



# “NO WI-FI MEANS NO LIFE”:



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



### METHODS AND PROCEDURES



ECPAT International was awarded a project grant by Safe Online to spearhead a groundbreaking research project on the digital safety of children on the move, with a focus on Greece and linkages to another project focused on the Venezuelan crisis in Latin America. This project, conducted between 2024 and 2026, adopted an innovative, child-participatory approach, empowering children to voice their experiences and perceptions. The research employed a qualitative approach, including participatory sessions with 32 children on the move in Greece, and interviews with 25 humanitarian and technology representatives at the global level, and 17 service providers in Greece.

An Advisory Committee composed of organisations and individual experts was established to provide knowledge, expertise, and guidance on the project’s design and implementation. Members of the Advisory Committee represented organisations and entities with a specific focus on humanitarian issues, gender, and child protection, both globally and in Greece.

### METHODS

#### PARTICIPATORY SESSIONS WITH CHILDREN

##### Rationale

Participatory methods were selected to explore children’s use of digital technologies and online interactions, while also enabling the co-creation of recommendations for safer online environments. During the participatory sessions, children were invited to create fictional avatar characters representing the experiences of children on the move. This approach was central to the methodology, as it allowed participants to engage with sensitive topics, such as migration-related hardship, technology-facilitated sexual exploitation, and coping strategies, at a safe emotional distance, enabling expression without disclosing personal or identifying information.

The participatory sessions were also intentionally designed to incorporate creative, narrative, and playful tools. Humour emerged as a meaningful element of this process. Across all groups, children frequently used humour through their avatars to exaggerate, soften, or create distance from difficult experiences. This playful tone appeared to help children

navigate hardship with less emotional burden, while simultaneously providing space to express their hopes, aspirations, and adolescent imagination.

Building on trauma-informed and gender-sensitive practice, the methodology allowed for the generation of knowledge and the exploration of recommendations in a safer emotional environment, offering children the choice and control over what they wanted to share and how, and allowing children to feel empowered, valued, and respected while generating recommendations to inform policies and practices.

### Sample

A total of 32 children (9 girls and 23 boys) aged 14–17, representing diverse countries of origin and mobility backgrounds, participated in the sessions. Participants were identified and recruited by ARSIS through their community-based programmes and protection services, ensuring that recruitment was carried out by trusted professionals familiar with the children’s circumstances. The inclusion criteria considered age, experience of migration or displacement, and regular engagement with support services.

Given that participants were enrolled in ARSIS programmes, ARSIS professionals assessed children’s emotional readiness to participate in the research. Children experiencing acute distress or facing protection risks that could compromise their well-being were not invited to take part.

The sample reflected diverse backgrounds in terms of country of origin, migration status, length and stage of the migration journey, and access to digital technologies.<sup>1</sup> Efforts were made to ensure gender-diverse participation; however, as boys are more

commonly represented among children on the move in the programme context, the number of boys (23) participating was higher than that of girls (9).

Participation took place in small group settings (5–10 participants per group) to support trust, meaningful engagement, and safeguarding. All participants took part voluntarily and provided informed assent, with consent obtained from caregivers or legal guardians where required. Throughout the process, children’s identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms and fictional avatars, and no personal or identifying information was collected during the sessions.

### Participatory activities

The methodology consisted of a series of six structured group sessions, delivered to small groups of children. Sessions were facilitated by trained teams comprising two facilitators, a note-taker, and a designated safeguarding focal point, ensuring meaningful participation and robust safeguarding.

*A Walking Together Toolkit* was developed by a team of consultants and reviewed by ARSIS and ECPAT. The toolkit provided detailed descriptions of the tools and step-by-step instructions for the facilitators. In addition, a facilitation guide accompanied the toolkit, offering further guidance for facilitators on facilitating the sessions and systematically documenting observations and notes.

Each session followed a consistent, predictable structure, including a welcome and icebreaker, one or two participatory activities, and a collective reflection, to create a safe, inclusive, and trusting environment. The sessions were designed to be iterative and cumulative: insights generated in earlier sessions (e.g.

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<sup>1</sup> Countries of origin included: Afghanistan (5), Belarus (1), Congo (1), Egypt (11), Georgia (1), Guinea (1), Iran (1), Iraq (1), Pakistan (1), Palestine (2), South Sudan (1), Somalia (3), Sudan (1), Ukraine (1), Syria (1). The majority of participants were unaccompanied children living in shelters, while six participants were accompanied, living with family members or relatives.

technology use patterns or identified risks) were revisited and deepened in later sessions, culminating in the co-creation of visions for safer digital environments. However, each session was also designed as a standalone activity to ensure flexibility.

Each session incorporated a mix of activities, including drawing, storytelling, and games, to encourage creative expression and meaningful participation. Overall, each session incorporated the following topics/elements:

- » Session 1: Introduction to the project, with a focus on building rapport and establishing a safe, inclusive space for participation and open discussion.
- » Session 2: Exploration of participants' digital lives through a media mapping activity, identifying how they use technology and patterns in their everyday practices.
- » Session 3: Participatory analysis of digital experiences, examining both risks (e.g. privacy concerns, exploitation) and opportunities (e.g. learning, connection).
- » Session 4: Presentation and discussion of fictional characters created by participants, illustrating how these avatars navigate online environments.
- » Session 5: Co-creation of advocacy messages aimed at addressing online risks and promoting safer digital practices.
- » Session 6: Participatory reflection on the process, consolidating key learnings and identifying messages for sharing findings more broadly.

Each session lasted no more than 2 hours, including 15 minutes at the beginning for introductions and greetings, and 15 minutes at the end for reflections. The sessions took place at the Youth Support Centre run by ARSIS, fit within its regular schedule, with a maximum of 2 sessions per week. The

frequency of the sessions was intended to balance children's busy schedules, including school and extracurricular activities, with the possibility that their stay in Greece or at ARSIS shelters may be temporary.

Children decided how to form their groups based on prior familiarity, affinity at the time of the session, or shared language. Interpreters were made available for any child or group that required support. The workshops were conducted in Arabic, Dari/Farsi, Urdu, Somali, Greek, French, English, and Ukrainian, with interpretation support as needed. The availability of interpreters for any child or group that required support was a key element of the methodology, ensuring that children were free to communicate in the language they felt most comfortable with.

Facilitators from ARSIS employed trauma-informed approaches, ensuring activities were sensitive to participants' needs. Specific strategies, such as additional icebreaker exercises or emotional support options, were available for participants who required a break or experienced distress. Facilitators remained attentive to individual needs, providing a quiet space or tailored support as necessary. All session outcomes were carefully documented while maintaining participant anonymity, ensuring that children's voices were respected and protected without compromising their safety or well-being.

Throughout the process, strict ethical and safeguarding protocols were applied, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and clear referral pathways for support. Documentation relied on anonymised activity forms, facilitator observations, and creative outputs, with particular attention to how experiences and perspectives differed by age, gender, and other intersectional factors highlighted by the children themselves.

## INTERVIEWS WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS IN GREECE

### Rationale

Given the key role of service providers in working directly with children on the move, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in Greece and explored specific trends in how children on the move use digital technology. Service providers were also invited to share their knowledge on emerging issues and risks they observe when crises arise regarding technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, the interviews helped identify potential challenges, gaps, and opportunities to ensure safer digital environments for children on the move and to support those facing technology-facilitated harms.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allow the collection of information on predefined topics essential to the research, while maintaining the flexibility to incorporate emerging and participant-driven topics of interest.

### Sample

ARSIS professionals drew on their national networks to identify service providers supporting children on the move. A total of 17 interviews were conducted with service providers based in Greece, including 10 men and 7 women. The sample included shelter coordinators, psychologists, educators, lawyers, social workers, and legal guardians, among others. The majority of participants represented organisations from the humanitarian and child protection sectors, such as the International Rescue Committee, Home Project, SOS Children's Villages, and the Greek Police. Two institutions specialising in digital safety were also included in the sample. Their diverse professional roles and locations (Athens, Thessaloniki, Crete, Larisa, Kozani, and Poligyros) provided a broad perspective on the experiences of children on the move.

All participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- » Over 18 years of age;
- » At least 12 months of experience working in humanitarian settings in Greece, in fields such as social work, psychology, legal aid, health, or other forms of social or child protection support;
- » At least 12 months of direct experience working with children on the move or affected by crisis.

The initial plan was to conduct 15 interviews. However, after completing the first 10, the ARSIS team perceived that the initial interviews were generating limited insights directly relevant to the project's objectives. In response, additional efforts were made to identify participants with more direct experience in digital risks, leading to the inclusion of two additional professionals.

### The interviews

Following ethical approval, the semi-structured interview guide underwent several stages to ensure it was contextualised and met the project's needs. The proposed interview topics were selected and reviewed by the ARSIS and ECPAT International teams as part of the design, contextualisation, and planning process. Additional revisions and changes were made to ensure the interview is clear and contextualised.

Once the final document was approved, ARSIS invited a small sample of professionals to participate in a pilot test of the tool. Further revisions were made based on this test to ensure the interview was clear and appropriate to the context. Only after completing these steps did the formal data collection begin.

The interview topics included service providers' perspectives on children on the move's digital experiences, with a focus on the types of devices used, patterns

of internet access, and the challenges encountered when navigating digital technologies during migration and upon arrival in host countries. The interviews also examined how children use digital platforms and how these practices are shaped by factors such as age, gender, and cultural background. In addition, they explored the role of digital technologies in shaping migration experiences, decisions, and expectations, including the influence of online content and social media.

Further topics addressed perceived and experienced risks of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, children's awareness of these risks and protective strategies, and gendered patterns in perpetrators' tactics. Finally, the interviews examined case management practices, including reporting pathways, access to support services, institutional responses, and gaps in existing policies and practices to ensure safer digital environments for children on the move.

## INTERVIEWS WITH KEY INFORMANTS AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

### Rationale

To complement the perspectives of service providers in Greece, representatives from the humanitarian and technology sectors were also interviewed. In addition to exploring how children on the move use digital technology and experience technology-facilitated harms, the key informant interviews focused on structural and systemic issues related to humanitarian child protection programming, as well as on how digital platforms function and address children's digital experiences.

### Sample

ECPAT International identified potential participants based on its networks. The Advisory Group also contributed by suggesting potential interviewees.

A total of 25 key informants were interviewed for this study, representing a broad range of expertise at the global level. The group was diverse in terms of gender, comprising 17 women and 8 men, and included professionals working in child protection, humanitarian response, digital safety, gender, and the technology sector. Participants came from international organisations, civil society, and independent expert backgrounds, offering perspectives from across the world.

All participants met the following inclusion criteria:

- » Over 18 years of age.
- » At least last 12 months working in child protection humanitarian organisations or tech companies.
- » Knowledge on child protection issues in humanitarian settings, in particular sexual exploitation of children and technology-facilitated harms.

### The interviews

Following ethical approval, the semi-structured interview guide went through several stages of revision to ensure it was appropriately contextualised and aligned with the project's objectives. The guide was refined to improve clarity and relevance, and it was adapted according to interviewees' areas of expertise and the contexts in which they worked.

The interviews explored participants' global and regional perspectives on children on the move's digital experiences, with a focus on the types of devices used, patterns of internet access, and the challenges children face when navigating digital technologies during migration and upon arrival in host countries. They also examined how children use digital platforms and how these practices are shaped by factors such as age, gender, and cultural background. In addition, the interviews explored the role of digital technologies in shaping migration

experiences, decisions, and expectations, including the influence of online content and social media.

Finally, the interviews addressed programme design, policy, and system-level responses. This included the extent to which digital safety is integrated into humanitarian and child protection programming, donor priorities, cross-sector collaboration between humanitarian actors and technology companies, existing reporting and response mechanisms, and the key challenges in preventing and responding to technology-facilitated harm in humanitarian settings. Interviews with representatives from the technology sector further examined platform-level safeguards, detection and moderation practices, algorithmic risks, and opportunities to strengthen child-centred, rights-respecting digital protection for children on the move.

## **ANALYSIS AND VALIDATION OF FINDINGS**

Notes from the participatory sessions with children were recorded by notetakers and facilitators in Greek and later translated into English for analysis. Documentation forms from each session and group were systematically reviewed to identify emerging themes. The information generated through the avatars was extracted and organised, including patterns of technology use, technology-facilitated harms, and children's ideas and proposed solutions. The avatar stories and children's narratives were then discussed in dedicated analysis meetings with ARSIS facilitators. These meetings supported the validation of findings, ensured translation accuracy, and allowed facilitators to enrich the analysis with contextual observations from the sessions.

For the interviews with both key informants and service providers, the ECPAT International research team conducted an initial thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and cross-cutting issues. Particular attention was given to similarities and differences across regions, as well as variations in perspectives between humanitarian, child protection, and technology-sector actors. In the case of service provider interviews, a series of analytical meetings was held with the ARSIS team to ensure translation accuracy and preserve the meaning intended by interviewees, as the original interviews were conducted in Greek. These discussions also provided valuable contextual insights, including challenges related to sample identification, interpretation of non-verbal cues, and the broader context of data collection, thereby strengthening the depth and reliability of the analysis.

All data were subsequently coded using Atlas.ti, enabling the systematic organisation and analysis of themes across data sources.

To further strengthen the analysis, several spaces were created to discuss and validate the emerging findings. A validation and discussion meeting with 15 children on the move was held in March 2026. During this session, ARSIS facilitators presented an overview of the findings and revisited the avatars and stories created by participants. Children shared their reactions, validated key insights, and contributed additional reflections. Similarly, in April 2026, ARSIS facilitated a meeting with 14 service providers who had participated in the interviews. This session provided an opportunity to discuss the findings, including both children's perspectives and interview data, and to gather additional input from service providers.

The findings were also discussed in two roundtables: one with humanitarian and gender experts in December 2025, and another with representatives from technology companies in February 2026. These discussions focused on gathering participants' reflections and strengthening actionable recommendations for policy and programming. In addition, the preliminary report was shared with the Advisory Committee for feedback.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

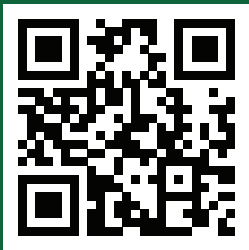
The ECPAT International team, in collaboration with ARSIS, developed a research protocol outlining the methods and procedures for data collection. The protocol was reviewed and approved by an Ad Hoc Committee composed of three professionals with experience in research in humanitarian contexts and with children, in particular in the Greek context. The committee provided feedback and recommendations to ensure the protection of participants' rights and contextual sensitivity throughout the research process. The committee's feedback was carefully incorporated before the project began.

## LIMITATIONS

Regarding the data collection with children, the majority of participants in the participatory sessions were boys. While this reflects the reality of many humanitarian settings, where unaccompanied and separated children are predominantly boys, this gender imbalance may have influenced the findings. In mixed-gender groups, boys often dominated discussions, shaping both the content of the avatars' stories and the ways in which technology-facilitated risks were articulated, potentially limiting the depth and visibility of girls' experiences and perspectives. This dynamic may also have contributed to the under-representation of certain issues, including boys' experiences and perspectives on sexual exploitation, which may be less frequently disclosed due to prevailing gender norms that discourage boys from speaking about such experiences. It may also have limited the exploration of the specific exposures and risks faced by younger children.

Among service providers and key informants, many demonstrated only a general level of knowledge on the topic, which, as discussed later in the main report, is itself indicative of existing gaps in understanding and capacity.





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