

GENDER, SAFETY AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS IN ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS



From Brussels workshop - June 2024

This brief summarises a June 2024 workshop hosted by ECPAT International, bringing together child rights representatives, researchers, and online gaming companies to discuss gender, safety, and help-seeking behaviours in online environments. Emphasising the value of collaborative spaces, participants explored challenges, identified gaps, and proposed key actions aimed at ensuring gender-sensitive children's safety in online gaming environments. The discussions left participants motivated to pursue future actions by leveraging diverse expertise for the benefit of children's online safety.

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF ONLINE GAMING AND ITS CHALLENGES

Online gaming is a critical activity for fostering meaningful communities and relationships among gamers. From a gender perspective, participants noted that girls often engage in online gaming for social interactions and community building, whereas **boys are drawn to both community and achievement aspects**. Across genders, participants discussed how all children find a sense of community in online games; they perceive online friendships as equivalent to offline ones, and online interactions as strengthening their offline relationships. In addition, it has been recognized that online games offer experiential, narrative, and visual elements that can help children engage in challenging conversations on various topics, such as gender norms, sexuality and sexual orientation.

Participants also acknowledged that online spaces can be a hub of toxic and abusive habits and that **some children normalize these behaviours and do not view them as risky or damaging**. However, participants also agree

that **online gaming platforms with robust community standards and preventive measures can effectively mitigate and reduce such negative behaviours**.

Research indicates that toxicity levels correlate with age: younger boys perceive online gaming as safer compared to older age groups. Both boys and girls less than 10 feel less safe as they transition to platforms used by adults, where the level of toxicity that one can encounter while gaming online increases proportionally to the number of adult presences. A key highlight of the discussion is that children of diverse gender groups respond differently to the increased chance of having abusive interactions online.

HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOURS IN ONLINE GAMING

A key point discussed was how children, especially boys, use gaming communities to seek out help. These online spaces often provide a sense of community and support, making it easier for children to ask for support when they encounter problems. The discussions emphasized the

importance of these platforms in creating a safe environment where boys feel comfortable sharing concerns, thus challenging rigid ideas and biases around masculinity.

Participants emphasized the importance of providing user-friendly reporting tools and ensuring timely resource sharing on platforms, to effectively tackle online safety issues. Gendered resources are crucial to provide appropriate and tailored resources to the diverse gendered experiences and needs of children. They also highlighted the role of training community moderators to improve their ability to recognize and respond to abuse, considering gender-specific behavioral patterns for enhanced platform safety.

SOLUTIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES

During the two-days discussion, participants noted that knowledge gaps persist in understanding and responding to both positive and negative trends in child online gaming experiences. In particular,

discussions highlighted gender disparities in online grooming and exploitation methods, affecting boys differently than girls and LGBTQIA+ children. The lack of gender-disaggregated research impedes a comprehensive understanding of online abuse dynamics and hinders the development of effective preventive tools. They stressed the importance of transparently sharing research findings, **especially data**

disaggregated by gender, to inform effective strategies and policies across child rights organization, researchers, and tech companies.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONLINE SAFETY

Part of the conversation revolved around the importance of caregivers' supervision and awareness of children's interaction online. Enhancing digital

literacy among parents and caregivers remains challenging but essential. However, the group recognised how the responsibility for children's online safety extends beyond parents and caregivers to include tech companies, policymakers, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Effective policies, regulations, and tech measures tailored to the unique aspects of prioritizing safety in online gaming environments is crucial.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The intersection of children's age groups and gender identity in gaming environments underscores the need for nuanced research and tailored interventions. While girls' experiences are relatively well-documented, gaps in understanding boys' experiences persist, hindering comprehensive child protection data and tools development. Collaboration among stakeholders—CSOs, tech and online gaming companies, and researchers—is essential to inform safer product design and policies that reflect children's diverse experiences.

THE FUTURE OF CHILD SAFETY ON ONLINE GAMING PLATFORMS

In conclusion, the unanimous commitment of participants underscores a shared vision for the future of gender-sensitive child safety in online gaming platforms. Moving forward, the group has articulated a joint purpose to foster ongoing dialogue and to share the latest research and best practices among themselves, with a focus on developing actionable solutions to enhance child safety online, particularly emphasizing gender-specific approaches to be implemented in online gaming environments. Participants recognized

that each of them has a role to play: children's rights organizations are crucial in collecting data and amplifying children's voices, ensuring their perspectives inform the development of targeted and effective tools and policies; meanwhile, tech and online gaming companies provide resources for conducting research and gathering data on tools and behaviours that contribute to online child protection, with a particular emphasis on gendered data breakdowns.

ECPAT, in collaboration with civil society organizations, the tech and online gaming sector, and researchers, is committed to establishing a knowledge-sharing hub where

sector leaders collaborate to identify gaps, foster ongoing dialogue, and develop effective solutions. This initiative is crucial for safeguarding and strengthening child safety on online gaming platforms by facilitating the exchange of research and best practices. With a specific focus on gender, especially highlighting the unique needs of boys, this effort aims to ensure comprehensive protection for all children in digital spaces.

