“NO WI-FI MEANS NO LIFE”: THE DIGITAL LIVES, RISKS, AND PROTECTION PATHWAYS OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

ECPAT International would like to thank all the persons involved in writing this report.

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GLOSSARY

- **Children on the move:** an umbrella term used to refers to "those children moving for a variety of reasons, voluntary or involuntary within or between countries, with or without their parents or other primary caregivers, and whose movement might place them at risk (or at an increased risk) of inadequate care, economic or sexual exploitation, abuse, neglect or violence."[1]
- **Children affected by crisis:** children whose lives are disrupted by situations such as conflict, inequalities, the effects of climate change or other emergencies.[2,3]
- **Unaccompanied children:** children who are separated from both parents and other relatives and who are not under the care of an adult legally or customarily responsible for them.[4]
- **Digital technologies:** devices such as personal computers and tablets, tools such as cameras, calculators, and digital toys, systems such as software and apps, augmented and virtual reality, and less tangible forms of technology such as the Internet.[5]
- **Gender:** socially constructed norms, roles, behaviours, expressions and identities associated with boys, girls, men, women and gender diverse people.[6]
- **Age:** this research adopts the definition of the age range for children enshrined in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, considering individuals up to 18 years old as children.[7] However, given that age is a category of analysis, the study will explore how children on the move understand age and life stages to better contextualise and deepen the research.
- **Migration** refers to the movement of people away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State.[8] This broad definition covers all forms of migration (voluntary/forced migration, internal/international migration, long-term/short-term migration), different motives for migration (migration because of political persecution, conflicts, economic problems, environmental degradation, or a combination of these reasons or migration in search of better economic conditions or conditions of survival or well-being, or other motives such as family reunifications, and irrespective of the means used to migrate (legal/irregular migration).[9] In this report, ECPAT International uses the term *human mobility* as a broader framing. This framing helps capture the full spectrum of reasons, conditions, and legal statuses

1 Save the Children. (n.d.). Children on the move. Save the Children Resource Centre.
2 Havard Humanitarian Initiative. (n.d). Children in Crisis.
3 UNICEF Greece. (n.d.). Children in crisis.
4 The alliance for child protection in humanitarian settings. (2020). Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS). 2019 Edition.
5 Kelly Johnstone, Lisa Kervin and Petta Wyeth. (2022. May, 24). Defining Digital Technology. Digital Child.
6 World Health Organization. (n.d). Gender and Health. Canadian Institutes of Health Research (n.d). What is gender? What is sex?
7 United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child.
8 International Organization for Migration. (n.d). Key Migrant Terms.
9 International Organization for Migration. (2019). Glossary on Migration.

under which people move, rather than focusing solely on the narrower legal or policy category of "migration.

- **Sexual exploitation of children** is defined by the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse as *"[a] child is a victim of sexual exploitation when they involved in a sexual activity in* ***exchange*** *for something (e.g. money or other gains like food, housing, clothing, protection or even the promise of such) received by a third party and/or the perpetrator"*.[10] It is important to note that the definition of sexual exploitation of children overlaps with that of sexual abuse of children. However, it is distinguished by the presence of an additional element of exchange (money, material goods or access to protection or shelter).
- **Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse** according to the Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, *"technology is an increasingly pervasive element in sexual offending against children and it is becoming rare that no technology at all is used at some stage of the preparation, commission, or further dissemination (in the case of child sexual abuse material) of the sexual exploitation or sexual abuse of a child. Although not always used to facilitate or commit a sexual crime, the overarching role of technology in facilitation means that it can cover crimes committed in both digital and non-digital environments. Firstly, a sexual offence committed in the digital environment is, by definition, facilitated by technology. Secondly, a broad variety of sexual offences committed in-person are made possible with the help of technology, for instance, to connect perpetrators of sexual offences, exchange information, and coordinate actions."*[11]

10 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Thailand: ECPAT International.
11 Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Thailand: ECPAT International.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children on the move's digital connectivity needs often conflict with safe navigation. In this context, ECPAT International and ARSIS conducted a research project to explore the perceptions and experiences of children on the move in using technologies, the manifestations of technology-facilitated harms, including sexual exploitation, and how to build safer online environments for children. The research is also linked to related work exploring the sexual exploitation of children in the context of the Venezuelan migration in Latin America.

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, children 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.

Children on the move described technology as central to their daily lives, functioning both as an everyday tool and as a lifeline during their journeys. Digital devices supported communication with family and peers, adaptation to new environments, learning, entertainment and access to information, while also helping children navigate unfamiliar places, overcome language barriers, and stay safe.

Children's digital engagement was shaped by intersectional factors, including gender, background, and mobility conditions. While boys and girls reported broadly similar uses of technology, differences emerged in areas such as gaming and online self-presentation, where gender norms influenced how avatars were portrayed. Children also demonstrated awareness of inequalities linked to nationality and migration status: avatars from European countries or with regular migration pathways were depicted as having more stable access to devices and connectivity, whereas those from non-European backgrounds faced greater barriers. The stage of the migration journey strongly influenced how technology was used: children who had spent longer in Greece tended to describe technology in relation to leisure and self-expression, while more recent arrivals emphasised its role as a survival tool, highlighting challenges such as limited connectivity, confiscated phones, reliance on borrowed devices, and the emotional distress caused by disconnection.

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse represent a significant risk for children on the move in humanitarian contexts, although it is not consistently recognised or addressed. The most frequently reported forms included online sexual harassment and grooming for sexual purposes. Children and professionals also identified a range of other technology-facilitated harms, such as scams, misinformation, cyberbullying, hacking, unwanted contact, and loss of connectivity, as well as exposure to harmful content and recruitment attempts by organised crime or armed groups through social media. **Perpetrators exploit the intersection of structural factors, gender norms, technological inequalities, and the broader hardships associated with mobility, creating layered risks for children on the move.**

Gender norms shape how these harms are experienced and perceived: girls were more commonly associated with sexual exploitation online, including harassment, grooming, pressure to share images, and economic manipulation, while boys were more often linked to non-sexual harms such as scams or hacking. However, the few concrete cases shared by service providers they encountered involved boys, suggesting important gaps in identification and disclosure, as well as possible gender bias in how risks are recognised. **Gender norms further influenced children's responses to harm, with girls often portrayed as more emotionally vulnerable to manipulation, while boys tended to minimise or normalise harmful experiences.**

Children on the move understand digital safety holistically, combining emotional reassurance, practical digital guidance, and support aligned with the realities of mobility. Rather than separating online risks from in-person experiences, boys and girls consistently described families, peers, humanitarian organisations, governments, and technology companies as part of a single protective ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, peers play a particularly active role in online safety by providing emotional support, sharing experiences of harm, and exchanging practical strategies to navigate digital risks.

Significant structural and institutional gaps limit effective prevention and response to online harms, including technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Digital safety is rarely integrated into humanitarian programming, needs assessments, or funding frameworks, while service providers often face heavy workloads, limited training, and legal constraints. These challenges are further compounded by mobility-related barriers, language differences, cultural biases, and limited coordination between humanitarian actors, child protection systems, and technology companies.

Technology companies play an important role in shaping the digital safety of children on the move, although current approaches still present opportunities for further strengthening. Children expect these platforms to actively prevent harm rather than respond only after incidents occur. Boys and girls highlighted the need for stronger safety features embedded in platform design, including real-time protection mechanisms, safer interaction settings, clearer and multilingual safety information, and reporting tools that lead to visible and meaningful action. However, key informants and technology representatives pointed to significant gaps in current approaches. Detection systems often focus on public spaces, while many harms, such as grooming, harassment, and sexual extortion, occur through private messaging and closed groups. Reporting mechanisms are frequently complex and poorly adapted to the realities of children on the move, particularly in low-connectivity or multilingual contexts. Structural challenges linked to privacy-by-design, limited contextual data, and reliance on parental verification further complicate the identification of risks affecting this group. The findings highlight the need for more proactive, child-centred approaches by technology companies, including stronger safety-by-design measures, greater transparency, and improved collaboration with humanitarian and child protection actors to ensure safer digital environments for children on the move.

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

- Digital safety and technology-related risks should be built into national and regional child-protection and humanitarian systems, so platform safety measures connect with real-world 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

- 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children on the move are exposed to multiple forms of violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly when travelling alone. Gender norms and roles, as well as other individual, contextual, or structural characteristics, shape how they perceive and respond to risk and harm, including their engagement with technology. Therefore, the need for robust evidence to inform better policies- at a national and global level- for children on the move has become increasingly urgent.

In this context, ECPAT International conducted a research project on the digital safety of children on the move, with a focus on Greece and linkages to another project on the Venezuelan crisis in Latin America. The project, implemented in collaboration with ARSIS - Association for the Social Support of Youth, the Greek member of the ECPAT network, aimed to understand how intersectional factors like gender norms and roles, age or backgrounds influence the use of technology as well as perceptions of risks related to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse these children face.

Using a participatory, child-centred methodology, the research placed children's perspectives at the centre, complemented by insights from service providers and key informants in the humanitarian and technology sectors. Through the creation of fictional avatars, children on the move were able to express their lived realities, perceptions of risk, and ideas for digital protection in ways that were safe, nuanced, and grounded in experience, without requiring personal disclosures.

The findings challenge simplified narratives that may portray children on the move solely as passive victims or as a homogeneous group defined only by suffering. Instead, children's stories demonstrate diverse personalities, aspirations, coping strategies, and digital practices, shaped by gender norms and roles, mobility conditions, and backgrounds. They also expose how technology-facilitated harms are often normalised, minimised, or perceived as "something that happens to others", particularly to girls, masking boys' vulnerabilities and limiting opportunities for prevention and disclosure.

The report also incorporates findings from a parallel study conducted by ECPAT in 2023-2025, focusing on the sexual exploitation of children in the context of Venezuelan human mobility.[12] While that study focused primarily on access to and quality of care services, it also generated valuable insights into the digital safety of children on the move within this context.

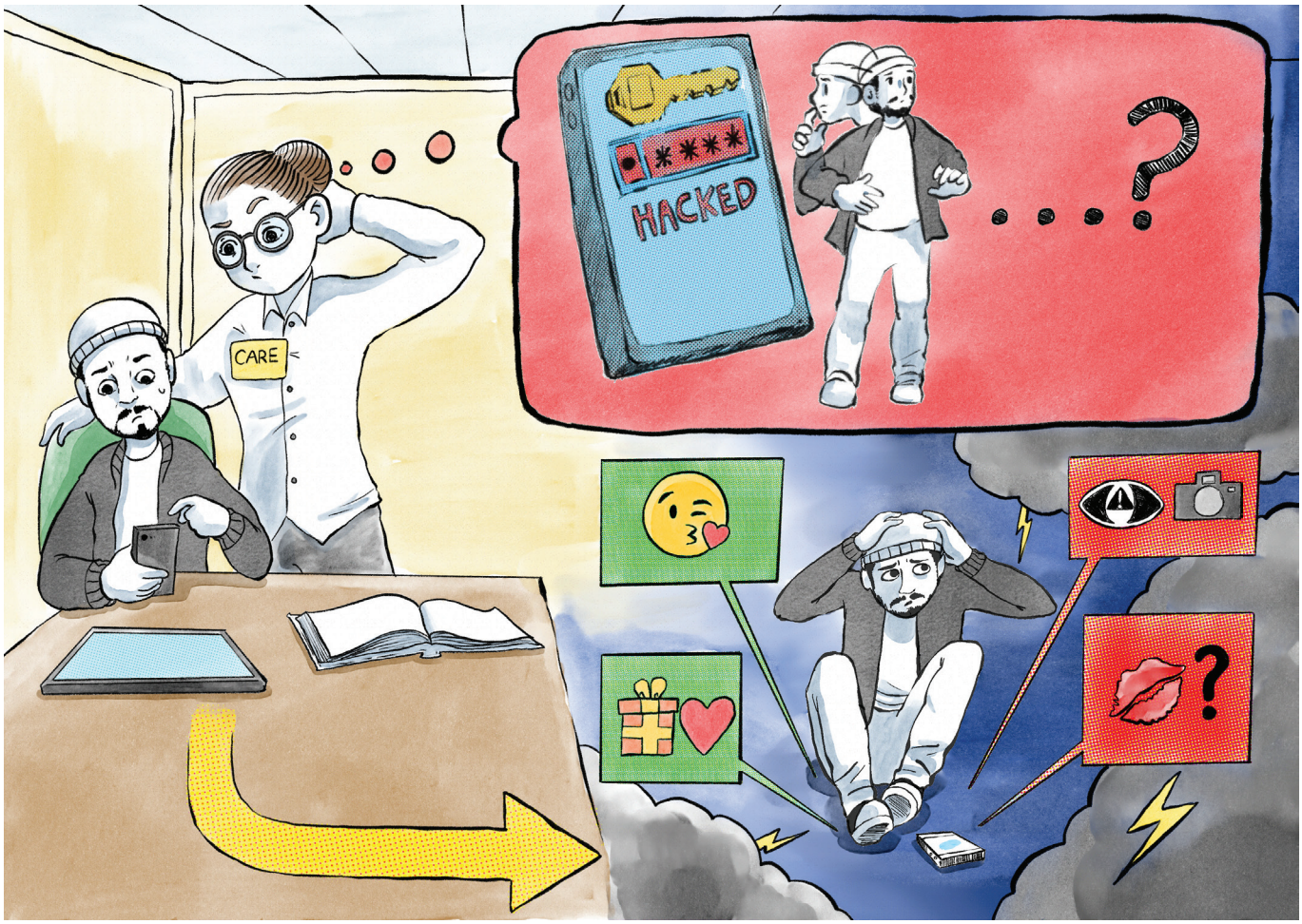
This report intends to inform policymakers, donors, humanitarian professionals, and technology companies, and to support more coordinated, accountable, and child-informed action. Ultimately, the findings contribute to understanding how systems, products, and processes can be designed to create safe and rights-respecting digital environments for children, informed by the diverse experiences and profiles of children on the move, including gender norms and roles and background.

12 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Implementing partners

ECPAT International is the leading global network working towards the vision of ending the sexual exploitation of children. With over 30 years of experience in engaging with and managing multi-stakeholder processes and alliances across national, regional, and global levels, ECPAT is considered to be at the helm of all issues and manifestations pertaining to the sexual exploitation of children. Considered a thought leader on all subject matter pertaining to the identification, addressal and prevention of sexual exploitation of children, it has been a leading voice in recent years in promoting the voices and perspectives of children who have been subjected to sexual exploitation. With a Secretariat driving strategic direction, producing key research and working on global advocacy, complemented by on-ground efforts of 141 members in 114 countries, the network approach bridges local communities, governments and the private sector, offering a global focus combined with customised national actions.

ARSIS - Association for the Social Support of Youth. ARSIS is a non-governmental organisation operating in Greece, specialising in the social support of youth that are in difficulty or danger and in the advocacy of their rights. The main target is the prevention of youth marginalisation, the elaboration of policies which defend youth rights and the active social support towards disadvantaged children. ARSIS is an integral part of the National Emergency Response Mechanism, which is the sole actor responsible for tracking, identifying, supporting and housing unaccompanied children in Greece.



2. METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

This study collected information from children and service providers in Greece, as well as from key informants worldwide.

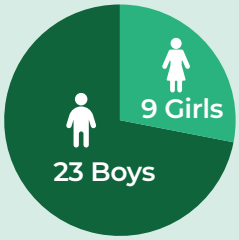
METHODS

PARTICIPATORY SESSIONS WITH CHILDREN ON THE MOVE IN GREECE

To capture children on the move's experiences and perspectives, ARSIS conducted six participatory sessions with 32 children (9 girls and 23 boys) aged 14–17, representing diverse countries of origin and mobility backgrounds. During the sessions, children were asked to create avatars, fictional characters to depict the stories of children on the move. With a gender lens informing their design, creative and reflective activities during the sessions enabled participants to express how they use technology, the challenges they face online, and their expectations for safety and inclusion in the digital world. Besides the avatars' stories, discussions also included participants sharing their own stories, allowing them to reflect on how similar or different their stories were within the group and with the avatars they were creating. Therefore, in analysing the findings, while the avatars' stories were the main source of information, the group discussions among children and the facilitators' reflections also served as key sources.

32 Children on the Move Participated in 4 Participatory Groups

GENDER



AGE RANGE

14 - 17 years old

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN
(15 countries)

- Afghanistan (5)
- Belarus (1)
- DRC (1)
- Egypt (11)
- Georgia (1)
- Guinea (1)
- Iran (1)
- Iraq (1)
- Pakistan (1)
- Palestine (2)
- South Sudan (1)
- Somalia (3)
- Sudan (1)
- Syria (1)
- Ukraine (1)

LANGUAGES OF COMMUNICATION

- Arabic
- Dari/ Farsi
- Urdu
- Somali
- Greek
- French
- English
- Ukrainian

MOBILITY STATUS

26 Unaccompanied

6 Accompanied living with family/ relatives

INTERVIEWS WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS IN GREECE

The interviews with service providers, conducted by ARSIS, aimed to explore trends in how children on the move use digital technology (also in line with their perceptions of gender roles), as well as emerging issues and risks identified by professionals when crises arise, particularly in relation to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

A total of 17 interviews were conducted with service providers based in Greece, including 10 men and seven women. The sample included shelter coordinators, psychologists, educators, lawyers, social workers, and legal guardians, among others. Most 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.

Many of the interviewees were currently working primarily with unaccompanied children on the move, who, as interviewees indicated, are predominantly boys. However, several participants also drew on their previous professional experience working with girls on the move. This combination allowed interviewees to reflect on the experiences, risks, and needs of both boys and girls, and to offer comparative perspectives on how gender norms and roles shape children's engagement with technology and exposure to online risks through their journeys.

INTERVIEWS WITH KEY INFORMANTS AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

The interviews aimed to explore how children on the move use digital technology, the risks they face from technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and how humanitarian professionals and technology companies are responding to these challenges.

A total of 25 key informants were interviewed for this study, representing a broad range of expertise globally. The group was diverse in gender, with 17 women and eight men, and included professionals working in child protection, humanitarian response, digital safety, gender equality, and the technology sector. Participants came from international organisations, civil society, and independent experts, providing perspectives from across the globe.

All the participants met the following criteria:

- Participants over 18 years of age.
- At least the 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.

ANALYSIS

The analysis combined data from participatory sessions with children and interviews with service providers and key informants, using a thematic approach. The analysis of the participatory sessions and interviews with service providers was

conducted jointly by the session facilitators and the interviewers. This collaborative process served several purposes: first, it helped ensure an accurate reading and interpretation of the data and reduced the risk of meaning being lost in translation, as the original session notes were produced in Greek and the analysis was carried out in English. Second, the joint analysis enriched the findings by incorporating ARSIS's in-depth knowledge of the Greek context, their direct experience working with children on the move, and their insights into the non-verbal dynamics observed during the participatory sessions and interviews.

To strengthen the analysis, several spaces were created to discuss the emerging findings. Validation and discussion meetings were held with children on the move who participated in the study, as well as with service providers in Greece. During these sessions, participants validated the emerging findings and contributed additional insights. The findings were also discussed in two roundtables: one with humanitarian and gender experts, and another with representatives from technology companies. In both roundtables, discussions focused on identifying actionable recommendations for policy and programming. In addition, the preliminary report was shared with an advisory committee composed of organisations and individual experts working on humanitarian issues, gender, and child protection, both globally and in Greece.

ETHICAL PROCEDURES

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.

Although the participatory session methodology was designed to minimise the risk of distress, additional measures were put in place to ensure children's safety and well-being. These included developing safeguarding and distress protocols and having a designated safeguarding focal person.

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.

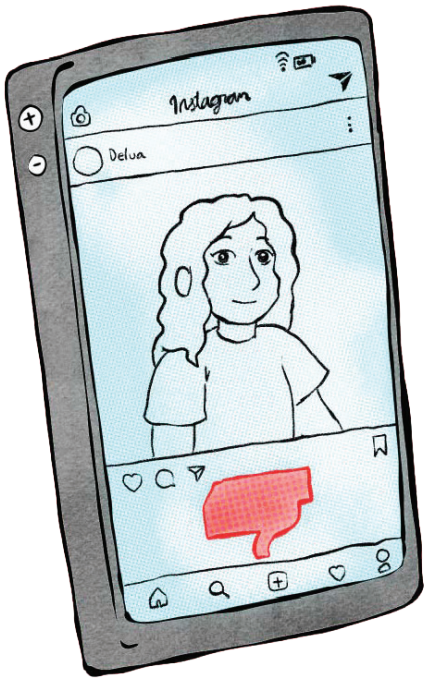
Among service providers and key informants, many demonstrated only a general level of knowledge on the topic, which, as discussed later in the report, is itself indicative of existing gaps in understanding and capacity.

For further information on the methodology, please refer to "Methods and Procedures," which explains the rationale for selecting each method, the sample, and the data collection procedures.

3. 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.[13] Using avatars allowed participants to explore sensitive topics, such as human mobility-related hardship and technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, at a safe emotional distance, enabling open expression without requiring personal disclosure, while also exploring how expectations on gender roles affected them. Although children were invited to share fictional stories, the content of their narratives, the group discussions, and the analysis of non-verbal behaviours during the sessions indicated that children often drew on their own lived experiences and on situations they had witnessed. However, the use of a fictional, participatory approach enabled children to engage with these topics in a comfortable, safe manner, often incorporating humour and playful elements that helped reduce emotional pressure and facilitate expression. The connection between expectations and pressure stemming from their understanding of gender roles and norms was also facilitated by the use of avatars, which revealed unconscious biases and beliefs in this regard.

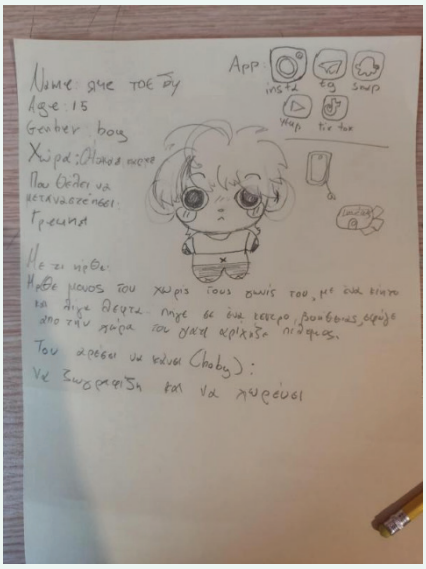
The following table summarises each avatar's story, offering a snapshot of their main characteristics, online experiences, risks, and support networks.



13 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.

Table 1. Summary of each avatar's story

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



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

Main characteristics: Intelligent, calm, and reflective.

Mobility experience: Fled war, passed through Egypt and Türkiye, where he was injured during an attack, before reaching Greece. His journey was long and unsafe.

Online experiences: He mainly uses his phone for YouTube and messaging apps.

Main risks: Experienced cyberbullying related to his accent and identity, and witnessed his friend Alma being sexually harassed online, which reinforced his mistrust.

Support networks: Alma, his parents (contacted from afar), and NGOs/teachers as distant helpers.

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

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

Main characteristics: Outgoing, confident, and expressive; portrayed as someone seeking independence and connection.

Mobility experience: Left Pakistan after an abusive relationship and unstable home conditions.

Online experiences: Active on Tinder, where she finds clients and "sugar daddies", and Instagram, TikTok, and Spotify for self-expression and income generation.

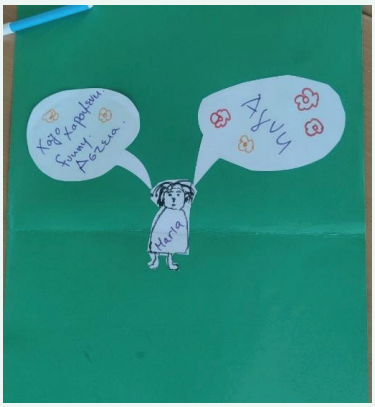
Main risks: Faced sexual harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images of a sexual nature and scams.

Support networks: Her mother (emotional support), a toxic boyfriend, and "sugar daddies" providing financial help.

14 The children chose their own nicknames, as part of the ethical considerations guiding the research.

3. *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).



Main characteristics: Optimistic and curious, with a desire for normality despite displacement.

Mobility experience: Moved legally from Ukraine to Germany with family due to the war.

Online experiences: Uses **TikTok**, **YouTube**, **Instagram**, and **Google Maps** for entertainment, learning about her new city, and following news from home.

Main risks: Fall victim to a **housing scam**. Online fraud and misinformation.

Support networks: Her aunt and a volunteer who helps with legal issues; she relies heavily on apps for daily navigation and contact.

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

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

Main characteristics: Introverted, cautious, shy, naive, from a poor background.

Mobility experience: Journey shaped by poverty and limited education. She had lived in different shelters.

Online experiences: Limited access to technology, avoids social media and prefers **Messenger** to stay in touch with trusted people, not very familiar with using social media platforms.

Main risks: Online scams, hacking, and exposure to strangers.

Support networks: God, family, close peers and NGOs offering basic support.

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

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

Main characteristics: Adventurous and curious, but also reflective and aware of danger.

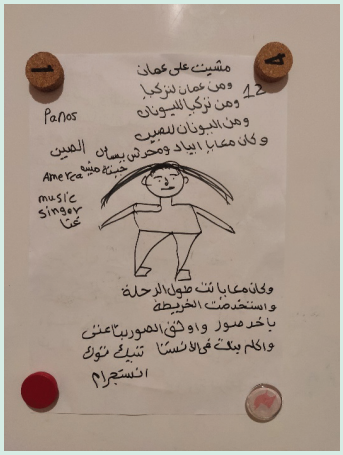
Mobility experience: Undertook a long, irregular journey through several countries until reaching France.

Online experiences: Uses **WhatsApp**, **TikTok**, and **Facebook** for communication, information, and entertainment. Struggled with weak connectivity.

Main risks: Poor Internet signal, exposure to scams, and unwanted contact from strangers.

Support networks: Peers, NGOs, and friends he described as "those who know about Internet stuff."

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



Created by: Makseky (17, boy, Egypt)[15].

Main characteristics: Cheerful, creative, and confident; enjoys showing his skills.

Mobility experience: Moved to America to earn more money and have a better life. He travelled with friends.

Online experiences: Posts **karate videos on TikTok and Instagram**, using social media for self-expression and pride.

Support networks: The "Internet Ministry" and friends who offer encouragement and share learning experiences.

15 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.

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

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

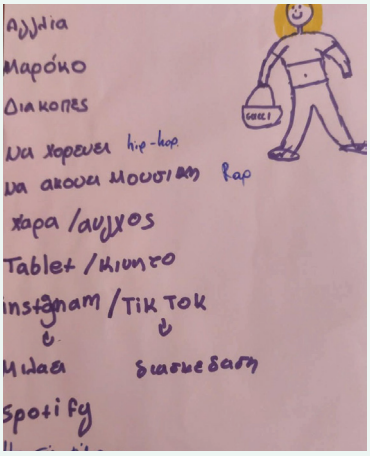
Main characteristics: Independent, inquisitive, and open-minded.

Mobility experience: Travelled from England to Morocco "to discover the world."

Online experiences: Uses **Instagram**, **WhatsApp**, and **Google Translate** to communicate; reads online news from her home country.

Main risks: **Hacking and limited Internet access during transit, as well as** exclusion due to language barriers.

Support networks: Parents and brother as emotional support; friends as sources of shared learning and police.



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

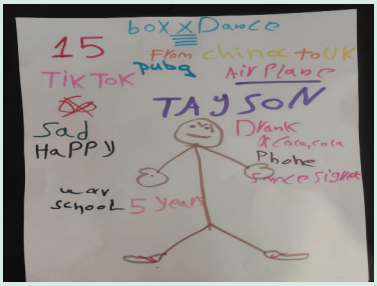
Created by: Maro (17, boy, Afghanistan) and Yasu (17, boy, Egypt).

Main characteristics: Sociable, ambitious, and confident.

Mobility experience: Moved to the UK to attend a better school because of the war in his country.

Online experiences: Uses **TikTok, YouTube**, and **online games** to socialise and express himself. Dreams of becoming an influencer.

Support networks: Older family members and adults (teachers or relatives) are seen as guides. "Internet Ministry".



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

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

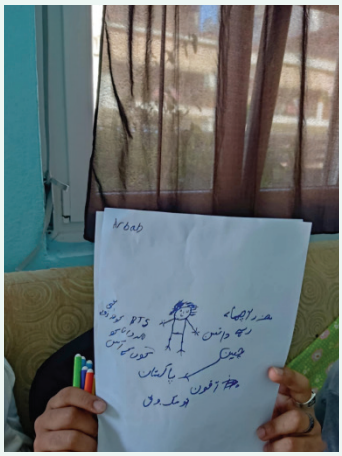
Main characteristics: Loves food.

Mobility experience: Moved to Pakistan to eat food.

Online experiences: Uses **Instagram** to post photos of streets and cityscapes, saying he wants to "look okay."

Main risks: Fraud and online deception.

Support networks: Parents, uncle, and older brother who provide emotional and financial support.



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

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

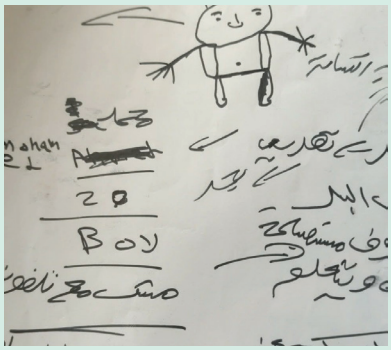
Main characteristics: Hard-working, serious, and motivated by responsibility.

Mobility experience: Fled domestic violence and economic hardship; travelled alone. Faced many challenges during transit.

Online experiences: Uses **Google Maps**, **YouTube** and **WhatsApp**.

Main risks: Smugglers took his phone.

Support networks: *God*, adults and Google.



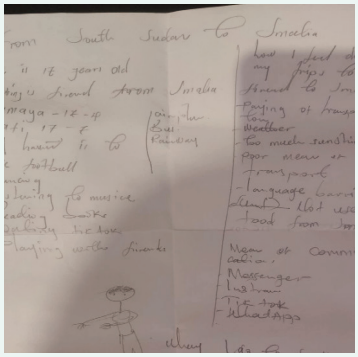
11. *Wan* (17, boy, South Sudan)

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

Main characteristics: Joyful and friendly.

Mobility experience: Travelled from South Sudan to Somalia to visit friends.

Online experiences: Uses **TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp.**



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

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

Main characteristics: Cheerful and motivated by helping others.

Mobility experience: Left Somalia and travelled through several countries before arriving in Greece; journey marked by instability and interrupted schooling.

Online experiences: Uses **TikTok**, **YouTube, Facebook**, **Google Maps**, **Google Translate**, and **ChatGPT** for learning, entertainment, and orientation.

Main risks: Poor connectivity, frequent SIM card changes.

Support networks: *ChatGPT* ("it answers questions"), parents and older brother for advice, and NGOs for external support.

4. CONTEXT: CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MOBILITY

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

Children (of all genders), key informants, and service providers highlighted the complex and often unstable conditions under which children on the move navigate mobility pathways. Interviews with key informants and service providers emphasised contexts marked by uncertainty, frequent movement, limited resources, and high levels of stress for both children and their caregivers. Although the conditions of the mobility were not the explicit focus of the participatory sessions, children's narratives offered nuanced, grounded insights into how they experience and understand human mobility.

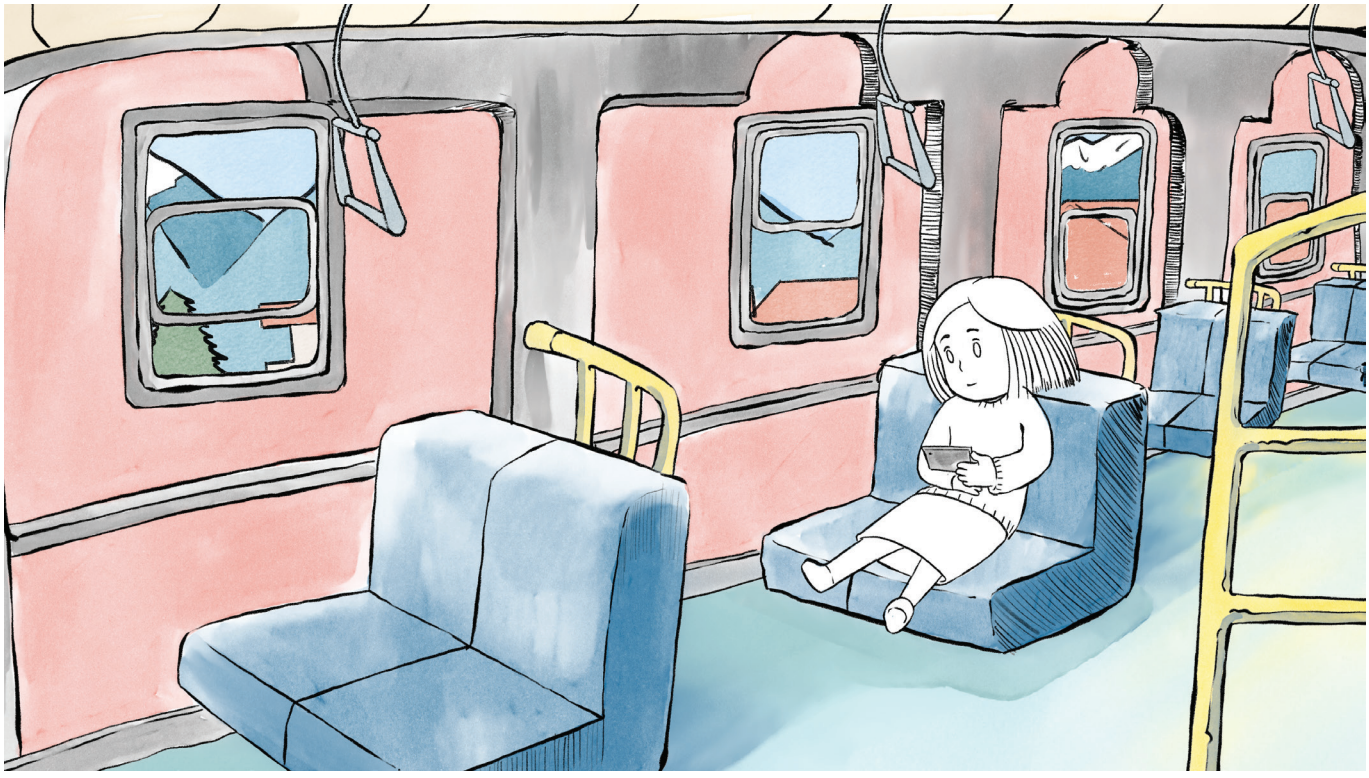
The reasons for mobility depicted in the avatars' descriptions varied widely across groups. In some cases, particularly among those who had arrived in Greece more recently (for example, six months earlier), the stories described children who fled from violence and adverse situations, such as *Nikolai* and *Tayson*, who escaped from war, or *Maria 1*, who fled an abusive relationship. *Mohamed* was portrayed as being unable to attend school because his father beat him and forced him to work. The boys who created *Mohamed* explained that his plan was to earn money to help pay for his sisters' marriages. Other avatars, especially those created by boys and girls who had been in Greece for a longer period and were therefore more integrated, reflected mobility driven by curiosity and exploration. For example, *Rakel*, who left England for Morocco after hearing other girls on a bus talking about it, and *Omar*, who travelled to explore the world and experience tourism.

A cross-cutting theme in most stories was the description of difficulties experienced during transit or upon recent resettlement, including both technology-facilitated risks and challenges, as well as in-person risks. The in-person risks mentioned in boy avatars included being attacked by soldiers and being abandoned by smugglers, and in girl avatars, feeling lost and emotional instability. The online risks, as will be discussed later, included being contacted by strangers and the lack of access to Wi-Fi, which was itself perceived as a risk, often accompanied by feelings of sadness and anxiety. Linguistic barriers, social isolation, and feelings of being lost or excluded were also shown to be interconnected experiences that unfold across both online and in-person contexts.

Interestingly, the description of the avatar *Maria 2*, a girl from Ukraine who moved to Germany because of the war, prepared by boys from Egypt, Afghanistan, and Guinea, did not include in-person risks. The children explained that this was because she had a European passport[16] and could therefore travel by plane without encountering border problems, an aspect that participants throughout the sessions repeatedly highlighted.

Children's accounts reflect both the instability of mobility and the gradual processes of adaptation that follow arrival in a host country. For many, mobility was not a single event, but an ongoing condition marked by waiting, uncertainty, and the need to navigate complex bureaucratic and social landscapes. However, it is worth noting that children's narratives also expressed joy and hope for improving their living conditions, without denying the challenges they face. Kitrinos (17, male, Egypt) said, *"She's (referring to María) like many of us, we want to see the world, but we always miss home."*

Despite the variety of motivations for mobility and the significant hardships experienced during transit and in host countries, all the stories portrayed human mobility as a positive change in the children's lives. Children described a strong desire to continue their journeys despite the risks and challenges involved, often framing mobility as a pathway to safety, opportunity, and a better future.



16 The children referred to a "European passport" to mean passports issued by countries of the European Union.

5. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

The research sought to understand specifically how children on the move engage with technology. During the participatory sessions, children were invited to explore this through playful activities and by depicting their digital practices in the avatars they created. However, their behaviours and initial reactions suggested that, although technology is deeply embedded in their daily lives, they are not accustomed to discussing it openly. In the early stages of the sessions, many children struggled to focus, and they did not immediately elaborate on their use of technology. Boys' and girls' reactions suggested that the facilitators were asking about something "obvious".

A similar dynamic emerged in the interviews with adults. The ARSIS team encountered difficulties identifying service providers. Although many service providers met the inclusion criteria, some hesitated to participate upon learning that the project focused on digital safety for children on the move. Humanitarian workers felt they lacked sufficient knowledge about technology or children's digital behaviours, while those working in the technology sector felt unfamiliar with the realities of human mobility. During the interviews, both service providers and key informants recognised that questions about how children access devices, what they use them for, or the challenges they face online are not typically part of routine conversations with children. Service providers offered additional insights, noting that they may fear asking children about their online communication because such conversations could trigger distress; for example, if a child were to disclose contact with family members in difficult or unsafe situations in their home countries. As one service provider explained:

> *It's a bit difficult to ask children this question, about how they access technology, the challenges and risks they face, or what they use it for, because we're opening up wounds they may not want to talk about.*
>
> (Service provider 4)

Similarly, a key informant working in South America explained that frontline workers often avoid asking how both boys and girls on the move obtained a device or what they do online because the answers may touch on private matters or situations the child does not wish to disclose, including, in some cases, having acquired a phone through unsafe or illegal means.

Despite the challenges, once the sessions and activities progressed, children provided rich insights into their perceptions and use of digital technology, as well as the factors shaping these practices. This section first outlines the changing digital dynamics across the mobility journey, examining children's perceptions and uses of technology and the challenges they face in accessing devices and connectivity evolve at different stages.

While the research found that children on the move often use technology in ways similar to those who are not on the move, their narratives about these uses are strongly shaped by their mobility contexts. For this reason, the second part of the section focuses on children's perceptions of their digital practices, highlighting how digital practices are embedded in experiences of displacement. Throughout the chapter, particular attention is given to how gender norms and roles influence these dynamics.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY ACROSS THE ROUTE

Findings from the participatory sessions and interviews show that digital technology is central to the everyday lives of children on the move. Mobile phones were consistently identified by boys and girls as the primary device used by children on the move throughout the mobility journey. Across the participatory sessions, almost every avatar was depicted using a mobile phone, with only isolated mentions of tablets and no references to computers. Children repeatedly indicated that phones are their primary tool for communication, navigation, entertainment, learning, and survival. Among the avatars, only *Rakel* and *Momahed* were described as having access to a tablet, which was used in the same way as a phone. Service providers confirmed this near-universal dependence on phones. Financial constraints and mobility mean that a phone is the only portable device feasible:

> *As far as I know, children mainly have smartphones for financial reasons; it's difficult for them to afford a laptop, let alone a desktop computer. I imagine usability is also a factor; since we're talking about children on the move, it's much harder for them to carry larger devices.*
>
> (Service provider 15)

AT HOME, BEFORE MOVING

Children's narratives offered essential insights into how they used technology in their home countries, revealing a mix of everyday uses and human mobility-related uses. Descriptions of device use before they moved varied widely across groups. Some avatars, like *Panos*, were reported as using *"just as a normal kid,"* such as chatting with friends and family, listening to music, watching videos, or scrolling through social media. Others, like *Mohamed*, described much simpler uses, *"only for calls."*

Avatars who had fled war, such as *Maria 2 and Panos*, were described as using their phones to follow updates about the conflict. A recurring theme was that avatars used technology to gather information and plan their journeys, including by seeking details on safer routes and identifying shelters and aid organisations.

Key informants reflected on how algorithm-driven content can reinforce certain narratives, exposing boys and girls to politicised messages, for instance, war-related content, or amplifying stories of human mobility success, which may create unrealistic expectations.

> *Young people on the move, but also those in their countries of origin or destination, are influenced because if there is enough content supporting one point of view, they won't see the opposite (…). Depending on what you look at, you will tend only to get one side of the argument, not the other side of the argument.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 04, humanitarian sector)

Access to digital devices also varied widely by children's living conditions in their home countries. In *Nikolai's* story, for instance, the avatar had reliable Wi-Fi and stable mobile data, which enabled him to remain connected and access the Internet freely. By contrast, *BTS*, *Wan*, *Delua*, and *Omar* were described as having more limited or inconsistent access, reflecting environments where connectivity was restricted or shared among family members. Interestingly, the group that created *Delua* initially stated that she did not use technology at all. During discussions with the facilitators, it was noted that the group consisted of two boys and one girl, with the two boys from Egypt leading the activity. Facilitators reflected that, in Egypt, it is relatively uncommon for girls to have their own digital devices, which may have influenced how the group portrayed *Delua's* access to technology.

Avatars from European countries were described as having fewer restrictions and greater access to home devices. For example, *Rakel* from the United Kingdom was said to have both a tablet and a phone, as well as unlimited data. Similarly, *Maria 2* from Ukraine did not experience significant difficulties accessing the Internet before moving. This perception aligns with accounts from key informants: one interviewee with experience working in Ukraine noted that most children there had a mobile phone or, in some cases, a tablet (Global Key Informant 15, humanitarian–digital protection). Similar to the avatars' stories, key informants and service providers suggested that children in some non-European countries, particularly those living in rural areas, may have had more limited engagement with technology due to poor connectivity or the absence of household devices.

Children's narratives indicate that access to and use of technology before mobility were also shaped by gender, geography, and situations of conflict, with girls often facing more restrictions than boys. Girl avatars from non-European countries were more often portrayed as having reduced or mediated access to digital devices, reflecting the limitations of girls' ownership and independent use of technology. For example, the portrayal of *Delua* as a girl who is not using technology at all, shaped by a group led by boy participants, highlights how gendered assumptions can influence how girls' digital lives are imagined, making their access invisible or, at least, underestimated. In this respect, limited connectivity and device ownership also reduce girls' ability to cross-check information, increasing situations of vulnerability to one-sided narratives, misinformation, and unrealistic expectations around their journeys.

The narratives suggest that girls experience compounded digital disadvantage due to gender norms, legal status, and geographic context, while boys are more often assumed to have autonomous and continuous access to technology, shaping unequal initial access even before their journeys and mobility projects.

WHILE ON THE MOVE

Across groups, children highlighted the role of technology during transit as primarily linked to protection and survival. As Makseky (17, male, Egypt) summarised about the avatar *Panos*:

> *Once on the move, it (the internet) became a tool for directions, quick updates and sharing his journey.*

Boys and girls reported using their phones to search for real-time updates on safe routes, border conditions, and meeting points. Kochiq (16, female, Georgia), speaking through her avatar, said: *"Sometimes I saw different border routes in WhatsApp groups and on YouTube. Some say one road is safe, others warn it's closed. I checked at least three online sources and asked trusted friends in the group before deciding."*

According to the interview findings, when children on the move travel without family members (unaccompanied children), it is common that they travel with a device or at least with a SIM card. Family members make sure they have a device for the journey. The primary concern is no longer obtaining a device but rather finding ways to charge it and maintain internet access, sometimes borrowing others' devices to connect:

> *By 16 it seems to be already quite normal [to travel with a device] … it might be that they migrated with their own device, so their worry is how to charge or how to get access to the Internet, not to a device.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 13, humanitarian sector)

While boys often had generally more control over mobile devices and internet access, with many described as using phones for directions, updates, and communication, some boy avatars show that they faced significant challenges, such as phone confiscations by smugglers or authorities, such as in *Mohamed's* case. Girls, like *Delua*, were contrarily portrayed as more dependent on others for devices, as seen previously. The economic realities of mobility often meant that adult men in families, or groups of men, controlled access to technology.

Some interviewees echoed this gender divide: *"The truth is that most girls who come to the country don't have mobile devices. Usually, the boys do, regardless of whether they ask for them later; they usually have them when they arrive and know how to use them."* (Service provider 3)

When children travel with family members, key informants said it is common for an adult male to own a device, as he is often the one with the money to buy one if needed or to pay for SIM cards or internet. In this situation, younger children, women and girls may face greater challenges using the devices. Younger children often rely on their caregivers' devices. And as one key informant suggested, the economic means usually remain with men in the group, restricting women's ability to buy a device or a SIM card.

> *If I am a male migrant, I cross the border, the first thing I do is buy a mobile phone or Internet access. A female would have much more difficulty accessing income… maybe the money will be with another male member of the community. They will be much more dependent on the males.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 17, humanitarian sector)

Findings show that during transit, boys and girls on the move experience greater restriction, loss of control, and disconnection from technology. Access to mobile phones and the Internet depends largely on chance, cost, or the mercy of others.

Children's stories, particularly from group 4, composed by boys, who arrived in Greece some months earlier than the sessions took place, described harsh experiences, including moments when smugglers confiscated their phones for several days, allowing their use only in exchange for money, something many could not afford. Children recalled having just a few minutes to contact their families, or in some cases, being unable to use their devices at all. Similarly, key informants from different regions and the service providers interviewed recounted related stories. The confiscations of their phones, not only by smugglers but also by authorities, were mentioned.

Boys and girls, key informants and service providers stated that when children on the move, particularly those travelling without a family member, do not have their own phones, they often keep a SIM card and borrow a device from another member of the group to communicate with their families or access information. This is illustrated in the story of *Maria 2*, the boys who created her explained that she knew there would be no signal during her journey, so she travelled without using any technology at all. In Libya, she met someone who allowed her to borrow their Facebook account temporarily to send messages to her family before continuing her trip alone. However, as several key informants noted, this strategy only works within countries where cross-border connectivity is possible; in some regions, mobile data does not function across national borders.

Key informants noted that shelters and aid points often serve as important places for children and families to access the Internet and recharge their devices. However, children travelling without caregivers may avoid these spaces due to fear of being referred to authorities, limiting their access to connectivity. Key informants also highlighted that gender and cultural norms influence who feels able to access public spaces for Internet use. One interviewee explained:

> *A woman would not go to a café to sit and have free Internet because the café would be full of men… her community might already say, 'you cannot come here', and she would be stigmatised.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 17, humanitarian sector)

Interestingly, a key informant described a different pattern in the context of human mobility related to the Venezuelan crisis. The interviewee described how, on a digital platform used to provide information to people on the move, most users were women and adolescent girls, who later approached services through the platform. The interviewee explained that this was partly due to gender norms within families:

> *…due to social norms that require men to appear self-sufficient, they were less likely to seek help, and in families, they designated women to do so.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 18, humanitarian sector)

The lack of connectivity while moving was described by boys and girls not only as a practical obstacle but as an emotional one, provoking fear, sadness, and a deep sense of isolation. As Samwi (16, male, Egypt), put it, *"BTS needs Wi-Fi, bro, no Wi-Fi means no life."* Connectivity challenges were also described as logistical frustrations. Samwi (16, male, Egypt) explained how *Omar* struggled with a poor signal while travelling, especially on the road, and how exhausting it was to keep buying new SIM cards in every country just to stay connected. *"You can't call anyone, you can't send location, nothing!"* he said.

IN THE NEW COUNTRY

> *Back home, Mohamed only used his phone for calls. On the move, he lost much of that freedom because smugglers controlled his access. Now in Greece, he uses Messenger, WhatsApp and (Google) Maps more carefully.*
>
> (Description of the avatar Mohamed)

> *Back in China, Panos mostly used the internet for games, music, and chatting with friends. During his journey, things shifted, and he began using maps to guide him, sometimes posting online to update his friends. Once he arrived in the U.S., his use changed again. He still enjoyed TikTok and Instagram, but also started using apps like Google Translate. 'Now he learns new languages, English, Greek, even Chinese again!' Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) said proudly, and the group laughed when Kiro (17, boy, Egypt) shouted: 'Next he will teach us too!'*
>
> (Description of the avatar Panos)

As the descriptions of *Mohamed* and *Panos* illustrate, boys and girls narrated that the use of technology expands significantly in the host countries compared to their home environments and while on the move. The "typical uses" of digital devices described in their countries of origin were now complemented by new purposes linked to inclusion, integration, entertainment, financial survival, and peer support.

A similar evolution was evident in *Omar Odris*'s and *Maria 2´s* descriptions. Interestingly, for the girl avatars *Delua and Rakel,* the evolution shifted towards more cautious digital behaviour. *Delua* faced connectivity challenges and limited confidence using social media, leading her to rely only on familiar platforms and trusted contacts. *Rakel*, whose Instagram account was hacked during the journey, used the Internet mainly to communicate with others in the new country, doing so with greater care, influenced by the higher levels of unwanted online contact in the city where she lives.

Children on the move and interviewees provided information about the challenges they face in accessing technology in their new countries, which depend on several factors, including whether they live with caregivers or in a shelter and their age and gender, which are connected to economic means.

When children on the move live with their caregivers in the host countries, the evidence suggests that caregivers mediate their access to devices, whether by allowing children to use other children's devices or by providing independent devices for children. However, limited financial resources to install Wi-Fi internet at homes pose a significant obstacle to connectivity, as service providers in Greece indicate.

> *Because even in cases where we are talking about families who are recognised refugees living in an apartment, I find that there is an issue with internet access in terms of the cost of connection, and they tend to use free Wi-Fi hotspots.*
>
> (Service provider 3)

Key informants from different regions noted that although people on the move, including children, can often obtain a SIM card in transit countries, limited financial resources frequently prevent them from topping it up. When this happens, the SIM card becomes inactive, and they lose their phone number.

> *OK, in Cyprus it's easy to buy a pay-to-go card... but almost all of these children end up with an invalid number after two or three months because they never top up or credit their phone... They only use the device for WhatsApp or any other type of chat applications.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 19, humanitarian sector)

Consequently, children often depend on humanitarian organisations or public networks to access the internet. Similarly, the case is for boys and girls living in shelters, who usually have access to Wi-Fi. Additionally, as part of the regular procedures in some facilities, staff assess whether children need support to ensure connectivity and, if so, provide them with a SIM card. Service providers in Greece explained that, depending on the structure and intervention, some organisations provide SIM cards or devices, such as computers, for use in shelters.

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE USES OF TECHNOLOGY

Before turning to children's narratives, it is worth noting that many key informants and service providers in this research primarily recalled human mobility-related uses when asked about how children on the move use technology. Similarly, frontline workers involved in ECPAT's study on child sexual exploitation and abuse in the context of Venezuelan human mobility suggested that communication with family and friends, as well as education, were the main perceived benefits of children's access to technology.[17]

As noted in the previous section, interviewees indicated that children's use of technology is not a topic typically discussed with children on the move. This may be further compounded by adult-centric perspectives and by an understanding of children on the move that focuses narrowly on their condition of "mobility", overlooking other dimensions of their lives. Such framings can obscure children's everyday experiences, including forms of technology use that go beyond those directly related to human mobility. In contrast, children participating in this research provided richer, more nuanced accounts, highlighting their engagement in a wide range of everyday digital activities beyond those directly linked to human mobility. The following paragraphs describe how children narrated these routine uses of technology and the meanings they attached to them.

STAYING CONNECTED WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Across the avatars' stories, communication with family members emerged as one of the most consistent and meaningful uses of technology. Mobile phones and messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and

17 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Telegram allowed children to stay in touch with relatives who remained in their home countries or were dispersed across different mobility routes. For many, this contact provided emotional protection, helping them cope with uncertainty and loneliness. In *Nikolai's* story, constant messaging with family was described as what *"keeps him calm during bad days*," while *Wan* and *Tayson* were portrayed as checking in with relatives after long journeys to reassure them that they were safe. Even when connectivity was limited, as in *Delua's* case, the desire to maintain contact persisted; she used her scarce Internet access mainly to message her mother and read news from home.

Similarly, the group of boys who created *BTS* said that he starts and ends his day with short calls or voice notes to his family, and he talks to his brother more casually, especially when he's confused about paperwork or directions. "*I send them a good morning like this, ' I'm alive! I call my family every night just like him* (*BTS*)," said Joni (17, boy, Pakistan).

LEISURE

All the avatars incorporated some form of leisure use of technology, most commonly through social media and video platforms. *Wan*, for instance, *"likes to watch TikTok for fun and Instagram,"* while *Tayson* was said to *"play online games and watch football highlights"* on his phone. *Rakel* similarly used Spotify to listen to her favourite singer, and *Mohamed* spent time on YouTube watching movies and series to pass the time.

While entertainment was mentioned across all groups, in some cases, children's narratives were intertwined with other purposes related to their mobility experiences. In some narratives, children described using social media for leisure but connected this use to other needs related to communication, belonging, and adaptation. For example, *Maria 2 "has an iPhone and uses TikTok for entertainment and Instagram for both enjoyment and communication."* Similarly, *Maria 1* was described as using TikTok, Instagram, and Spotify not only for fun but also as part of her daily routine, helping her cope with isolation during long periods without face-to-face contact.

Some key informants also provided examples of how children on the move use technology for entertainment and leisure. For example, they explained that children often turn to their phones to watch videos, share messages, or interact with peers when structured activities are unavailable at community centres and shelters.

One key informant illustrated this through an example from Gaza, Palestine, emphasising the role of technology in creating moments of normalcy and emotional stability despite extreme conditions:

> *At least examples coming out of, for example, Gaza now, with children just sitting around a phone and looking at a film, is a form of normalcy... (...) they're essential tools for the mental health of children, creating those little sacred spaces.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 22, tech child protection sector)

The reflections of two boys who created *BTS* offered particularly revealing insights. Their discussion showed how leisure use of technology can take a secondary place in children's narratives, often overshadowed by the need for survival and adaptation. 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."*

More strikingly, Joni (17, boy, Sudan) added, *"Now, in the new place, he doesn't use it for fun; he uses it to survive."* Although *BTS's* story included elements of social media use for leisure, the clarifications provided by Messi and Joni reframed these activities as functional rather than recreational, tools for coping, learning, and maintaining a sense of control. Their perspectives may also reflect their own circumstances, as both had to leave the shelter after the second session, with their attention understandably focused on immediate needs and adaptation rather than entertainment.

In a similar vein, while several key informants acknowledged children's use of technology for entertainment, this dimension did not emerge spontaneously in discussions. Initial responses tended to focus on human mobility-related uses, with leisure and everyday digital practices only surfacing after further prompting. **One key informant reflected that this may reveal a broader bias within the humanitarian sector, where emphasis on safety, survival, and resettlement can overshadow children's everyday lives. As a result, the role of technology in supporting adolescence, peer relationships, and social interaction is often underestimated.**

Most boy avatars were depicted watching football matches on their mobile phones. Three boy avatars were also described as playing online games: *Wan* and *Omar Idris* mentioned football-related games, while *Mohamed* and *Panos* did not specify the type of games they played. Interestingly, none of the girl avatars included online gaming or watching sports on online platforms. Similarly, during the validation and discussion meeting, gaming was highlighted only by boys as an important online activity and a need.

PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

A recurring theme across the avatars' stories was the importance of online peer support groups. Many boys and girls described participating in WhatsApp or similar messaging groups composed of other people on the move (adults and children), where they exchange information about routes, services, and safety. Maria 2: "*Like every hour, she looks for groups of Ukrainians who already live in Germany, they share tips like where to sleep.*"

These groups were not only practical but also emotional spaces of belonging. Children trusted the information shared there precisely because it came from peers who spoke the same language and had similar experiences. As Kochiq (16, girl, Georgia) explained when describing *Nikolai's* experience: *"He feels welcomed and supported in migrant WhatsApp groups because members share tips, messages arrive in his own language, and he can ask questions quickly."* These online communities function as digital extensions of networks of children on the move, offering inclusion, reassurance, and a sense of collective protection.

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Boys and girls, key informants, and service providers commonly mentioned using technology to overcome language barriers. Google Translate was the app most frequently referred to by children, with uses ranging from learning new languages and translating everyday phrases to completing administrative tasks and communicating with institutions. For many, it was described as an essential tool for navigating daily life and connecting with others in the host country. During the validation and discussion meeting, children further emphasised the importance of such tool, particularly given the language barriers they face. As Portugal (15, boy, Egypt) explained, learning the language through formal education can be a slow and difficult process for many of them: *"Some of us can learn the language faster; others are still waiting for school."*

When describing the story of *Panos*, Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) explained that discovering *Google Translate* marked a turning point for him, becoming one of his favourite tools. *"He used it almost every day to learn new words and phrases, helping him pick up English and Greek, and even improve his Chinese,"* he said. Learning new languages was perceived as indispensable for integration and safety. Many boys and girls reported feeling excluded or frustrated when they struggled to understand the information they encountered online, such as on websites, service announcements, or social media posts from local organisations.

LEARNING

In addition to language, participants described using technology to learn a variety of skills related to survival, adaptation, and integration. For instance, girls who created *Maria 1 explained that she* follows creators who post tips on personal safety, self-defence moves, and how to screen "clients" safely. The girls described these as *"life-hack videos on TikTok."*

Similarly, when describing *Tayson*, Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) said that platforms like TikTok and Instagram *"aren't just for fun, they can teach you a lot if you follow the right accounts (…) You see a cooking video, it's fast, and you learn something new."*

BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Boys and girls described using technology to maintain emotional and cultural connections with their home countries, providing them with comfort and a means to navigate the distance. Watching the news or searching for traditional recipes were described as ways to stay close to what they had left behind. Portugal (15, boy, Egypt) indicated that Maria 2 watches short news from back home every day and listens to songs from her country to stay connected. Jack (17, boy, Afghanistan) said, Rakel watches the news online, *so she doesn't miss what's happening in Ukraine or here."* Jack (17, boy, Afghanistan) and Titi (17, boy, Guinea) also explained that when she felt homesick, she searched for recipes that reminded her of her grandmother. Similarly, *Nikolai* and *Delua* were described as following news websites and YouTube channels to stay updated on the political situation in their home countries.

PLANNING AND NAVIGATION

The avatar's stories included uses of technology for planning and navigating new environments, both during transit and after arrival. They searched for routes, temporary accommodation, and travel advice, but also used apps to learn about the cities or countries where they had resettled. As one participant explained, *"You check the places before you go, so you don't get lost or waste money."*

In this regard, Google Maps was seen as one of the most useful tools for girls and boys, and, as discussed later, even as a form of protection. Maps and navigation apps became essential for finding routes

through unfamiliar streets, bus stops, and neighbourhoods. For *Mohamed*, digital tools became *"a guide that keeps him connected and shows him where to go in a place that still feels strange."*

Maria 2 relied heavily on Google Maps to navigate her surroundings. Kitrinos (17, boy, Egypt) explained, *"She checks messages from her aunt and from a woman volunteer who helps her with legal stuff. When she's outside, Google Maps is her hero. If she gets lost, she doesn't panic — she just checks the map."* Similarly, *Maria 1* used her phone's GPS to orient herself in unfamiliar cities, reducing her anxiety about getting lost. As Olec (15, girl, Belarus) said, *"The GPS helps her feel safe — she knows where she is and where to go."*

In *Nikolai's* story, Kochiq (16, girl, Georgia), speaking as if she were the avatar, explained, *"Sometimes I see different border routes in WhatsApp groups and YouTube, some say one road is safe, others warn it's closed. I check at least three sources and ask trusted friends in the group before deciding."*

RELIEF AND EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Technology was also indicated as a source of relief and emotional comfort for both girls and boys, helping avatars cope with stress, loneliness, and the longing for home. Some stories included moments of seeking distraction or calm through digital practices.

Maria 2, for instance, *"stays up late watching funny videos just to forget she's far away,"* explained Titi. Similarly, *Maria 1* was described as using Instagram Stories and Direct Messages as a kind of *virtual "check-in" system*. By sharing her location privately with a small circle, she felt more connected and less isolated. Olec (15, girl, Belarus) added that *"María 1 constantly listens to music through her headphones, whether commuting, during downtime in shelters, or before sleep, to maintain a sense of routine and find emotional uplift in familiar tunes."*

Neimar (17, boy, Sudan) explained that *Omar Idris* watches short videos to distract himself from the fear and boredom of the road. He said, *"Even during difficult times, that small screen gave him a sense of escape."*

SELF-REPRESENTATION

Through their avatars and social media behaviours, children narrated how they present themselves to others, often balancing safety and aspiration. For some, such as *Delua* and *Nikolai*, self-representation meant restraint and invisibility, choosing to observe rather than share to avoid being hacked or scammed (a theme explored further in the section on online risks).

For others, such as *BTS*, *Panos*, *Maria 1*, and *Tayson*, self-representation involved projecting confidence, attractiveness, or success. *BTS* was described as someone who *"likes to post cool photos (…) you know, streets, buildings, nice lights. He wants to look like he's okay"*, said Messi. Similarly, Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) explained that *Panos* would proudly record his karate training and post it online. The rest of the team teased him, clapping like a pretend audience, and Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) laughed: *"Yes, he shows his power online, like a mini influencer."*

In the same way, *Maria 1* and *Tayson* were portrayed as influencers, reflecting children's aspirations for visibility, recognition, and financial gain. As facilitators noted, these confident, successful self-images often contrasted sharply with the vulnerability children experienced in person. This tendency to reframe or even *fake* aspects of their reality may not simply reflect creative expression but could also suggest an effort to manage how others perceive them; for example, by presenting a more positive image so that family back home would not worry, or by aligning their online personas with influencer culture and social media trends.

FINANCIAL USES

While economic hardship was indicated by several boys and girls, a few avatars mentioned financial uses of technology. For example, in *Deluas'* story, children suggested that she used cryptocurrency, indicating she lost all her money because she trusted an online trading app.

The analysis of children's narratives revealed not only their current representations of technology use, but also their aspirations and imagined possibilities for how technology could change their economic lives and circumstances. Some avatars were described as using digital platforms to earn, manage, or spend money, while others revealed experiences of financial loss or exploitation. *Tayson*, for example, was portrayed as using social media to gain followers and visibility, hoping to "make easy money" through influencer-style content. Similarly, *Maria 1* was described as using online apps, such as Tinder, to connect with potential "clients".[18] While the girls did not say this directly, their descriptions suggested that *Maria* 1 engaged with adults who sexually exploited her in exchange for money. The group explained that *Maria* 1 used messaging apps to secure payment in advance, a strategy she developed to avoid scams or harassment. Similarly, while several avatars were portrayed as influencers, an interesting, gendered difference emerged: *Maria* 1 was described as a "sexy" influencer, whereas the boy influencers were depicted as *"cool"* or *"interesting"*.

Income generation through technology revealed some of the most pronounced expressions of gender inequality. Boys' financial aspirations on social media were framed as entrepreneurial and aspirational, even when unrealistic (e.g., "easy money" through "influencing"). In contrast, as represented in *Maria 1*, girls' financial survival strategies were closely linked to different forms and risks of sexual exploitation. Her use of dating and messaging apps to secure payment in advance reflects adaptation to structural vulnerability. While boys' financial losses (i.e. cryptocurrency scams) were framed as mistakes or possible risks, girls' losses were mostly connected to coercive systems of exploitation, as will be further discussed in Section 7.

As shown throughout this section, boys and girls provided valuable insights into how they access and use technology, as well as how they perceive it. Importantly, the avatars they created reflected a wide range of personalities, offering further evidence that children on the move are not a homogeneous group but individuals with distinct traits, interests, and motivations. Some avatars, such as *Maria 1* and *Tayson*, were described as extroverted and expressive, enjoying visibility and interaction as aspiring influencers who used social media to share content and connect with others. In contrast, avatars like *Delua* and *Omar* were more cautious and reserved, preferring smaller, controlled online spaces and valuing privacy over exposure. These contrasting personalities influenced how children envisioned their engagement with technology: while the more outgoing avatars utilised social media to express themselves and seek recognition, others primarily used digital platforms for safety, information, or communication with trusted individuals.

18 The term "client" is used here as it was expressed by children during the participatory sessions. However, in line with the Terminology Guidelines for The Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, this report discourages the use of this term, as it completely omits the fact that child sexual exploitation is a criminal act and a serious violation of the child's human rights. The term is retained only to accurately reflect children's narratives.

Table 2. Summary of the main apps described by children on the move in their avatars' stories

Application / Platform	Main Uses Described by Children
Google Translate	» Translating signs, forms, and conversations » Communicating with locals or aid workers
WhatsApp	» Keeping in touch with family and friends » Contacting volunteers or NGO staff » Joining community groups of people on the move for information
Instagram	» Sharing daily life and following others » Communicating with relatives or peers » Searching for housing or opportunities through community pages
TikTok	» Entertainment and stress relief » Learning through short videos (language, cooking, news) » Connecting with others from the same country » Creative self-expression
YouTube	» Learning languages and life skills » Watching news and tutorials » Listening to music or relaxing
Facebook	» Searching for housing and jobs » Joining groups of people on the move » Following news and updates
Google Maps	» Navigating routes and public transport » Checking safety of locations » Finding shelters or services
Telegram / Signal	» Receiving updates on the mobility contexts and anonymous tips
Music / Gaming Apps	» Entertainment and emotional escape » Connection with peers

IN A NUTSHELL

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE'S DIGITAL LIVES

- **Technology as a lifeline and everyday tool:** Children on the move described technology as central to their daily lives, supporting communication, adaptation, learning, and survival. Entertainment uses were also mentioned; however, these uses were deeply shaped by human mobility-related needs.

  Messaging apps functioned as emotional lifelines, while digital tools were also essential for navigation, accessing information, overcoming language barriers, and staying safe.

- **Intersectional factors influencing digital engagement:**
  - **Gender:** While most uses of technology reported by children were similar for boys and girls, a clear gender difference emerged in online gaming, which was depicted only among boy avatars. In addition, although several avatars were portrayed as influencers, a gendered distinction was evident: the girl avatar *Maria* was described as a "sexy" influencer, whereas boy influencers were characterised as "cool" or "interesting".
  - **Background and nationality:** Children's depictions reflected an awareness of inequalities linked to country of origin and human mobility status. Avatars from European countries or with regular mobility pathways (e.g. Ukraine, the United Kingdom) were portrayed as having more stable access to devices and Wi-Fi. By contrast, avatars from non-European countries (e.g. Egypt) faced greater barriers. In *Delua's* case, the intersection of gender and background was particularly evident: as a girl from Egypt, her story highlighted gender-based gaps in access to technology.
  - **Mobility conditions:** Children on the move's stage of their journey strongly shaped how technology was imagined and used. Avatars created by children who had been in Greece longer tended to face fewer access barriers and used technology for leisure, exploration, and self-expression. In contrast, narratives from more recent arrivals emphasised technology as a survival tool, highlighting challenges such as limited connectivity, phone confiscation during transit, reliance on borrowed devices, and the emotional distress caused by disconnection.

6. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED RISKS AND HARMS IN CONTEXTS OF HUMAN MOBILITY

Across the data collection process with children, service providers, and key informants, a common pattern emerged: discussions about technology-facilitated harms, particularly sexual exploitation and abuse, did not surface easily or spontaneously. Boys and girls tended to share limited information about these issues, and although service providers and key informants acknowledged that such risks exist, many recognised that they lacked in-depth understanding of how these harms manifest in practice. Despite these challenges, the data gathered offer valuable insights into how children on the move perceive, experience, and navigate online risks.

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE'S PERCEPTIONS AND AWARENESS OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED RISKS

During the participatory sessions, when asked to describe the dangers their avatars faced online, boys and girls initially responded with silence or brief comments such as *"there are no risks"* or *"the only risk is not having Internet."* Facilitators often needed to provide examples or prompts to initiate discussion, after which children began to engage more openly.

Boys and girls began to discuss some technology-facilitated harms, both sexual and non-sexual in nature. However, facilitators noted during the analysis sessions that **children's descriptions often lacked detail and did not indicate a comprehensive understanding of how such harms occur, suggesting a general rather than in-depth awareness of online risks**. Insights from the interviews, particularly with service providers, echoed this observation. While children may recognise that risks exist, they are not always fully aware of how these risks manifest, especially in relation to sexual exploitation facilitated by technology. Service providers, for example, highlighted that children may not realise how easily digital content can be misused or shared beyond their control, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation, blackmail, or sexual exploitation. As one interviewee observed, *"Oh yes, I certainly don't think they would even understand that this is sexual harassment, facilitated by technology or otherwise."* (Service Provider

10). Another noted, *"I believe they are aware of it, but in many cases, they are misled. They don't think that sending a photo, not a nude photo, just a simple one, could be dangerous or expose them to risk."* (Service Provider 2).

The findings show that individual characteristics, such as gender, mobility experiences, and peer interactions, shape children's perceptions of risk and sense of vulnerability.

- **Gendered perceptions of risk:** Boy avatars were frequently described as "too smart", "too careful", or "not the type" to be targeted, reinforcing a belief in personal invulnerability. Technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse was consistently framed as something that "happens to girls, not boys", a narrative shared by both boys and girls. These gendered assumptions distanced boys from victimhood and contributed to the minimisation of their perceived exposure to online harm. What is more, these findings highlight how gender stereotypes and norms continue to mirror and shape how children navigate their journeys and relationships with technology and online spaces. The contrast in how risks are framed for boy and girl avatars reflects broader cultural perceptions of gender, risk, and vulnerability. For boys, the risks are primarily physical and external, reinforcing the stereotype that boys are expected to endure and confront danger, especially in public spaces. Violence from authorities, like the police or smugglers, fits into a narrative where boys are seen as strong and having to endure hardship. On the other hand, the risks for girls are often portrayed as emotional or psychological nature, which emphasises ideas of women being more fragile, emotionally unstable, or dependent. The experiences of feeling "lost" or "anxious" reflect a gendered vulnerability that is internalised rather than external, reinforcing the stereotype of girls needing protection or being overwhelmed by their environment in a way that boys on the move are not.

  Even though online spaces can sometimes offer opportunities to move beyond certain social norms, rules and expectations, the risks identified by the avatars—when analysed through a gender lens—appear to reflect similar dynamics to those experienced in-person. For example, girls on the move may be more likely to face abuse linked to sexualisation, while boys may experience harassment that questions their toughness, resilience, strength, or other rigid expectations associated with dominant masculinities.

- **Conditions and stage of mobility:** Recently arrived boys and girls or those who had experienced acute insecurity tended to interpret digital risks through a survival lens, focusing on scams, theft, fraud, or detection by authorities (e.g *BTS* and *Mohamed*). By contrast, children who were more settled and integrated described risks related to social exposure, reputation, bullying, and sexual harassment, as illustrated in the stories of *Maria 1* and *Nikolai*. As immediate survival pressures decreased, social and relational risks became more visible and salient.

  Service providers and key informants noted that exposure to prolonged hardship and trauma may normalise harmful behaviours, online and in-person, making it harder for children to identify certain digital interactions as violations or risks requiring action. While these dynamics are consistent with patterns observed in other non-humanitarian contexts, they may be exacerbated in humanitarian settings.

> *To some extent, they are aware of it; they know it exists, but do they consider it a risk, especially if they have had traumatic experiences?*
>
> (Global Key Informant 18, humanitarian sector)

- **Peer interactions and shared experiences:** Children often rely on peer experiences to interpret what is safe or dangerous online. Witnessing harm experienced by peers could reshape children's perceptions of risk, even in the absence of direct victimisation. Reluctance to disclose personal experiences, particularly among boys, may contribute to a false sense of safety within peer groups.

MANIFESTATIONS OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

This sub-section presents the manifestations of technology-facilitated harms against children on the move identified through the participatory sessions with children and the interviews with key informants and service providers. In addition to describing how these manifestations are experienced in migration contexts, the section also examines how children understand and interpret these harms.

Before outlining the identified manifestations, it is important to highlight the dynamics observed during data collection, which illustrate how technology-facilitated violence, especially that of a sexual nature, is often overlooked or remains unspoken.

As noted in the previous section, neither boys nor girls immediately identified online harms. However, as discussions unfolded, different forms of technology-facilitated harm began to emerge, affecting their avatars, their avatars' friends, or presented as broader problems they recognised. Interestingly, boys and girls provided limited detail about how these situations unfolded. Their initial hesitation to talk about risks, combined with the sparse descriptions they offered, may reflect patterns in which children either do not fully acknowledge certain harms or choose not to discuss them. One participant summarised this reluctance when asked whether the avatar *Nikolai* had shared his experience of online harm with others: *"He opened up during the digital safety workshops, but only to ask practical questions, not to share feelings."* (Kochiq, 16, girl, Georgia). Similarly, service providers and key informants recognised the risks of technology-facilitated harm for children on the move but reported having limited information on how these risks manifest, particularly those of a sexual nature. They noted that the digital dimension of harm is rarely documented or explored in depth in their interventions.

TECHNOLOGY FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

Online sexual harassment

Online sexual harassment was the most recurrent manifestation of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse affecting children on the move, described in both the interviews and the participatory sessions. These interactions often came from strangers and ranged from repeated unwanted contact and persistent sexually suggestive messages sent through social media and messaging platforms to explicit attempts to involve children on the move in sexual conversations.

During the participatory sessions, instances of online sexual harassment emerged in the stories of female characters such as *Maria 1* and *Nikolai's* friend *Alma*. In the group that created Nikolai, this narrative prompted strong emotional reactions:

> *This* [online sexual harrasment] *is something that should never happen; people who do that must be punished hard.*
>
> Sion (15, female, Ukraine)

Interestingly, the few concrete cases shared by service providers in Greece involved boys. One service provider described an Afghan child who had been subjected to persistent sexual harassment on Facebook (Service Provider 8). Another reported two cases of sexual harassment involving boys in shelters, one occurring on Snapchat and the other on Instagram (Service Provider 1).

Non-consensual sharing of sexual images

The non-consensual sharing of sexual images appeared in the representation of the avatar *Maria 1*. Her photos were uploaded without her consent, an event that left her feeling *"violated, anxious, and exposed."* Emy (14, female, DCR) described her as *"shaking with anger and fear,"* while Olec (15, female, Belarus) used sad and angry emojis to convey her emotions. The group of girls described it as one of the most distressing forms of harm. The group agreed that *"once a picture is out there, you can't take it back."* For the participants, this experience represented a total loss of control and an irreversible breach of dignity, illustrating how digital violence can reproduce the same power imbalances and violations experienced in person.

Although this manifestation was not reported as an example of the cases handled by service providers in this study, both service providers and key informants expressed concern about the non-consensual sharing of sexual images. In a survey conducted with frontline workers as part of ECPAT's study on sexual exploitation of children in the context of Venezuelan mobility, 40% (n = 10) reported having handled cases of this nature.[19]

Interestingly, the literature review conducted for this study also identified a harmful practice within the context of Venezuelan mobility: women, including adolescent girls, were contacted with offers to work as models but were subsequently sexually exploited through live-streaming or the exchange of sexual material.[20] Similarly, in the survey conducted as part of the ECPAT's research project on the sexual exploitation of children on the move, 56% of frontline workers (n = 14) reported having handled cases related to the possession or exchange of child sexual abuse material.[21]

19 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
20 ECPAT International (2025). Technology and children on the move or affected by crisis: uses, risks and protection measures. Literature review. Bangkok: ECPAT Internationa.
21 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Emi (14, girl, DCR) highlighted that the risks for technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are higher for girls: *"For girls, it's worse, boys try to trick you and ask for photos or don't pay you"*. Emi's reference to perpetrators who "don't pay you" points to a form of economic manipulation embedded within technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. It reflects situations in which promises of money or support are used to pressure girls on the move into sexualised interactions, only for perpetrators to withdraw once content has been shared. As indicated earlier, the girls who created *Maria 1* described how the avatar sought "clients" online. Facilitators further noted that the group spoke with striking normality about *Maria*'s clients and about experiences of non-payment. These expressions suggest a concerning normalisation of the sale of sexualised content, the sexualisation of girls, and the extent to which children may internalise and accept these practices as part of their online experiences in mobility contexts.

Online grooming for sexual purposes

Online grooming for sexual purposes was described as a process in which perpetrators take advantage of the economic and emotional needs of children on the move, manipulating their needs and gradually building deceptive relationships.

This dynamic was reflected in the story of *Maria 2*, whose group explained that she met someone online who "pretended to be a friend but turned out to be a thief or even a smuggler." As Kitrinos (17, boy, Egypt) added, *"You think he's a nice guy, but he's not,"* later clarifying that *"he tried to abuse her."*

A service provider shared a similar real case involving a 17-year-old boy from Syria who was contacted on Facebook by an adult who sent him photos, arranged a meeting, and offered him money in exchange for sex.

Likewise, in the ECPAT's study on the sexual exploitation of children on the move in the context of the Venezuelan crisis, a frontline worker explained how offering mobile phones was used by perpetrators as a way to initiate contact and lure children.[22]

Unwanted exposure to sexual content

40% (N=19) of the frontline workers surveyed in the ECPAT's study on Venezuelan mobility reported having handled cases involving unwanted exposure to sexual content.[23] While this manifestation was not described by service providers or children in Greece, some service providers and key informants expressed concern about it. Several key informants raised particular concerns about young children, noting that they often use other people's phones, including caregivers', without adequate controls or restrictions. These concerns extended beyond sexual material to include exposure to other forms of violent content.

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED HARMS OF A NON-SEXUAL NATURE

Scams and misinformation

Being victims of scams and misinformation, particularly when trying to meet basic needs such as accommodation, health care, or information about services, was frequently mentioned by boys and girls and interviewees. The avatars' stories included several instances of falling in such situations. For example, in *BTS's* story, the boys explained that he once tried to visit a clinic he found on Google Maps, only to discover it was fake. After that experience, *"He now trusts only medical centres recommended by hospital staff or verified NGO profiles,"* the group said. Children's discussions and interviews confirmed the high prevalence of fake posts. One key informant shared an example.

22 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
23 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

> *When working with the Ukraine response at the beginning, when the war first started, there was a lot of social media usage for finding jobs for children. For Ukrainian women specifically, I remember when I was working in Moldova, we had a few cases of men coming up to the reception centres and looking specifically for girls under the age of 18 and offering jobs. They were showing the girls job websites, which turned out to be fake. These websites were made very realistic and very catchy, because, of course, what they proposed was attractive. That came up a lot at the time.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 07, humanitarian sector)

Financial scams were also mentioned. In *Delua's* story, the group described how she lost all her savings after trusting an online trading app. Maria 2's group *had interesting* reflections, revealing that limited financial literacy and digital skills make children on the move especially vulnerable to online fraud. The group laughed when they shared that Maria 2 had been a victim of an online financial scam, saying, *"Again, money problems!"* but quickly defended her mistake, arguing that many children could *"fall into that trap if they don't know how it works."* Raham (15, female, Palestine) noted, *"If you don't speak the language, then it's harder."* Sion (15, girl, Ukraine) explained, *"If you can't read the messages well, you don't know if someone is lying."* Kochiq (16, girl, Georgia) agreed, adding, *"Yes, that's why scams happen to people, because of confusion."*

Receiving messages from strangers

Being contacted by strangers was highlighted in multiple avatars' stories, including those of *Omar* and *Delua,* and by some service providers. *Omar's* group described how he received *"weird messages"* from unknown people on WhatsApp, prompting confusion and anxiety: *"You don't know if it's danger or just someone bored,"* one participant said. *Delua*, by contrast, was portrayed as actively avoiding social media platforms *"because the government or strangers could find her."*

A service provider recounted finding a recently arrived girl in a car with two older men, a situation they believed had likely been arranged through a mobile app. However, this could not be confirmed, as the girl chose not to share further details (Service Provider 11).

The group that created *Omar* had an interesting discussion illustrating the immediacy and unpredictability of online contact, noting how quickly a simple action can expose children to strangers and potential harm.

> *Did someone talk to him on Facebook or WhatsApp who wasn't a good person?*
>
> Momo (17, boy, Afghanistan)

> *Yes, an unknown person on WhatsApp.*
>
> Ali (17, boy, Egypt)

> *On WhatsApp, if you tap any number, it can connect you to someone, that's how fast it happens.*
>
> Kostas (14, boy, Afghanistan)

Cyberbullying

Being targeted on online platforms for being an individual on the move, based on accent, or ethnic or cultural characteristics, is well documented in the literature, and children echoed this experience through the story of *Nikolai*, who faced cyberbullying. During the session, the group of girls illustrated how even *Maria 1* mocked *Nikolai's* accent on social media. This ridicule, amplified in public digital spaces, left him feeling humiliated and isolated. *"It's like being laughed at in front of the whole Internet,"* said Sion (15, girl, Ukraine). Over time, *Nikolai* withdrew from interactions altogether, losing trust in friends and in the idea of safety online. His story revealed how verbal and social forms of online aggression can deeply affect self-esteem and belonging, particularly for children already navigating displacement and exclusion.

Being hacked

Several avatars, boys and girls, experienced hacking as a common and distressing form of harm. The group that created *Delua* described it as a constant threat: *"People hack everybody,"* explaining that hackers steal photos, bank details, and personal data. *Rakel's* Instagram account was hacked shortly after she arrived in Spain, and her photos were posted without her permission. *Maria 1*'s group warned that *"apps aren't reliable and may steal your data,"* while *Omar*'s Facebook account was stolen and used to spread false information. *Mohamed* spoke about fake comments and the loss of access to his account. Across these cases, hacking symbolised a loss of control over identity, privacy, and trust in technology. As Samwi (16, boy, Egypt) put it, *"It's like stealing your face."*

Connectivity loss and exposure to danger

Across the groups, boys and girls consistently described the lack of Internet access as a risk in itself. Disconnection was framed not only as a practical challenge during transit but also as a factor that increased the risk of harm by limiting access to information, trusted contacts, and support. Children explained that without connectivity, they felt cut off, anxious, and at greater risk of engaging in unsafe behaviours, such as relying on strangers for help or taking risky actions to regain access. Raham (15, girl, Palestine), when explaining the risks experienced by *Rakel's* avatar, said that she did not have Internet access while in transit and warned that the lack of devices could lead children to take risky actions: *"If they (children) don't have free phones, they might steal to get one, or ask for one from people they don't know or trust."*

This perspective was echoed by service providers, who emphasised that mobile phones function as lifelines for children on the move. Beyond communication, devices are used to store critical documents and maintain contact with those supporting their journeys. Losing a phone or Internet access can place children at immediate risk, undermining their ability to prove their identity, seek help, or move safely through routes:

> *Usually, what the children learn is that their mobile phone is the only means they have to prove who they are, because they have some pictures of their passports, birth certificates, etc. Therefore, any children who have a mobile phone try to keep it (…).*
>
> (Service provider 5)

Recruitment by criminal and armed groups

Reports of recruitment through digital platforms emerged across several regions during the interviews with key informants. In Nigeria, for example, one key informant

described how online platforms were being used to recruit children on the move into armed groups:

> *Recruiting boys on the move into armed groups online (…) that's how they are trying to recruit more children to then fight and become involved in the military.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 03, humanitarian sector)

Similar concerns were raised in South America:

> *The risk of recruitment is increasing a lot, and it is happening not only in Colombia but also in Ecuador, where we are currently working. That is how the groups have expanded.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 01, humanitarian sector)

In Central America, digital recruitment of children on the move was linked to offers of belonging to gangs or organised criminal groups:

> *There are proposals to join gangs or criminal groups. This often influences children's decisions — for example, thinking that if they join, they will do well and won't need to study.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 21, humanitarian sector)

CHILDREN ON THE MOVE'S SELF-PROTECTION MEASURES AND EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED HARMS

As in discussions about online risks and harmful situations, asking boys and girls how their avatars protect themselves online did not always elicit direct or reflective answers. Most initially responded that dealing with online risks was *"easy"*, something practical and quickly resolved, such as creating a new account or changing a phone number if something went wrong. For instance, Walaa (17, male, Egypt), when asked what his avatar would do if he faced a problem online, compared it to losing Internet access due to SIM card issues, laughing, he said: *"In Greece, nothing (dangerous happens online). If we have a SIM card problem (…) you can buy a new one, easy peasy lemon squeezy!"*

Boys and girls on the move portrayed in their self-protection strategies, many of which focused on controlling their own online behaviour. As Sion (15, female, Ukraine) summarised, *"The best advice? Don't overshare."* Many children echoed this idea, highlighting that managing the type, amount, and visibility of information shared online is a key safety strategy. In several avatars' stories, boys and girls explained that avoiding posts showing money or material belongings was also a form of protection. Limiting such content, they said, helped prevent scams and theft, reflecting a cautious, strategic approach to online visibility.

For *Panos*, Makseky (17, male, Egypt) explained that he would have two accounts, one private and one "pro." To protect himself even more, children said that *Panos* keeps his personal account private to control who can see his posts: *"Nobody you don't want can see your life."*

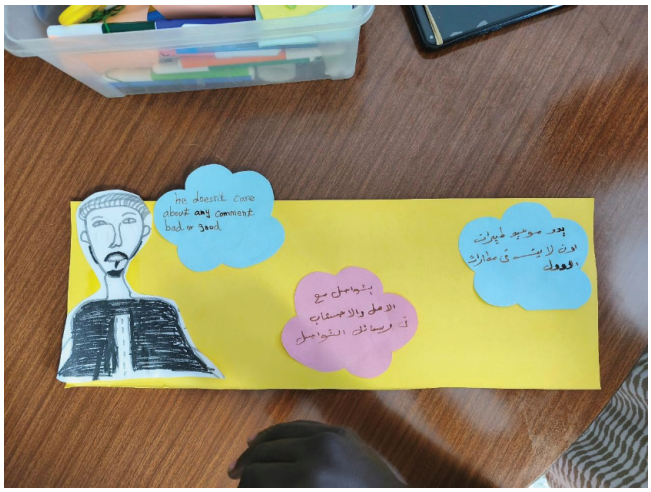
Communicating only with trusted people was another commonly mentioned safety measure. In *Delua's* story, for example, children described her as deliberately using a single messaging app where she felt safer, communicating only through direct messages with people she trusted. She was also portrayed as someone who preferred to *"stay quiet but connected,"* making her online world *"smaller but safer."* Similarly, Samwi (16, male, Egypt), when talking about *Omar's* story, explained: *"He only used Messenger and WhatsApp with people he met face to face. Fewer people, fewer problems."*

Besides controlling the content, boys and girls are also included in their stories; blocking unknown users, setting strong passwords, or creating a new account were other measures. Yusef (17, male, Egypt), from the group that created *Omar*: *"Use a stronger password, open a new account if needed, and don't post personal stuff right away. Make it hard for them to get in."* *Maria 1* was described as using blocking and reporting functions when someone bothered her, and as someone who frequently reset passwords or adjusted security settings after hacking attempts. *Rakel* was similarly portrayed as proactive in managing her digital boundaries: *"She can block, report, even close her account if she has to."* The girls who created her explained that *"changing passwords often, blocking strangers, and keeping her profile private means not just anyone can enter her life."*

Children's narratives showed that experiences of technology-facilitated harm often generated complex and ambivalent emotional responses. Through their avatars, boys and girls described feelings such as fear, stress, embarrassment, and anxiety, frequently represented visually using emojis and symbols that combined sadness, nervousness, and forced calm. These representations reflected the emotional complexity of encountering digital harm, including situations of a sexual nature, which were rarely expressed in a single or straightforward way.

Experiences of online harm, whether directly experienced or witnessed, were commonly associated with mistrust and withdrawal. In several stories, such as *Nikolai*'s and *Omar*'s, children described how digital incidents led avatars to lose trust in others, feel ashamed, or disengage from online spaces, with spill-over effects on their confidence and in-person interactions. At the same time, many children, particularly boys, tended to minimise or normalise these experiences and the consequences. As illustrated in Figure 1, the boys who created *Omar Idris* described his reaction to online harm as indifference: *"He does not care about any comment, good or bad"*, a framing that facilitators linked to the broader adversity children face during mobility, which may lead them to downplay digital harms in comparison to other challenges.

Figure 1. Omar Idri's reactions to technology-facilitated harms



It is worth noting that humour also emerged as a recurring element in discussions about technology-facilitated harm. While often presented as playful, facilitators noted that nervous laughter and avoidance frequently accompanied these moments, suggesting that humour

functioned as a coping strategy. It allowed children to recall distressing experiences, such as being hacked, deceived, or contacted by strangers, while maintaining emotional distance and keeping the conversation socially safe.

PERCEIVED RISK FACTORS FOR TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

> *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)

This account highlights that technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is not confined to specific contexts but becomes more acute where protective environments and adult support systems are weakened, a reality that frequently accompanies situations of mobility and displacement. As the key informant noted, while these forms of violence can affect all children, the risks increase in conflict and mobility contexts, where instability, unmet needs, and emotional distress are more pronounced. In such settings, as described in Section 5 of this report, children on the move may rely more heavily on digital technologies to address needs such as connection, information, survival, and support, thereby shaping distinctive patterns of online engagement.

The interviews further underscore that perpetrators are highly skilled in identifying and exploiting these vulnerabilities.

> *Many perpetrators can exploit hundreds of children at a time because they are just experts at recognising how vulnerable children express themselves, what they look at, what kind of (online) groups they join and so on.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 22, tech child protection sector)

Rather than acting randomly, perpetrators actively observe how children present themselves online, the types of content they engage with, and the digital spaces they inhabit, using this information to target those who appear isolated, in need of support, or seeking opportunities.

Service providers and key informants agreed that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation can affect any child, though girls were consistently perceived as more likely to be approached or targeted by perpetrators. This gendered perception of risk was also reflected in the avatars' narratives. Technology-facilitated harms of a sexual nature appeared only in the stories of female avatars, whether created by girls, mixed-gender groups, or boys. Even in *Nikolai's* story, a male avatar created by a group of girls, online sexual harassment was attributed to a female friend of the avatar rather than to *Nikolai* himself.

Both girls and boys repeatedly associated girls' online experiences with sexualised risks. As Sion (15, girl, Ukraine) explained, *"Girls and boys don't have the same problems online. Girls get more scary messages"*, suggesting sexual content. By contrast, male avatars such as *BTS* and *Mohamed* were portrayed as more confident and in control online. Their risks were more often linked to scams, hacking, or unstable Internet access rather than sexual harm.

Interestingly, while girls were widely perceived as being at greater risk of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation, all the concrete cases shared by service providers involved boys. In interviews with key informants, some reflected on the potential bias created by binary perceptions of children's digital practices and vulnerability. As the global literature indicates, greater difficulties in disclosure among boys, combined with a stronger institutional focus on girls as primary victims, may contribute to boys' experiences being overlooked or under-identified in practice.[24]

Emotional insecurity, such as fear, stress, loneliness and instability during displacement, can heighten children's susceptibility to manipulation or grooming online. A service provider explained that children on the move, particularly girls, are often in a vulnerable emotional state and seek friendships and connections online.

> *Somehow, from what I've seen so far, I feel that girls are more likely to be shy and reserved. Okay, there are always exceptions, of course. It's a little harder for them to fit into a new group, especially in a new country with a new language, whereas boys tend to come as they are, part of a pack. So girls have a greater need to feel they belong somewhere, which automatically makes them more vulnerable (...). Boys are more involved in the exchange part. I contact you to exchange something I have or something you want to give me, or possibly to work... These are the two differences I have noticed.*
>
> (Service provider 3)

Perceptions of online risks cut across genders, yet they were experienced in gender-differentiated ways. Lack of Wi-Fi, for example, was described as a risk due to isolation and anxiety, particularly affecting girls' emotional wellbeing. The case of *Maria 2* illustrates how gender intersects with legal status and mobility privilege. Her European passport was perceived as shielding her from in-person risks, suggesting that vulnerability is not only shaped by gender but also by nationality and documentation. While mobility was portrayed positively across all stories, boys' narratives emphasised factors such as physical hardship and resistance, whereas girls' narratives highlighted emotional strain and insecurity.

Economic pressures further increased children's exposure to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Many children on the move rely on the Internet to find work through websites, online ads, or social media groups because they lack local support networks. Service providers and key informants noted that these "opportunities" are often scams or recruitment strategies used by exploitative networks. Unaccompanied boys were described as particularly vulnerable, as they may feel responsible for supporting their families or continuing their journey, making them more susceptible to offers that involve coercion or abuse, including those with a sexual component. The need to earn money also emerged in the avatars' descriptions. For example, both *Maria 1* and *Mohamed* were portrayed as working. In *Maria 1's case, the girls who created her explicitly stated that she used Tinder, a dating app, to find* clients to earn money. They also explained that these clients helped her meet her basic needs when she was facing difficulties.

Age and developmental stage also played a role. Most examples shared by

24 ECPAT International. (2021). Global Boys Initiative: A global review of existing literature on the sexual exploitation of boys. ECPAT International.

interviewees and reflected in the avatars involved adolescents, who are generally more active online and therefore exposed to a broader range of risks. Interviews with key informants suggest that younger children, by contrast, were more frequently associated with accidental exposure to harmful content or misinformation, often through unsupervised use of a parent's device. Their more limited digital skills, combined with less autonomy online, shaped different patterns of risk.

Online gaming environments were another source of concern, particularly for boys, who were observed to spend more time on these platforms. Some service providers and key informants raised concerns about inappropriate pop-up content within online games, noting that such material can redirect children to sexually explicit content. Other interviewees raised additional concerns regarding the types of games that children on the move were engaging with. In particular, they noted that in their perceptions, many of the games played by children on the move were war-themed, which prompted questions about the potential normalisation of violence. However, the existing literature presents mixed findings on the relationship between online gaming and violent behaviours or attitudes.[25] Rather than gaming alone, studies emphasise the role of broader social and contextual factors, including exposure to violence, insecurity, and the surrounding environment, in shaping children's perceptions and normalisation of violence.

Some key informants also noted that algorithm-driven content may increase children's exposure to online risks. Although no specific cases were identified, they noted that poorly monitored algorithms determine what children see, potentially exposing them to harmful, sexual, or extremist content. Algorithms can also amplify unrealistic narratives about mobility, safety, or economic opportunity, deepening children's emotional needs and making them more susceptible to manipulation.

Across all interviews, limited digital literacy emerged as a significant risk factor for technology-facilitated harms, including those of a sexual nature. Many children on the move, and often their caregivers, had only basic mobile phone skills and lacked the knowledge required to navigate privacy settings, evaluate online information, or identify grooming tactics. Children from countries where digital literacy is not embedded in school curricula were reported to face increased exposure to online harm. Moreover, long periods outside formal education meant that many children had missed opportunities to receive structured guidance on safe online behaviours, further compounding their exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse. While digital literacy is an essential skill, it cannot compensate for digital environments that are not designed with children and their protection in mind. The gaps observed do not reflect individual shortcomings but rather point to systemic failures in how platforms and digital systems provide age-appropriate safeguards, leaving children to navigate complex and risky online spaces without adequate built-in protection.

25 Jesuit Social Services. (2025). *The Adolescent Man Box: Report snapshot*.
Ewell, P. J., Hamilton, J. C., & Guadagno, R. E. (2025). The spoilers of virtual war: Experience and performance mediate the relationship between violent video games and hostility. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 28(2).

IN A NUTSHELL

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED RISKS AND HARMS IN CONTEXTS OF HUMAN MOBILITY

- Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is a significant risk in humanitarian contexts, but is unevenly recognised.
  - The most frequently reported forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were online sexual harassment and grooming for sexual purposes.
  - Regarding technology-facilitated harms of non-sexual nature, scams, misinformation, cyberbullying, hacking, unwanted contact, and loss of connectivity were identified. Exposure to harmful content and recruitment attempts by organised crime or armed groups through social media were also reported.
- **Perpetrators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse take advantage of the intersection of structural conditions, gender norms, personal characteristics, technological inequalities, and the broader hardship of mobility that children on the move experience. These factors do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another, creating layers of risk that perpetrators can exploit.**
  - Girls on the move were consistently associated with online experiences of sexual exploitation (harassment, grooming, pressure to share images and economic manipulation), while boys were more often linked to non-sexual harms such as scams, hacking and loss of connectivity. However, despite this perception, the most concrete cases reported by service providers involved boys, pointing to gaps in identification, disclosure and possible gender bias in practice.
  - Children indicated that they often rely on individual, behaviour-focused strategies (e.g. limiting sharing, blocking users) to protect from online harms.
  - Gender norms shaped how children experienced and responded to technology-facilitated harm. Girls were portrayed as more emotionally vulnerable to manipulation linked to belonging and survival needs, while boys often minimised harm or framed it through humour or indifference.

7. ONLINE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

WHAT CHILDREN ON THE MOVE NEED FOR A SAFER DIGITAL WORLD, AND THE GAPS IN RESPONDING TO THEIR NEEDS

Figure 2 illustrates *Delua's* support network, as represented the boys and the girl who created her, and serves as an example of the types of protectors commonly mentioned across the avatars in relation to safe online environments. Children identified families, friends, governments, and tech companies as key people contributing to their sense of safety online.

Figure 2. Representation of Delua's Support Network, group 2

As will be described in this section, children on the move's perceptions of digital protection were understood as a combination of emotional reassurance, practical digital guidance and support, and survival-related assistance. This section further explains how boys and girls conceptualised these protective roles, and also explores the limitations faced by humanitarian professionals and technology companies in meeting these needs.

EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL REASSURANCE

Boys and girls repeatedly described family members as key figures in their avatars' support networks, trusted people they would turn to if something went wrong, whether online or in-person. Even though the exercise centred on digital protection, the discussions made clear that children saw their families as protective in both realms. Notably, most of the children were physically separated from their families, who remained in their countries of origin. Their communication was often sporadic or entirely digital, which may explain why family emerged so prominently when children discussed who would protect their avatars.

While emotional support was most often associated with family members, children's narratives also highlighted the importance of trust-based and empathetic relationships with peers and humanitarian institutions. Interviews with service providers similarly emphasised the value of such relationships, not only as a preventive measure but also as a way to build children's confidence to seek help when they feel at risk, whether online or in person.

Service providers perceive the heavy workload of staff as a constraint that limits their ability to build the trust necessary to address sensitive issues, such as those related to sexual exploitation, including technology-facilitated forms. As one service provider explained, their work often focuses on meeting children's basic needs or dealing with administrative and human mobility-related matters, leaving little time to discuss other topics:

> *It is already very hard to build a relationship of trust with a child. This is the foundation of our work, yet we rarely have the time to discuss sensitive issues. We always discuss the problems—administrative or human mobility-related . Building trust requires time, and in our work, there is rarely enough. The eight working hours are not truly dedicated to the children.*
>
> (Service provider 12)

DIGITAL SKILLS AND SUPPORT

Girls and boys on the move participating in this research, as well as interviewees, agree that children on the move need access to safe and reliable environments, the development of their digital skills, and proper digital assistance for safer online engagement.

Children, both girls and boys, repeatedly stated that children on the move need safe and reliable access to devices, not only for access to technology itself, but also as a measure of digital and in-person safety and emotional survival. For example, Raham (15, girl, Palestine), when explaining the risks experienced by *Rakel's* avatar, said that she did not have Internet access while in transit and warned that the lack of devices could lead children to take risky actions: "*If they (children) don't have free phones, they might steal to get one, or ask for one from people they don't know or trust.*" She added that staying connected is not simply about convenience, "*all children need to speak to their families and to people they trust*", making connectivity a matter of safety and emotional survival.

Some service providers and key informants in Europe stated that they provide or have access to devices, since they recognise children's need for communication with their home countries, as explained by one interviewee:

> *I mean, teenagers are the ones who come to shelters with their own devices. In this case, we provide them with a SIM card and other things they don't have on their mobile phones. We try to determine whether we believe they need that device to provide it to them. Why? (because) We also use it as a means for children to communicate with relatives, parents who are in other countries, etc.*
>
> (Service provider 3)

It is important to note that interviewees in non-European countries, such as Guatemala and Peru, explained that, even when providing devices was discussed internally in their teams, donors rarely include it in their priorities or funding frameworks in humanitarian settings.

They also highlighted logistical challenges in providing such materials to children in transit, such as SIM cards that do not work across borders, as well as legal constraints when children travel without caregivers. In these contexts, provision is often limited to offering Internet connectivity and electricity at key points along the mobility route.

Interestingly, in contrast to children on the move participating in this research, interviewees in Central America noted that digital issues were not reflected in needs assessments derived from direct surveys with the adult population on the move. These assessments typically prioritise sectors such as health, food, water, and sanitation, but rarely include digital concerns. The findings suggest that while the information is provided by the population on the move themselves, it may also be shaped by the service provision templates that are usually offered, which do not consider access to SIM cards, devices, or other digital needs.

Several boys and girls mentioned that adults, including family members and non-governmental organisations, also have a responsibility to guide and support them in navigating online spaces. As Mon (17, boy, Egypt) said, *"Families should also play a role, warn children and teach them how to stay safe."* The group that created *Tayson* underlined this point, noting that although *Tayson* was portrayed as smart and capable, *"he still needs adults to guide him and give him advice."* During the validation and discussion meeting, children emphasised the importance of being able to ask for help as a way to deal with challenges encountered while navigating online environments.

Developing digital skills goes beyond teaching children how to apply technical safety measures or navigate online spaces more securely. It also requires a deeper understanding of the range of risks they may encounter and the protective options available to them. This includes addressing widespread misconceptions, such as the belief that only certain children are targeted online or that sexual exploitation affects only girls. Across interviews, participants consistently emphasised that strengthening digital literacy is essential to reducing vulnerability and supporting safer online engagement among children on the move. Likewise, findings from ECPAT's study on sexual exploitation in the context of Venezuelan human mobility further highlight this need. Frontline workers in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru reported that both children and their families need guidance to better understand online risks, recognise harmful behaviours, and respond appropriately.[26]

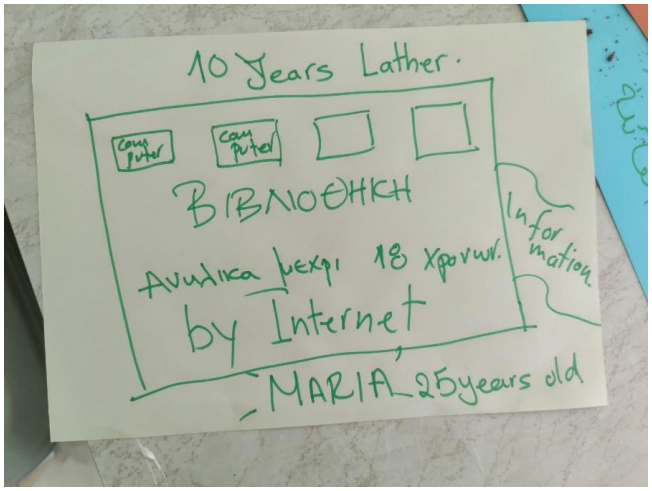
During the validation and discussion meeting with service providers, participants reflected on the emerging findings and recognised that safety concerns often lead them to restrict children's access to mobile phones. However, they acknowledged that such restrictions can lead children to hide their online activities. Similarly to what children suggest, service providers agreed on the need to shift from restrictive approaches towards more supportive forms of supervision.

It is important to note that when children asked adults for guidance, they did not expect adults to have all the answers; they wanted them to listen, understand, and help them navigate the online world with empathy. For example, when providing ideas for a safer online world for their avatars. The group that created *Maria 2* (see Figure 3) imagined a future in which children could learn digital skills safely, in fun, friendly spaces. When discussing *Maria's* future, the boys suggested she

26 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

would *"create a library for children."* Kitrinos (17, boy, Egypt) added, *"There should be safe places to learn online stuff."* Similarly, Portugal (15, boy, Egypt) remarked, *"If Maria had a place to ask questions, she wouldn't fall for fake people."* They all agreed that information and guidance should be free, accessible, and delivered in ways that children enjoy.

Figure 3. Library for adolescents until 18 years old- Created by Maria 2's group



Beyond learning how to navigate digital spaces, children imagined systems in which institutions act proactively to protect them, rather than intervening only after harm has occurred. In their narratives, children often blurred the distinction between governments and technology companies, viewing both as authorities responsible for setting the rules that shape how digital platforms operate. In the stories of *Tayson* and *Omar*, for example, this idea was represented through the creation of "Internet Ministries", institutions perceived as having the power to regulate apps and enforce automatic protective measures, such as removing harmful accounts or intervening when online harm occurs. As Yasu (17, girl, Egypt) explained, *"One action helps many kids, not only Tayson."*

As discussed further in the following section, some boys and girls also described social media platforms and apps themselves as potential sources of protection, calling for safety-by-design approaches embedded within digital services.

HUMAN MOBILITY-RELATED SUPPORT

Addressing and preventing online risks and harms for children on the move cannot be separated from recognising and responding to their broader human mobility-related needs. Boys' and girls' narratives showed that non-governmental organisations were widely identified as part of their support networks when navigating online environments, precisely because these actors address essential needs related to safety, health, food, and shelter.

This perception aligns with reflections from key informants, who noted that addressing digital risks is often seen as secondary when children face urgent, unmet basic needs. Several interviewees highlighted the difficulty of introducing conversations about online safety, digital literacy, or technology-facilitated harm in contexts where children and families are struggling with survival, legal uncertainty, and instability. As a result, digital protection is frequently treated as separate from, or less urgent than, human mobility-related assistance. As one key informant explained:

> *It is very difficult to reach levels of digital literacy and advanced digital skills when even the most basic needs are not being met. That's where a huge challenge lies, how to make self-protection, or awareness of the risks that may arise when using a device, which they need for navigation, orientation, or accessing information, as important as securing their daily food, having shelter, or maintaining their health.*
>
> (Global key informant 8, humanitarian sector)

Boys and girls on the move often struggle to meet their basic needs, and their use of technology is frequently linked to survival. As a result, their digital engagement is more likely to be transactional and to expose them to targeting by perpetrators, underscoring the need for integrated protection measures within humanitarian responses. Addressing digital risks in humanitarian contexts is therefore not about adding new priorities to already overstretched systems, but about recognising that digital engagement is already embedded in children's daily lives, coping strategies, and survival mechanisms.

THE KEY ROLE OF PEERS ON THE MOVE, IN CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT, RISKS AND PROTECTION

Friends and peers were repeatedly mentioned during the participatory sessions as protective figures, providing emotional support, practical advice, and promoting peer learning and mutual online protection. As described earlier, children often rely on their peers to learn and understand the digital realm, including online risks. Further, the research found that children also rely on their peers on the move to learn how to face digital challenges and to obtain support in doing so. One interviewee summarised in the context of Ukraine:

> *They would often travel in pairs or in groups, looking out for each other. They could form support groups of other Ukrainians in different places, which was helpful because if someone was taken advantage of or something bad happened, they could raise it with the other children in the group. So they were sharing protective strategies as well as experiences, which I think was quite helpful for them.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 03, humanitarian sector)

In the avatars' stories, it was evident that even if children on the move do not travel with close peers, they often persevere, either online or within the group they travel with. Such peers turn into a mutual protective role. These narratives reveal how peer relationships function as informal systems of care, in which children act not only as beneficiaries of protection but also as active agents in keeping one another safe. For instance, in *Nikolai's* story, children explained that his friend *Alma* played a key role in helping him cope with online risks: *"He and Alma supported each other, especially when Alma shared her experience of online harassment."* Similarly, in *Delua's* story, friends were included in her support network. As Kiro (17, boy, Egypt) explained, *"When I fall, you see it, so you don't fall too,"* referring to how friends learn from one another's mistakes online and share lessons to protect each other from harm.

Again, the emotional support was also highlighted among peers. Makseky (17, boy, Egypt) described peers as *"the only ones who helped Panos."* He highlighted both the emotional support and the informal peer learning among friends, adding:

> *If one makes a mistake, the others copy it (...). If one of them is scared, the others turn it into a song (..) While they might not solve major problems, these interactions provided courage, companionship, and moments of relief, reminding them that "the journey can still be fun.*

Samwi (16, boy, Egypt) captured the practical dimension of this support when he said, without hesitation: *"The friend who knows about Internet stuff."* He explained that this meant someone you could turn to right away, not a professional, but *"someone who's been through it and can help."* What mattered most was not having to face challenges alone.

STRUCTURAL GAPS FOR DIGITAL PROTECTION OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

The findings show that children on the move's digital safety is not systematically integrated into humanitarian programming or funding priorities. This gap is further compounded by digital environments that are not adequately safeguarded for children, as discussed in the next section. Responses to technology-facilitated risks, including child sexual exploitation, remain fragmented and largely reactive. This section examines the structural barriers that limit prevention and response, beginning with gaps in programming and funding, and then exploring the institutional and legal constraints identified by service providers and key informants. Where available, children's perspectives are included to illustrate how these barriers are experienced in practice.

GAPS IN PROGRAMMING AND FUNDING

While a common narrative among key informants highlighted the limited integration of digital aspects into humanitarian interventions, the interviews revealed clear regional differences. Key informants working in Europe noted a growing, though still limited, recognition of online safety within humanitarian programming and donor calls. While digital safety is not yet central, some interviewees observed early steps towards acknowledging technology-facilitated violence, including child sexual abuse and gender-based harms, as emerging concerns within programme design.

By contrast, interviewees with experience in Latin America, Africa, and Asia consistently reported that technology-related issues, such as device access, connectivity, and digital safety, are rarely included in interventions or funding frameworks, despite their relevance to children's daily lives. Several participants described this gap as part of broader structural and colonial dynamics in humanitarian assistance, where donor priorities from the Global North shape what is considered legitimate or fundable. As a result, online safety is often treated as an "innovation" or a Global North concern, rather than a core protection issue for children on the move across all regions. As two participants noted:

> *(About funding) Europe has, yeah, Europe's. I've worked in the Middle East, Eastern Africa, and Southern Africa, no. It is still seen as a Global North problem. (…) I have reviewed, I don't know how many, donor proposals, and that is the norm. The guidelines are what is written for service provision within humanitarian settings for this area. However, if I look at a donor proposal or at activities carried out in Ukraine, there can be a component of online safety. But it is an armed conflict context over there. But it is (as) a conflict context in Iran, Israel as well. But the service provision or the sense of priorities are different.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 13, humanitarian sector)

> *It's related to the colonialism of humanitarian assistance and North–South relations. If it is not on the donor's agenda, we will not include it, because they are not interested and will not fund it. I believe this has a great deal to do with the donor's priorities and the dynamics of cooperation from the Global North to the Global South. Until you make this visible in ESFERA, we won't cause structural change in the sector; it will continue to be treated as an innovation topic.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 16, humanitarian sector)

As indicated previously, interviewees noted that digital needs are mainly absent from needs assessments, which tend to prioritise sectors such as health, food, water, and sanitation. While basic needs are undeniably urgent, one key informant warned that this focus can obscure digital risks and needs, which, as highlighted by the findings of this research, are a key component of children's protection: *"I think the focus is on basic need, take away from something that is not even considered a basic educational need yet, but it is, which is online education, and so it's so far in the minds of everyone.* (Global Key Informant 25, tech child protection sector). As discussed throughout this report, technology is an essential part of children on the move's lives. The fact that their basic needs are not fully met does not prevent them from using technology; on the contrary, children often recognise digital access as a basic need in itself. Because digital use is closely linked to survival, effective protection requires integrated protection measures.

The absence of digital safety within humanitarian responses also means that institutions tend to prioritise more "traditional" areas of child protection. This, in turn, leaves few concrete actions that directly address digital risks. As discussed in the following section, this gap also affects service provision and support, creating institutional shortcomings in prevention and response.

The lack of collaboration between tech companies, humanitarian agencies, and child protection organisations was repeatedly underlined by key informants as one of the most pressing gaps for ensuring the digital safety of children on the move.

> *It definitely needs collaboration. (…) In a non-humanitarian setting, it is about bringing together the various line ministries and really thinking about how you coordinate across sectors. (…) In humanitarian response, it is more about using the cluster system—you've got the child protection and GBV areas of responsibility. How do we put this (digital safety) on the radar a little bit more?*
>
> (Global Key Informant 03, humanitarian sector)

GAPS FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

One service provider who dealt with a case of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation shared a powerful account of the challenges faced when providing support to a child on the move.

> *You had to deal with a knot in your stomach in that situation. Secondly, you tried to consider how this person arrived at this point and how difficult their past experiences might have been, which they would logically not want to share with you. And thirdly, how, in a context that has its limitations – the girl or boy will be with you for a while, they may make an informal escape or leave, disappear, and you may lose them. How can you help them? How can you help them get out of this? That is the biggest challenge.*
>
> (Service provider 11)

Reflecting on the experience, the service provider described the emotional weight of the situation, the difficulty of understanding a child on the move's past experiences that they may not wish to disclose, and the uncertainty created by highly unstable contexts in which children may leave, disappear, or move on before support can be fully provided. This account captures many of the institutional and legal barriers identified by service providers and key informants, which hinder both the prevention of and response to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation of children on the move.

The emotional burden of working with cases of sexual exploitation of children on the move, including those facilitated by technology, adds to the broader structural challenges and capacity gaps among service providers. Several interviewees explained that, while dealing with their daily duties, which often focused on meeting children on the move's basic needs and managing administrative or human mobility-related processes, leaves them with neither the time, mental space, nor sufficient staff to identify and respond to such cases. Service providers also perceive the heavy workload of staff as a constraint that limits their ability to build the trust necessary to address sensitive issues, such as those related to sexual exploitation, including technology-facilitated forms.

In addition, several service providers highlighted significant gaps in knowledge and training. They noted that professionals working with children on the move often require further support to understand how technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse operate, as well as how to prevent and respond to these risks effectively. Similarly, findings from the ECPAT's research project, in the context of Venezuelan human mobility, echo this concern.[27] When frontline workers in Bolivia, Colombia and Peru were surveyed about how prepared they felt to support children on the move in the safe use of technology, 25% (N = 28) reported feeling *poorly prepared*; and 33% (N=37) said they feel poorly prepared to deal with cases of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. What is more, a recurring theme in interviews was limited familiarity with how digital technologies function, which frontline workers identified as a barrier to recognising risks and providing effective guidance and support to children on the move.

The study's findings also indicate limited knowledge of the specific digital risks faced by boys, particularly of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation among service providers in Greece, but also humanitarian and tech representatives at the global level. While there was recognition that girls may be more exposed to sexual exploitation, including technology-facilitated forms, many participants indicated that they did not know how these risks operate or manifest in the case of boys. This suggests gaps in the understanding of both risk and protective factors that respond to boys' specific needs. During the validation and discussion meeting, service providers reaffirmed that current protection narratives are often overly gender-biased, focusing protection strategies primarily on girls and potentially leaving boys without the emotional support needed to disclose experiences of digital abuse.

Many service providers pointed to systemic gaps within Greece's child protection system, highlighting the absence of a clear national strategy or guidance to effectively respond to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly in cases involving children on the move.

27 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Notably, when discussing how service providers had addressed, or would address, cases of technology-facilitated violence, including child sexual exploitation and abuse, the dominant response was to rely on established institutional case management protocols, which are designed to address more traditional forms of child protection. Many interviewees did not mention reporting cases to digital platforms, and only a few referred to involving law enforcement bodies specialising in cybercrime.

This reliance on traditional case management structures points to a gap in current practice. **While institutions are generally equipped to respond to the psychosocial and legal support needs of children on the move who have been subjected to sexual exploitation, digital safeguarding strategies are not yet fully integrated into their responses**. Moreover, the limited reference to online reporting mechanisms suggests either a lack of awareness of these channels, a perception that they are ineffective, or both.

Key informants and service providers also noted that **existing protection systems are rarely tailored to the needs of children on the move, particularly with regard to language and cultural considerations**. Language barriers in contexts where children speak languages other than those of the host country stem not only from the limited availability of interpreters but also from deeper dynamics related to fear, trust, and community relationships. One service provider recounted a situation in which a child disclosed sensitive information in a second language, but later denied it when the conversation was interpreted into their mother tongue. This was perceived as potentially linked to fears that someone from their community might overhear or that confidentiality could be compromised:

> *I have had instances where a child has told me things in a second language they speak, but when interpreted into their first language, they deny the things they said in the second language, possibly out of fear that it might be someone they know, and they might leak what we are talking about.*
>
> (Service provider 6)

The dynamics of the participatory sessions with children in this research further underscore the importance of language-sensitive approaches. Throughout the research process, ensuring the continuous presence of interpreters for all relevant languages was critical to enabling children to feel comfortable and safe to engage in conversations. In some instances, children preferred to communicate directly with translators rather than using them solely as intermediaries. Reflections with session facilitators highlighted that interpreters should not only be trained in mediation techniques but also equipped to play an empathetic role as integral actors in prevention and response processes related to child protection, including sexual exploitation.

In addition to language-related barriers, ECPAT's research shows that cultural norms, gender stereotypes and xenophobic attitudes significantly shape service responses to Venezuelan children on the move.[28] In several cases, frontline professionals interpreted situations of transactional sex involving adolescent girls on the move as "choices" linked to cultural practices, rather than as sexual exploitation. Gendered assumptions also contributed to the invisibility of boys and youth of diverse gender identity or sexual

28 ECPAT International. (2025). Explotación sexual de niñas, niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la migración venezolana en Bolivia, Colombia y Perú. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

orientation, whose experiences were frequently minimised or not recognised as exploitation. At the same time, xenophobic perceptions resulted in Venezuelan children being treated as a lower priority within overstretched services, particularly when they lacked documentation, with some survivors reporting judgmental or dismissive treatment by authorities. These biases undermined survivor-centred, trauma-informed responses and limited professionals' ability to address children's broader protection needs, including housing, legal status and psychosocial support.

The first quote in this section also illustrates how high mobility levels significantly constrain case follow-up and access to justice for children on the move. Some service providers explained that, even when a report is filed, legal proceedings and ongoing support services are often interrupted once a child leaves the country or relocates. One service provider, for instance, recalled a case referred to the Prosecutor's Office and the Cybercrime Division of the Hellenic police in Thessaloniki; however, the process did not proceed because the child left the country (Service provider 8). On the one hand, this disrupts children's access to justice and the longer-term psychosocial and legal support to which they are entitled. On the other hand, it contributes to a lack of accountability, allowing perpetrators to remain at large and potentially continue offending.

This challenge is further compounded by the frequent change of contact phone numbers among children on the move and their families, as discussed in the first chapter of this report. Key informants and service providers highlighted the high volatility of contact details, which are rarely maintained over time. This instability further undermines follow-up and significantly limits services' ability to provide continuous, coordinated support.

GAPS IN THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ENFORCEMENT AT THE GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

While discussing gaps in the legal framework, key informants and service providers did not explicitly focus on children on the move. However, they offered important insights into a recurring concern: the lack of binding legal frameworks to protect children in digital environments.

Key informants noted that some countries lack laws and that existing regulations are often fragmented, frequently shaped by the policies of a few countries where major tech companies are based. As one expert explained:

> *It's a very fragmented regulatory and legislative situation, and companies are primarily based in the US. (…) What we're seeing now is not a strengthening of protections for children. We're seeing a win on the other side — the freedom of speech side — and there is a strong lobby, especially in the US, that is making strides towards that.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 22, tech child protection sector)

Key informants noted that the lack of binding regulation weakens technology companies' accountability for child protection, emphasising that meaningful change is unlikely without legal frameworks that compel action. This is explored in more detail in the following section.

Although not often mentioned, some service providers highlighted gaps in law enforcement capacity in Greece, noting that collecting evidence and ensuring case follow-up are particularly challenging given the online nature of these incidents and the mobility context. A service provider with law enforcement experience noted the limited retention of IP addresses under

Greek law, which can result in the loss of crucial evidence if prompt action is not taken. In addition, because children often move from one city to another, cases are rarely followed up on or pursued over time.

This challenge is compounded by the borderless nature of cybercrime, which necessitates international cooperation, a process that is often slow and complex.

IN A NUTSHELL

ONLINE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

- **Digital safety is understood holistically by boys and girls on the move**, combining emotional reassurance, practical digital guidance, and human mobility-related support. Children consistently identified families, peers, humanitarian organisations, governments and technology companies as part of a single protective ecosystem, rather than separating online risks from in-person realities or survival needs.
- **Peers play a central and active protective role in online safety**, offering emotional support, sharing experiences of harm, and transmitting practical strategies to navigate digital risks.
- **Structural and institutional gaps limit effective prevention and response to online risks**, including technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Digital safety is rarely integrated into humanitarian programming, needs assessments or funding frameworks; service providers face heavy workloads, limited training and legal constraints; and responses remain fragmented and reactive. 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.

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

As discussed in Section 5, technology plays a central role in the daily lives of children on the move, supporting communication, access to information, and social connections. At the same time, the findings highlight significant gaps in how technology companies currently address children's protection needs.

This section explores in greater depth the role of technology companies in protecting children on the move, focusing on the required responsibilities and limitations identified in the study. It examines children's own perspectives on what they expect from technology companies to enhance their safety and wellbeing online, complemented by the views of service providers and key informants. In doing so, the section considers the implications of these findings for strengthening corporate responsibility, digital safeguarding practices, and child-centred approaches to protection.

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

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. Their suggestions pointed to a clear expectation of more proactive, preventive measures by technology companies. For example, Raham (15, girl, Palestine) explained that *Rakel*'s best protective measure would be an app that could "protect itself," for example, automatically changing her password if someone tried to hack her account.

Children on the move expressed expectations that platforms should actively prevent harm and facilitate access to support. One girl highlighted the importance of linking online protection with real-world assistance.

> *Maria may be strong, but she needs someone on her side, a real-life button to get help wherever.*
>
> Olec (15, girl, Belarus)

More broadly, boys and girls emphasised the need for real-time protection mechanisms, including instant alerts when potential harm might occur. Their suggestions reflect an expectation that platforms should actively monitor and respond to risks as they arise. For instance, Maria 1 's group envisioned *"apps with stronger security so no one can hack her phone or steal her money."* Children also spoke about the need for safer interaction settings, clearer and multilingual safety information, and systems that make it harder for unknown accounts to contact them. They further highlighted the importance of clearer warnings about scams or fake profiles and reporting mechanisms that lead to visible action when problems are flagged.

With specific regard to the risk of sexual exploitation of children, the group of girls that developed Nikolai called for stricter rules to address online sexual harassment. They also proposed applications capable of automatically detecting fake profiles and scams, highlighting the importance of early identification of exploitative behaviours. As Kochiq added, (16, girl, Georgia) *"If apps could tell who is real, half of Maria's problems would disappear."* And imagined *"an automatic shield that filters hate comments before they even appear."*

Children's demands stood in contrast to a recurring theme across key informant interviews, which highlighted concerns that technology companies continue to prioritise profit over child protection, often investing in safety measures only after harm has occurred. While children articulated expectations of proactive and automated forms of protection, key informants described a digital landscape that largely lacks safety-by-design, where harmful content and predatory behaviour are frequently detected too late if at all, and where preventive measures against the sexual exploitation of children remain limited in both scope and effectiveness.

Another gap identified by key informants, which contrasts with boys' and girls' expectations, was the insufficient detection of harm, especially in private digital spaces. A tech sector expert stressed that while some companies use detection tools for known child sexual abuse material, these measures mainly focus on public areas of platforms. However, grooming, harassment, and sexual extortion often occur in private messages and closed groups, where detection is weaker or absent. Notably, all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse described in the avatars' narratives were initiated through private messaging on social media platforms. This highlights a critical gap between existing platform protections and children's actual experiences of safety online. Addressing this gap calls for child-rights–based approaches that combine privacy-preserving safety measures, clearer in-product safeguards within private interactions, and more effective pathways for reporting concerns and accessing support when harm occurs.

It is noteworthy that, while girls and boys recognised and were familiar with the option to "report" harmful situations on digital platforms, this action was often perceived as a simple, stand-alone step, with no further elaboration on follow-up support, guidance, or case handling. This may indicate that, **although many children had potentially experienced online harm and used reporting tools, the process rarely went beyond submitting a report to block accounts, without receiving additional support or meaningful attention to their cases. In fact, in one of the groups, children called for platforms to offer reporting channels that actively guide users towards appropriate support**.

Key informants stressed that current reporting mechanisms on digital platforms are often not accessible or child-friendly, particularly for children on the move. Many may not speak the local language, may fear contacting authorities, or may

have limited and unstable Internet access. During the roundtables, representatives from technology companies similarly acknowledged that reporting tools are often complex, language-dependent, and poorly adapted to mobile, low-bandwidth, or crisis settings, which can limit their usability for children on the move.

Technology platform representatives also identified additional challenges in ensuring this group's digital safety. **Existing safety measures, including age-based access controls, age estimation tools, and restrictions on adult–child interactions, often rely heavily on parental involvement for age verification. This may not reflect the realities of children on the move**, who frequently navigate digital spaces with limited adult support. Participants also pointed to structural limitations linked to data minimisation and privacy-by-design principles. For instance, platforms intentionally limit the sharing of location and contextual data to protect users' privacy. While these safeguards are essential from a digital rights perspective, they can make it more difficult to identify or respond to the specific circumstances of children on the move or those in crisis situations. As a result, risks affecting children on the move are rarely analysed or addressed as a distinct category.

This tension, highlighted by technology representatives, contrasts with concerns raised by key informants about the insufficient detection of harm, particularly in private digital spaces. A tech sector expert explained that while some companies use detection tools for known child sexual abuse material, these measures focus mainly on public areas of platforms. However, grooming, harassment, and sexual extortion mostly occur through private messages and closed groups, where detection mechanisms are weaker or absent. Notably, all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse described in the avatars' narratives began through private messaging on social media platforms.

This gap suggests that existing platform protections do not always translate into real safety for children online. Addressing it does not require weakening privacy protections. Rather, it calls for child-rights–based approaches that combine privacy-preserving safety measures, clearer in-product safeguards within private interactions, and more effective pathways for reporting concerns and accessing support when harm occurs.

Key informants provided further insights on the role of tech companies in protecting children on the move in the digital realm. Although their insights did not focus exclusively on this group, interviewees broadly agreed that the tech sector's progress remains insufficient and largely reactive. They also emphasised that current interventions are disconnected from the lived realities of children on the move.

One key informant, specialised in digital protection, highlighted the lack of transparency in how platforms operate.

> *A less obvious one (…) is being more transparent. (…) Some of these bigger organisations, if they were a bit more transparent about how their systems worked, would dispel a lot of the myths. (…) For example, TikTok (…) will show you more and more content on the same thing. (…) But occasionally it will put in something totally unrelated — and that's deliberate. (…) Most people will never be aware of that. (…) If more people knew things like that, then maybe there would be a little bit more understanding (…) and equally knowing the positives if you're a young person.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 23, tech sector)

They emphasised that families, practitioners, and even digital safety specialists have a limited understanding of algorithms, content delivery systems, and internal reporting mechanisms. This opacity prevents meaningful collaboration between tech companies and humanitarian actors and ultimately leaves children on the move at greater risk.

Some key informants acknowledged structural and legal challenges faced by tech companies, particularly around reporting cases to law enforcement. Companies may shut down accounts without being able to escalate concerns due to legal evidence requirements. However, interviewees cautioned that these constraints do not justify the lack of proactive investment in safety tools tailored to vulnerable children.

In the view of key informants, the lack of regulation undermines tech companies' accountability for protecting children. Some stressed that meaningful change will only occur if companies are compelled to act through laws and regulations. As one expert put it:

> *My very critical perspective is that the companies are not going to do anything unless there is regulation and legislation… We always talk about child rights by design, but having a regulatory system nationally, regionally, and internationally that forces companies to have certain privacy and safety settings by design is essential.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 22, tech child protection sector)

A key informant emphasised that responsibility should extend across the entire technology supply chain, not only to major platforms:

> *We believe the industry, from technological developments such as software and platforms to Internet providers and telecommunications, should take responsibility. Not only for their commercial practices but also to ensure that their interventions, products, and services do no harm.*
>
> (Global Key Informant 08, humanitarian sector)

One interviewee emphasised the importance of establishing clear policies within technology companies to address child sexual exploitation and abuse. They suggested that companies should develop policies across three levels. At the external level, it is essential to issue strong public statements declaring that child sexual exploitation is not tolerated, explicitly referencing practices such as trafficking, sexual extortion, and grooming. Internally, companies should adopt content policies to guide moderators, outlining permitted content and conduct, providing definitions, and listing indicators that may signal exploitation, so that suspicious cases can be escalated for further review. Finally, companies should implement product policies that focus on the design and use of platform features, identifying high-risk functions and limiting children's access to them, for example, by restricting friend requests from outside a user's country to over-18s. In this way, policies should aim to set a clear stance, support content moderation, and reduce risks embedded in platform design.

Boys and girls suggested that social media platforms should be used to disseminate information not only about online risks, but also about harmful in-person behaviours. For instance, the group that created *Maria 1* explained that she looked up "safety tip videos" on TikTok, both

online and in-person protection. As children increasingly rely on these platforms as key sources of information, this underscores platforms' responsibility as information providers. Reflecting a sense of urgency, *Delua*'s group stressed the need for immediate and accessible communication, stating, "Make videos on social media," while Kiro added, "*If I can do something today, I do it. How about tomorrow?*"

IN A NUTSHELL

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES IN ENSURING THE SAFETY OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

- **Technology companies play a critical yet underdeveloped role in protecting children on the move.** Findings highlight the urgent need for platforms to adopt a more pro-active, child-centred approach by embedding safety-by-design principles, increasing transparency around systems and algorithms, and strengthening proactive detection of harm, including in private and encrypted digital spaces where risks often remain invisible.
- **Boys and girls expect digital platforms to facilitate protection, not only respond after harm occurs.** Technology companies should strengthen safety-by-design measures to better protect children on the move. This includes implementing safer default settings for unsolicited contact, introducing clearer, multilingual safety features, and adding friction when unknown accounts attempt to interact with children. Platforms should also strengthen signals and warnings about scams and fake profiles, and ensure that reporting tools are accessible, easy to use, and lead to timely, meaningful responses. Companies should also assess risks through child rights impact assessments, strengthen the detection of grooming and sexual extortion, including private messaging, and ensure safety tools work in low-connectivity and multilingual crises contexts.
- **Current digital safety initiatives are fragmented and insufficient to meet children's needs.**

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

> *Stop online sexual harassment; no one deserves this.*
>
> (Sion, 15, girl, Ukraine)

> *Today the problem is with us, if we leave it, it will be with you.*
>
> (Kiro, 17, boy, Egypt)

Governance and coordination

- Embed digital safety concerns within existing coordination structures (child protection, gender-based violence, education, access to justice), rather than creating parallel mechanisms.
- Establish structured dialogue between humanitarian institutions and technology companies, not only for case reporting but also for prevention and safety-by-design discussions.
- Create regular spaces for humanitarian professionals to share emerging risks, trends, and lessons learned from frontline practice.

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**,** such as the belief that these harms "only happen to girls," or that perpetrators are always strangers.
- Provide targeted training for case managers, social workers, educators, and frontline staff on preventing, identifying, documenting, and responding to technology-facilitated harm.
- Include interpreters, cultural mediators and other para-professionals in capacity-building efforts, recognising their critical role in sensitive conversations and the need for accurate, non-judgemental translation of digital safety issues.

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. That means understanding how boys might be subjected through technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse and how expectations to comply with rigid gender norms and ideas of masculinities might lead them to risk-taking behaviours or the dismissal of their victimisation.

- 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

- Digital safety and technology-related risks should be built into national and regional child-protection and humanitarian systems, so platform safety measures connect with real-world 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.

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

Child and Community Participation

> *Everyone with power should listen, but they never ask us anything.*
>
> (Kiro, 17, boy, Egypt)

> *They should listen to us. Even if we speak short, we know the truth.*
>
> (Mon, 17, boy, Egypt)

- Involve children, in safe and ethical ways, in the co-creation of recommendations and solutions to develop safe online environments. This could include tools (e.g., interactive digital safety guides), prevention messages, and reporting mechanisms.
- Recognise and strengthen peer approaches, which children identified as one of their main sources of knowledge about online risks. For example, implement peer-led discussion groups, peer education, and peer-moderated messaging groups.
- **Mainstream digital safety topics** across group activities, community-based interventions, and work with families, ensuring that discussions on online risks, digital rights, and protective practices are systematically integrated into child protection programming.

Recommendations for technology companies

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

Findings show a clear gap between the protection children expect from platforms and what they actually experience. Technology companies should move beyond reactive measures and apply safety by design across their services to address the specific vulnerabilities of children on the move, including displacement, isolation, language barriers, and reliance on private messaging.

- Anchor platform safety efforts in child-rights–based and privacy-respecting approaches. This includes implementing privacy-preserving safety measures, practical in-product safeguards that operate within private spaces without undermining fundamental rights, and more effective reporting-to-support pathways that enable children to report concerns and access timely assistance when harm occurs.
- 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. These measures should prioritise privacy-preserving safety solutions, clearer in-product safeguards within private interactions, and accessible reporting pathways that enable children to seek help and receive timely support when harm occurs.
- Regularly assess whether detection and safety systems reflect how children actually use platforms, particularly in humanitarian and mobility contexts. This should include reviewing whether current tools capture risks that occur in private interactions, low-connectivity environments, and situations where children navigate platforms with limited adult support.
- Ensure that platform reporting mechanisms are connected to clear referral pathways that enable children to access timely support. This should include automatic follow-up options, referrals to trusted helplines, and the availability of human support when reports involve accounts identified as belonging to children.
- 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, such as the belief that “this only happens to girls” or that sending “non-sexual” images is always safe.
- 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.

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