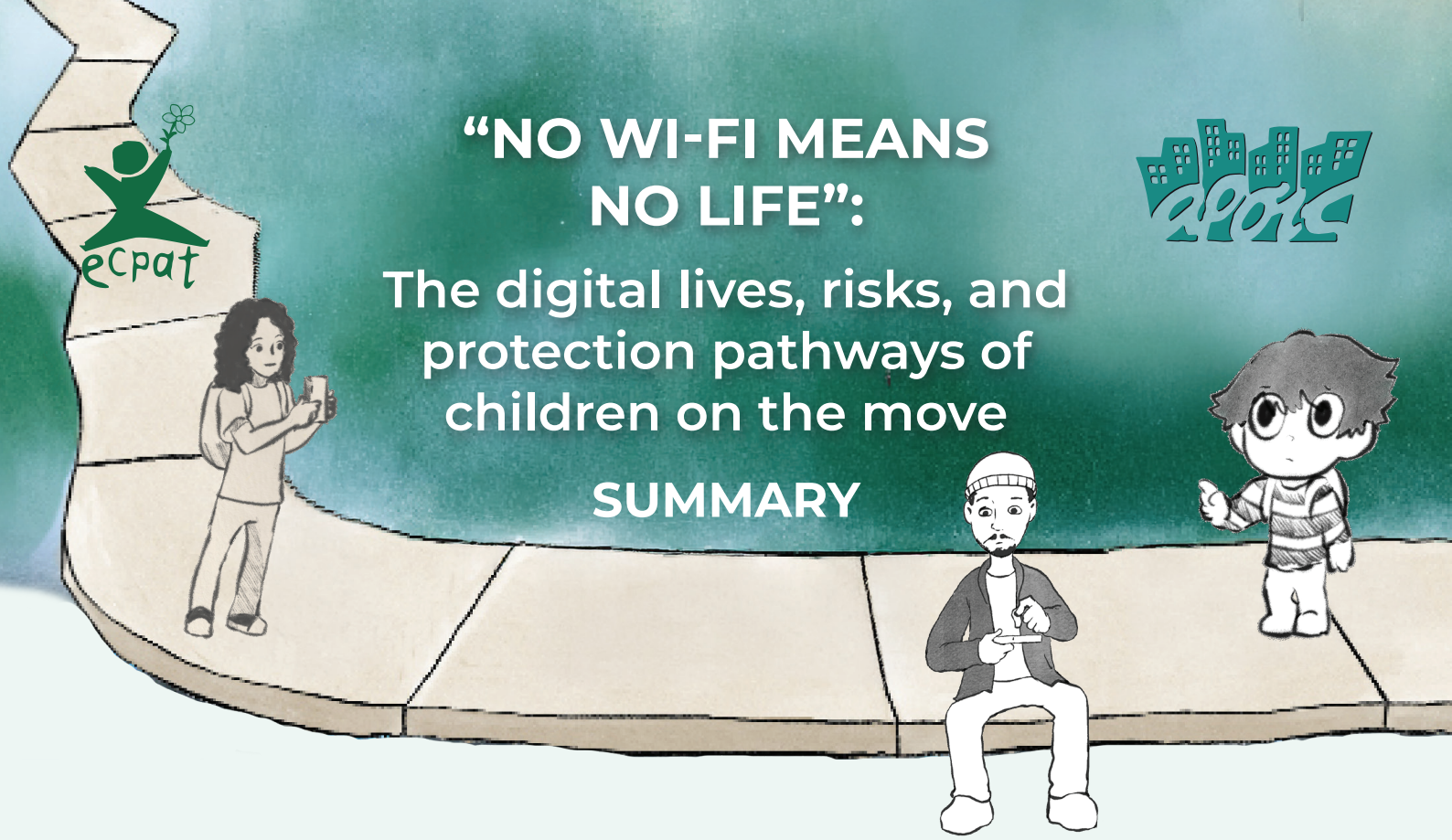


“NO WI-FI MEANS NO LIFE”:

The digital lives, risks, and protection pathways of children on the move

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

ECPAT International, in collaboration with ARSIS - Association for the Social Support of Youth in Greece, conducted research between 2025 and 2026 to examine how children on the move engage with digital technologies, the risks they encounter—particularly those related to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse—and the conditions required to build safer digital environments. Linked to parallel research in Latin America in the context of Venezuelan migration, this study addresses a critical gap in evidence at the intersection of human mobility, digital engagement, and child protection.

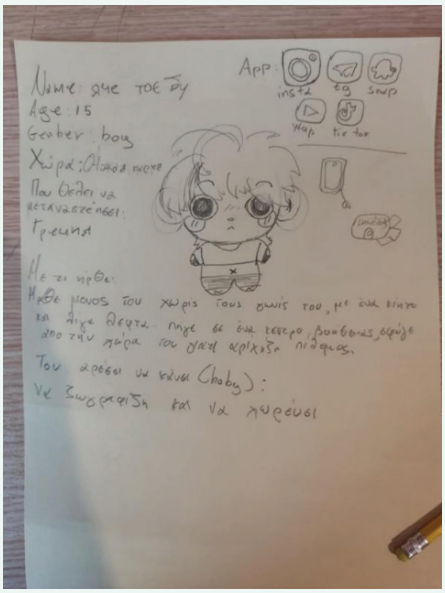
At its core, the research centres on children’s voices and lived experiences. It moves beyond reductive narratives that portray children on the move solely as passive victims, instead highlighting their agency, resilience, and diverse identities. The findings aim to inform policies, programmes, and technological design processes that are more responsive to the realities of children affected by displacement and crisis.

The research project adopted a qualitative multi-methods design. Participatory sessions were conducted with 32 children on the move (aged 14–17), including 9 girls and 23 boys living in ARSIS accommodation facilities. Through structured and playful activities, girls and boys created and narrated fictional digital characters (avatars), allowing them to safely express experiences, perceptions of risk, and ideas about digital safety without requiring personal disclosure.

To complement children’s perspectives, the research included interviews with 17 service providers in Greece and 25 global key informants working on digital safety and child protection. These interviews explored patterns in children’s use of technology, including the influence of gender norms and roles, as well as emerging risks related to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in crisis contexts.

FROM IMAGINATION TO IDENTITY: THE AVATARS DESIGNED BY CHILDREN

During the participatory sessions, children created 12 fictional avatars to represent the experiences of children on the move.[1]



Nikolai **(15, boy, South Korea)**

Created by: Sion[2] (15, girl, Ukraine), Kochiq (16, girl, Georgia) and Sataez (14, girl, Iraq)

Delua **(18, girl, Egypt)**

Created by: Marshall (15, girl, Iran), Mon (17, boy, Egypt), Maro (17, boy, Egypt), Yasu (17, boy, Egypt), (Kiro, 17, boy, Egypt)

Maria 1 **(16, girl, Pakistan)**

Created by: Olec (15, girl, Belarus) and Emi (14, girl, DRC)

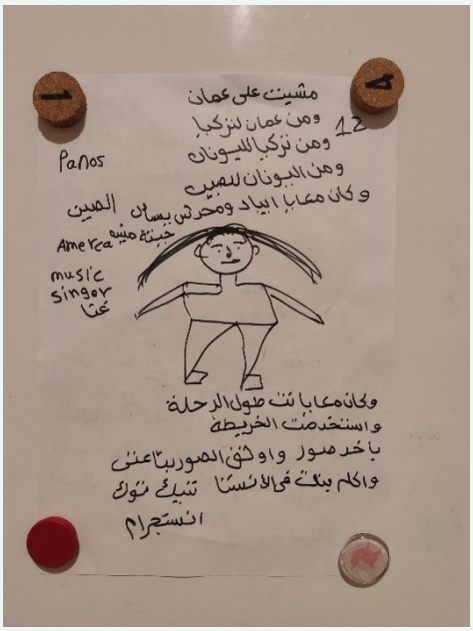
Omar **(16, boy, Pakistan)**

Created by: Momo (17, boy, Afghanistan), Ali (16, boy, Pakistan), and Samwi (16, boy, Egypt)

1 In this report, the names of the avatars are written in *italics* to differentiate them from the participants' names, which are always presented together with their age, gender, and country of origin.
2 The children chose their own nicknames, as part of the ethical considerations guiding the research.

Maria 2 **(15, girl, Ukraine)**

Created by: Portugal (15, boy, Egypt), Kitrinos (17, boy, Egypt), Jack (15, boy, Afghanistan), Lavi (17, boy, Afghanistan) and Titi (15, boy, Guinea)

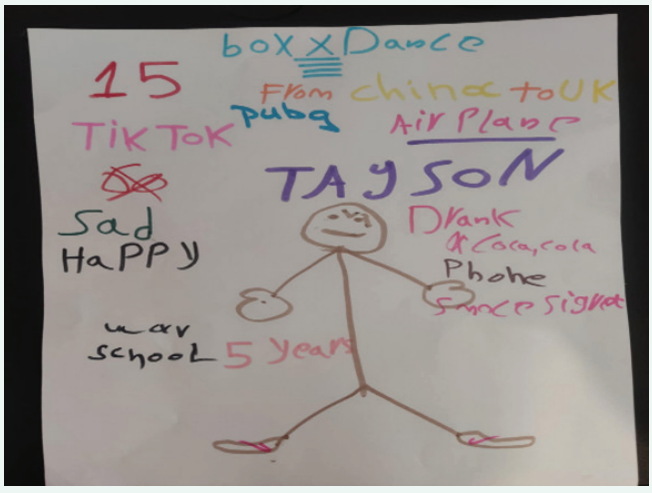


Panos **(12, boy, China)**

Created by: Makseky (17, boy, Egypt)[3]

Rakel **(16, girl, UK)**

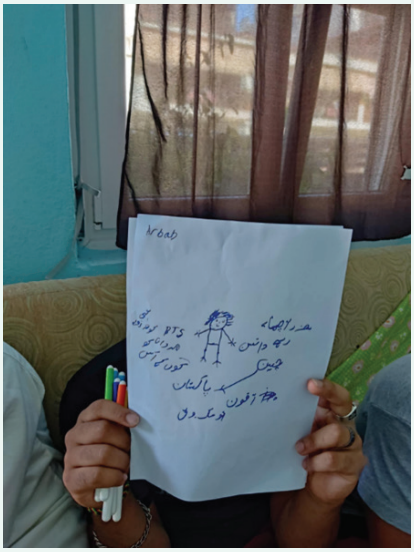
Created by: Raham (15, girl, Palestine), Ryan (17, girl, Somalia), and Marshal (15, girl, Iran)



Tayson **(15, boy, China)**

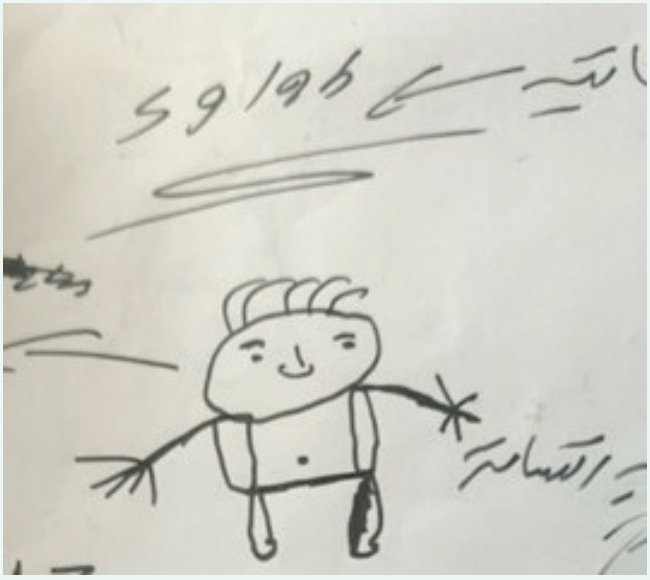
Created by: Maro (17, boy, Afghanistan) and Yasu (17, boy, Egypt)

3 Makseky did not attend the first session, during which the groups were formed and the children began creating their avatars. When he joined the second session, the facilitators offered him the option to join an already established group or to create his own avatar. Makseky chose to work independently and developed his own avatar throughout the remaining sessions.



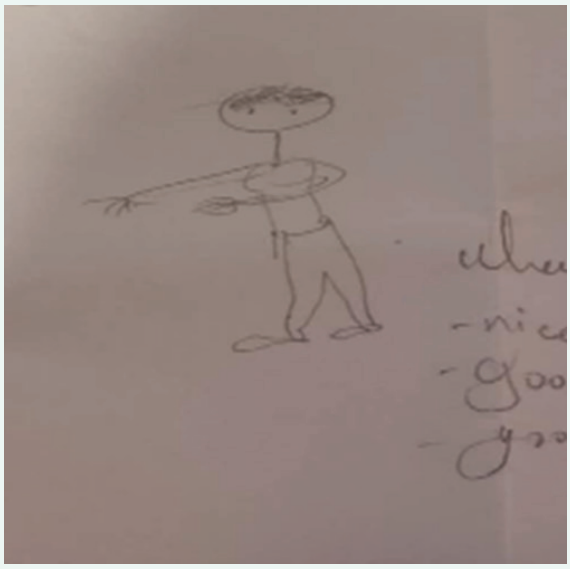
BTS **(16, boy, China)**

Created by: Messi (16, boy, Somalia), Joni (17, boy, Sudan), and Samwi (16, boy, Pakistan)



Mohamed **(17, boy, Afghanistan)**

Created by: Ali (17, boy, Egypt), Walaa (17, boy, Egypt)



Wan **(17, boy, South Sudan)**

Created by: Ryan (17, girl, Somalia), Swaydy (17, girl, Somalia), and Mc (17, boy, South Sudan)

Omar Idris **(16, boy, Somalia)**

Created by: Neimar (17, boy, Sudan), Dadaa (17, boy, Somalia), and Hassan (15, boy, Syria)

CONTEXT: CHILDREN ON THE MOVE'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MOBILITY

> *If you're underage, the trip is twice as hard. Everyone looks at you differently.*
>
> (Portugal, 15, boy, Egypt)

The research project situated children's digital lives within the broader context of human mobility, which, as described in children's avatar stories, is characterised by instability, uncertainty, and overlapping unmet needs. Children's narratives reveal that mobility is rarely a single event; rather, it is an ongoing process marked by transitions, disruptions, and adaptation.

The reasons for mobility varied widely, including conflict, economic hardship, family dynamics, and aspirations for a better future. Regardless of these differences, children consistently described experiences of risk during transit, including violence, exploitation, and emotional distress. Language barriers, social isolation, and bureaucratic challenges further compound these difficulties.

At the same time, the accounts of girls and boys on the move also reflect hope and determination. Mobility is often framed as a pathway to safety and opportunity, even when it is accompanied by significant hardship. This duality underscores the complexity of children's experiences and challenges simplistic representations of vulnerability.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Boys and girls on the move use digital technologies in ways similar to their peers, including for entertainment, education, and social interaction. However, mobility conditions shape how these technologies are prioritised, with digital tools becoming essential not only for everyday use but also for survival and adaptation. In this context, technology functions both as a practical resource and an emotional lifeline, with mobile phones playing a central role in communication, navigation, access to information, and social connection.

Children's use of technology evolves throughout their journeys. While in their countries of origin it largely reflects typical use, during transit it becomes critical for accessing real-time information and staying connected. In destination countries, digital practices expand to support integration, such as language learning and accessing services. Across contexts, technology also contributes to emotional well-being, offering comfort, distraction, and a sense of connection.

The study also provides insights into aspects often overlooked in humanitarian literature, such as entertainment and the financial use of technology among children. All avatars incorporated some form of leisure use, most commonly through social media and video platforms. However, reflections from two boys who created the avatar *BTS* highlighted how leisure can become secondary, often overshadowed by the need for survival and adaptation. As Messi (16, boy, Somalia) explained, *"He uses TikTok, but only for fun when he's not tired. He watches other people's journeys, and it gives him ideas."*

Children's narratives also showed that digital technologies are used for financial purposes, reflecting both aspirations and vulnerabilities. For example, *Tayson* was portrayed as using social media to gain followers and earn money, while *Delua* lost her savings through an online scam. In contrast, *Maria 1*'s story illustrated how financial use of technology can be linked to survival and sexual exploitation. These examples highlight gendered differences, with boys' use framed as aspirational, while girls' experiences were more closely associated with economic vulnerability and risks of exploitation.

Access to and experiences of technology are uneven and shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, socio-economic conditions, nationality, and stage of mobility. While boys and girls reported broadly similar uses, some differences emerged. For example, online gaming was only depicted among boy avatars, and while both boys and girls were portrayed as aspiring influencers, gendered distinctions were evident in how they were represented: girls were more often associated with sexualised self-presentation, while boys were described as "cool" or "interesting".

Boys and girls' accounts also reflected awareness of inequalities linked to country of origin and mobility status. Avatars from European countries or with regular migration pathways were portrayed as having more stable access to devices and connectivity, whereas those from non-European contexts faced greater barriers. In some cases, these inequalities intersected with gender, further limiting access. For instance, the story of *Delua*, an avatar girl from Egypt, highlighted how gender norms and socio-economic constraints can restrict girls' access to digital technologies.

Finally, the stage of the mobility journey strongly influenced how technology was used and perceived. Boys and girls who had been in Greece for longer described fewer access barriers and used technology for leisure, exploration, and self-expression. In contrast, more recent arrivals emphasised its role in survival, pointing to challenges such as limited connectivity, phone confiscation during transit, reliance on borrowed devices, and the emotional distress associated with disconnection.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED RISKS AND HARMS IN CONTEXTS OF HUMAN MOBILITY

> *So I think this thing is similar to gender-based violence. It's happening everywhere to all children, regardless of if they are in a conflict context or not. But in a conflict context, the risk is getting higher and higher.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 11, humanitarian sector)

Discussions about online risks, particularly those related to sexual exploitation, did not emerge easily among either children or support workers in humanitarian settings. Boys and girls often initially denied or minimised these risks, suggesting a combination of limited awareness, normalisation, and reluctance to disclose sensitive experiences.

Despite these challenges, several forms of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation were identified. Through their stories, children depicted experiences of online sexual harassment and grooming for sexual purposes. Both children's narratives and the accounts of interviewees indicate that perpetrators exploit the intersection of structural conditions, gender norms, technological inequalities, and the broader hardships associated with mobility. These factors do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another, creating layered risks that perpetrators can exploit.

In addition to sexual exploitation, a range of non-sexual technology-facilitated harms were identified, including scams, misinformation, cyberbullying, hacking, unwanted contact, and loss of connectivity. Key informants and service providers also highlighted exposure to harmful content and recruitment attempts by organised crime or armed groups through social media.

Gender norms play a significant role in shaping perceptions of risk. Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation is widely associated with girls, while boys are more commonly linked to non-sexual risks such as fraud. As Sion (15, girl, Ukraine) explained, *"Girls and boys don't have the same problems online. Girls get more scary messages"*, suggesting sexual content. However, the few cases shared by service providers involved boys, highlighting potential biases in recognition and reporting, as well as barriers to disclosure among boys.

Boys and girls indicated that they often rely on individual, behaviour-focused strategies (such as limiting what they share online, blocking unknown users, and adjusting privacy settings) to protect themselves from digital harms. However, these responses are shaped by gender norms, which influence how risks are experienced and addressed. Girls were more frequently portrayed as emotionally vulnerable to manipulation, particularly in relation to belonging and survival needs, while boys tended to minimise harmful experiences or frame them through humour or indifference.

ONLINE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Boys and girls conceptualised digital safety in holistic terms, integrating emotional support, practical guidance, and broader protection systems. They did not distinguish sharply between online and in-person risks; instead, they view safety as a collective responsibility involving families, peers, humanitarian actors, governments, and technology companies.

Peers play a particularly significant role, acting as sources of information, emotional support, and practical advice. These informal networks often function as primary protection mechanisms, especially in contexts where formal systems are limited.

However, the study identifies substantial structural gaps. Digital safety is rarely integrated into humanitarian programming, needs assessments, or funding frameworks. Service providers face constraints related to workload, limited training, and insufficient resources. Legal and institutional systems are often fragmented, reactive, and not adapted to the realities of boys and girls on the move. These challenges are further compounded by mobility, language barriers, cultural biases and the lack of coordinated collaboration between humanitarian actors, child protection systems and technology companies.

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES: GAPS, RESPONSIBILITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

The report highlights the critical yet underdeveloped role of technology companies in protecting children on the move. Boys and girls expressed clear expectations that platforms should proactively prevent harm rather than merely respond after incidents occur. Across the groups, boys and girls on the move consistently expressed a desire for stronger safety features on social media platforms, framing protection as embedded in the design of digital services rather than left solely to users' actions.

> *If apps can track us, why can't they also protect us?*
>
> (Emi, 14, girl, DCR)

In contrast, current approaches are often reactive and insufficiently tailored to children's needs. Detection systems tend to focus on public spaces, while many forms of harm occur in private messaging and closed groups. Reporting mechanisms are frequently complex, language-dependent, and disconnected from support services.

Key informants also emphasise broader systemic issues, including limited transparency in how platforms operate and insufficient regulatory frameworks to ensure accountability. The tension between privacy and protection presents additional challenges, particularly in relation to data minimisation and encrypted communications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNANCE AND COORDINATION

- Embed digital safety concerns within existing coordination structures.
- Establish structured dialogue between humanitarian institutions and technology companies.

HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Strengthen advocacy with donors to highlight the protective and preventive value of integrating digital dimensions into existing interventions, while promoting more equitable geographic distribution of digital safety funding for children on the move.
- Fund digital education initiatives that counter myths and misunderstandings about technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Provide targeted training for case managers, social workers, educators, and frontline staff (including interpreters, cultural mediators and other para-professionals) on preventing, identifying, documenting, and responding to technology-facilitated harm.

CONTINUUM OF SERVICES

- Integrate questions about technology use and online experiences into routine case assessments and management processes, using trauma-informed and child-sensitive approaches.
- Integrate technology-facilitated manifestation of child sexual exploitation and abuse into existing systems such as child protection and gender-based monitoring systems.
- Ensure that services are bias-free when supporting children on the move.
- Establish clear referral pathways for cases involving technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including psychosocial, legal, and platform-related responses.
- Ensure continuity of care and follow-up, recognising that children's mobility often disrupts traditional case management models.
- Develop safe spaces where online risks can be discussed openly, recognising children's need for digital safe environments.

POLICIES AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

> *All the big countries will make big laws for safe internet.*
>
> (Samwi, 16, boy, Egypt)

- Digital safety and technology-related risks should be built into national and regional child-protection and humanitarian systems, so platform safety measures connect with in-person protection and support.
- Strengthen alignment between child protection, gender-based violence, justice, and digital policy frameworks to avoid fragmented responses.
- Set clear due-diligence expectations so platforms can identify, prevent, and reduce risks to children, including those affected by mobility.
- Ensure regulations address end-to-end encrypted services, private messaging, and closed groups, where much of the harm identified in this study occurs.

CHILD AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

- Involve children, in safe and ethical ways, in the co-creation of recommendations and solutions to develop safe online environments.
- Recognise and strengthen peer approaches, which children identified as one of their main sources of knowledge about online risks.
- Mainstream digital safety topics across group activities, community-based interventions, and work with families.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

> *The people who run the internet should fix things.*
>
> (Kitrinos, 17, boy, Egypt)

- Anchor platform safety efforts in child-rights–based and privacy-respecting approaches.
- Adopt child-rights–based, safety-by-design approaches that operate across both public and private spaces, including private messaging and closed groups where many harms occur.
- Regularly assess whether detection and safety systems reflect how children actually use platforms, particularly in humanitarian and mobility contexts.
- Ensure that platform reporting mechanisms are connected to clear referral pathways that enable children to access timely support.
- Strengthen collaboration with child protection and mental health services to ensure that children reporting harm online can access appropriate care and support beyond the platform environment.
- Promote greater coordination across platforms, regulators, and service providers to protect children online. This includes developing child-centred regulatory frameworks, setting clearer expectations for proactive risk mitigation, and ensuring accountability across the technology supply chain.
- Provide clear, child-friendly explanations of how algorithms, visibility, and data sharing work.
- Develop accessible digital safety information in multiple languages commonly spoken by children on the move.
- Support education initiatives throughout social media platforms that address common misconceptions about technology-facilitated risks and harms.
- Co-design simple, accessible, and trauma-informed reporting tools with child-protection organisations and establish safe referral pathways that link platform responses to offline support services.

ecpat
INTERNATIONAL

328/1 Phaya Thai Road,
Ratchathewi, Bangkok,
10400, Thailand

Telephone: +662 215 3388
Email: info@ecpat.org
Website: www.ecpat.org

For more information: