Briefing Paper

This briefing paper has been compiled using information included in the report *child sexual exploitation and abuse online: survivors' perspectives in Colombia.*[1]

WeProtect GLOBAL ALLIANCE

WeProtect Global Alliance brings together experts from government, the private sector and civil society to develop policies and solutions to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse online. The Alliance generates political commitment and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children, preventing sexual abuse and long-term harm.

ECPAT

ECPAT International is a global network of 122 civil society organisations in 104 countries 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.

FUNDACION Renacer
Contra la violencia sexual

Fundación Renacer is a non-governmental organisation active since 1988 in Colombia to prevent and eradicate the commercial sexual exploitation of girls, boys and adolescents in any form. The work of Fundación Renacer follows three lines of action: comprehensive care for victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation, prevention and research. This social organisation is a pioneer in the country, due to the development of comprehensive care and protection models and also protection environments, from a rights, gender and differential approach and from multisectoral and inter-institutional actions.

CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ONLINE:

Survivors' Perspectives in Colombia

The Voices of Survivors research project aimed to explore child sexual exploitation and abuse online in six countries, including Colombia.[2] Presenting the perspectives of young survivors within the research was paramount.

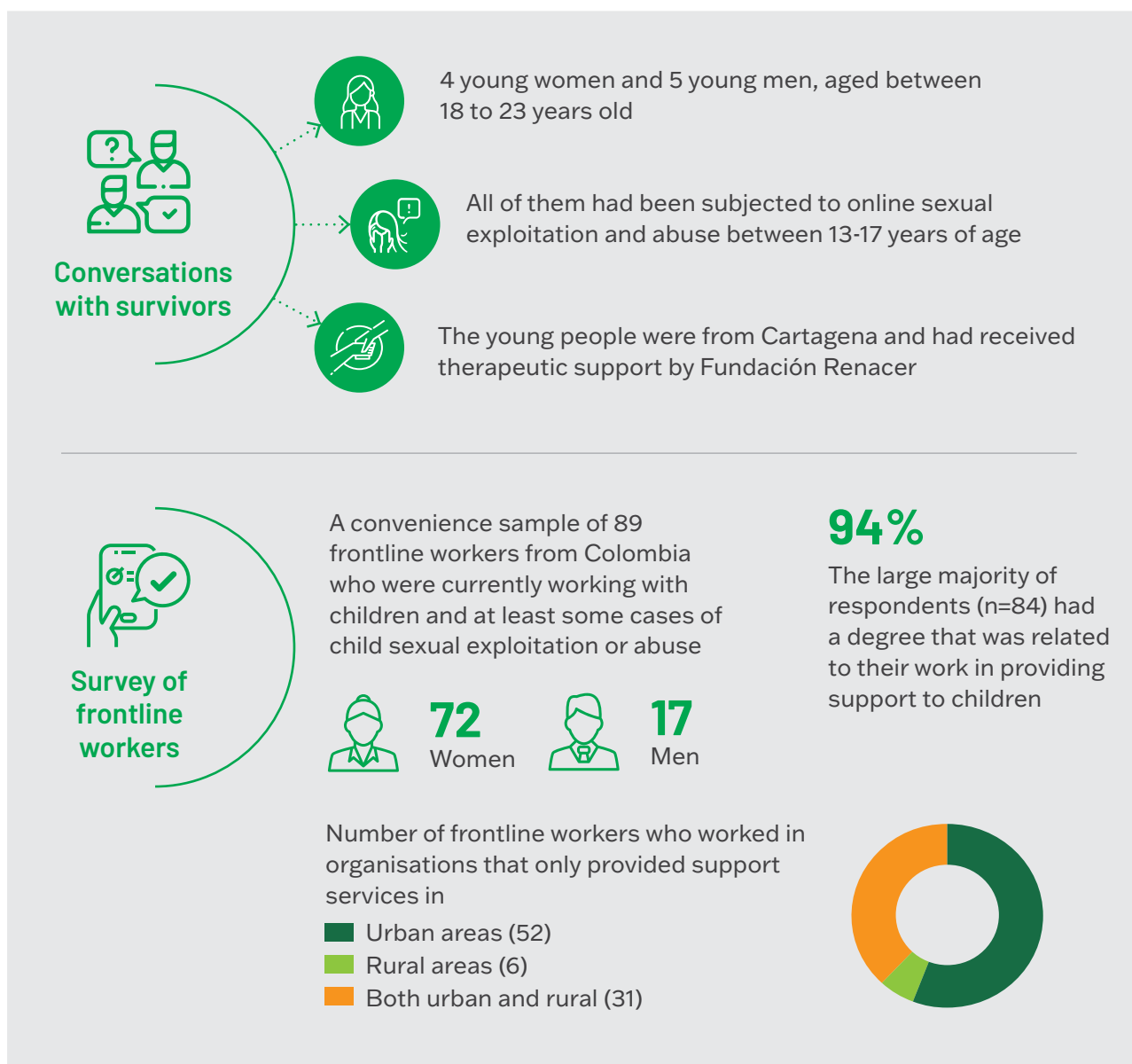Two best-practice activities were undertaken:

Qualitative one-on-one 'conversations' with young people who had experienced child sexual exploitation and abuse online

An online survey of frontline support workers who were working with child survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse

1. ECPAT International and Fundación Renacer. (2021). Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Online: Survivors' Perspectives in Colombia. WeProtect Global Alliance.
2. A total of six countries were involved in the Voices of Survivors project: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Mexico, Moldova and Peru.

Who participated in the project?

Conversations with survivors

4 young women and 5 young men, aged between 18 to 23 years old

All of them had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse between 13-17 years of age

The young people were from Cartagena and had received therapeutic support by Fundación Renacer

Survey of frontline workers

A convenience sample of 89 frontline workers from Colombia who were currently working with children and at least some cases of child sexual exploitation or abuse

72 Women

17 Men

94%

The large majority of respondents (n=84) had a degree that was related to their work in providing support to children

Number of frontline workers who worked in organisations that only provided support services in

- Urban areas (52)
- Rural areas (6)
- Both urban and rural (31)

Defining child sexual exploitation and abuse online

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online refers to situations involving digital, Internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.

Child sexual exploitation and abuse online includes an evolving range of practices including: *child sexual abuse material, grooming children online for sexual purposes, live streaming of child sexual abuse and other related behaviours* such as sexual extortion, the non-consensual sharing of self-generated sexual content involving children, unwanted exposure to sexualized content, among others.[3]

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3. ECPAT International. (2020). Summary Paper: Online Child Sexual Exploitation. Bangkok: ECPAT International.

Main findings and recommendations

This research puts the voices of survivors of child sexual exploitation and abuse online at the forefront of the response to this problem. The findings and recommendations presented here are mostly based on their perspectives about existing reporting mechanisms and about support services, and must ultimately be translated into strategy, policy and action by duty-bearers, service providers and law enforcement.

Reporting mechanisms

1. **Promote information and awareness campaigns about risks in the online environment related to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as about reporting mechanisms and available support services when harm occurs.**

Conversations with the young survivors generally illustrated little awareness of the formal reporting mechanisms that are available. During the conversations, all young people said that prior to the abuse, they had not received information about where to look for help when they were subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse.

According to one young survivor it is necessary to reach the communities with the message of prevention, recognition of these crimes and to promote reporting, allowing more and more people to learn about the issue, commit themselves and support the defence of children's rights and the reporting of the offenders. (VoS-COL-02)

This recommendation was supported by the surveyed frontline workers. When provided the opportunity to share any last thoughts at the end of the survey, almost a half (45%, n=40) emphasised the lack of general public awareness related to this topic as a major issue in Colombia. One of them said that:

> *"It is about the lack of knowledge about the crimes classified as sexual violence; it is important to provide support from prevention in order to gradually mitigate cases of sexual violence in a joint manner; this includes the family, the state and the society."[4]*

2. **Provide educational programmes for communities and family members about prevention of online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.**

For all of the young people who engaged in the conversations, the family plays an important role both in the prevention and protection of children. Therefore, it is crucial that family members have the capacity to educate children about risks related to their Internet usage. It is also important that they create spaces of dialogue where children feel confident to disclose, and know how to guide children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse in the process of reporting.

> *"Today it's easier for the problem to arise because parents ignore the role of educating their children; they don't see the dangers on social media."*
>
> (VoS-COL-01)

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4. Please note text in green boxes refers to quotes from the young survivors who took part in the conversations. Text in purple boxes refers to the qualitative input shared by frontline workers who completed the survey.

The surveyed frontline workers also mentioned that family members need to be better informed in order to prevent such crimes:

> "To a large extent, crimes related to technological means give merit to the lack of knowledge from the legal, assistance, and guidance perspective, and the support that the family provides and to prevent children from becoming network victims."

3. Improve the availability and dissemination of reporting mechanisms, creating child-friendly tools and making use of digital methods.

The reporting mechanisms should be as accessible as possible and available in easy-to-use online formats.

> "Information must be increased, the permanent dissemination of digital channels or complaints. Create an easily accessible chat to report or make an application."
>
> (VoS-COL-10)

In order to create these resources, one frontline worker recommended consulting children to make sure that their needs are taken into account.

> "I believe that victims should be heard. Many formulations are made based on the thoughts of some people, without considering the needs of the victims. Resources for the care of children and adolescents are scarce and governments are resorting to stringer campaigns to position themselves politically, and to ensure resources reach the children."

4. Impose legal duties on and promote collaboration with Internet service providers and social media companies.

These requirements ensure that providers will promptly comply with law enforcement requests for takedown of child sexual abuse material as well as to comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information. This will assist investigations into crimes and limit the wide distribution of child sexual abuse material.

In the conversations, young people said that social networks and other digital media do not promote actions for users to prevent harm. According to the young people, they are unresponsive to complaints - other than sometimes blocking content. They therefore recommend that Internet providers should have visible information on the risks associated with Internet usage for children, and steps to take. This should not be in the form of isolated websites, but actions proactively promoted to children as part of the user experience.

Support services

5. Better promote the availability of a full range of specialised support services for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Any child who goes through such an experience should have access to specialists who can help them. These professionals should have skills and knowledge about working with online forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

> *"The care programmes which exist are insufficient, there is a need for more, because there are many children who come to services for help and information, and they don't know how to talk and who to tell. Care centres should be developed in the most vulnerable sectors."*
>
> (VoS-COL-09)

Lack of specialised support services was also highlighted by one surveyed frontline worker:

> *"One of the challenges that children and adolescents, victims of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation face is the late psychological support from the health sector due to the poor quality provided by this service."*

6. Commit financial resources to provide training and capacity building opportunities to law enforcement officers and legal professionals on topics related to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

Both the young people who engaged in the conversations and the frontline workers who responded to the survey spoke about the need to improve the capacities of service providers.

> *"Officials don't have empathy, they don't understand the consequences of violence, they re-victimise. They lack training."*
>
> (VoS-COL-10)

A surveyed frontline worker emphasised the limited training available for professionals:

> *"The challenges in terms of care is training for public servants and identification of cases to ensure they do not get confused with other types of violence. Having the support of the pages for the reporting purposes creates awareness among the police and state agencies to address these problems."*

7. Improve the investigation and prosecution of online sexual crimes against children..

Law enforcement should improve approaches to conducting investigations of online forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Improvements are needed to ensure offenders are brought to justice and that those who have been subjected to such crimes are able to access compensation and other legal remedies. This would also encourage other children to report sexual abuse and exploitation.

"I believe that for this crime, despite the increased number of victims, the actions implemented are insufficient; the victims are unknown; there is lack of commitment of parents regarding prevention; there is lack of reaction of legal entities for the prosecution of the offenders and this last point [has an impact on] on how much the population believes in the importance of the complaint and increases the probability of having new victims."

Family and community support

Support from community and family members

The young people who engaged in the conversations referred to family members and the broader local community as important actors in their process of disclosure. Five of the nine young people who took part in the conversations had disclosed sexual exploitation to school or community members who, at the time, were in charge of promoting awareness campaigns about this form of violence. The young people said that, once they reached out, these adults not only demonstrated empathy but also acted to end ongoing situations of exploitation and abuse.

Non-judgemental attitudes, careful and genuine listening, persistence, patience and friendly treatment were some of the characteristics mentioned by the young people when describing those who received their disclosures. One young woman said that her family members told her:

"Always count on us, here we will be a family waiting for you so that you can recover."

(VoS-COL-09)

The family and community members also acted as mediators between the children and the formal reporting mechanisms, so they could gain access to the support they needed.

Support for family members

In Colombia, it was really encouraging to see that in some cases, family members also had access to psychological support. This was a departure from the other target countries. In the conversations, one young woman said that in a family therapy session she could tell her mother about the sexual exploitation that she had been subjected to. Another one mentioned that all members of her support network – including mother, father, siblings and aunt – participated in psychotherapy sessions, which she considered essential for her recovery process as they created a caring and trusting relationship:

"They care about me, but they give me freedom, I can go out alone; they trust me."

(VoS-COL-07)

A young man mentioned that the psychological support he and his family received helped them to accept his sexual orientation and understand his situation. Describing the impact of the family therapeutic process, he said:

"Thanks to that, I am who I am."

(VoS-COL-10)