc@ecpat.org or Francesco francescoc@ecpat.org.