

OUTCOME REPORT

**UNPACKING THE GENDER
DIMENSIONS OF RISKY, HARMFUL
AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR
IN ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS**



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UNPACKING THE GENDER DIMENSIONS OF RISKY, HARMFUL AND HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR IN ONLINE GAMING ENVIRONMENTS*

What does Gender have to do with it?

With their ever-growing reach and uptake, online gaming environments are places where children go to explore and/or to conceal gender** or sexuality. However public debate and expert conversations around child safety often pay insufficient attention to gender and sexuality in children's exposure to and experience of sexual harm in digital environments. To this end, a cross-sector discussion was convened in New York on 10-11 October 2023 on the gender dimensions of risk, harm and help-seeking in online gaming environments. The key outcomes, recommendations and a call to action are summarized next page:

NOTE

- * ECPAT International and PACT organized this activity with the kind support of Microsoft, which provided the venue for the roundtable.
 - ** By gender - we mean children who define or identify themselves by a gender such as boy or girl.
-

A gender lens must be mainstreamed within child safety and wellbeing in online gaming

- * All children should have the possibility to safely explore their sexuality and identity through online gaming platforms with the support of established and moderated gaming communities;
- * Considering child sexual abuse and exploitation as a gender-based phenomenon, special attention should be paid to the specific trajectories of children from different genders, including boys as both victims and real or potential perpetrators of sexual violence;
- * A defining feature of the online gaming ecosystem is community – a “social space” where young gamers can interact in ways that can be positive, risky and at times harmful for themselves and others;
- * Online gaming communities are also spaces where children might seek advice and help. This appears especially true for boys, who might struggle to ask for help and support in the real world because of rigid ideas of masculinity. Gender-related barriers might prevent boys from recognising abuse and report it, eventually affecting their overall safety and healing process;
- * Boys often perceive self-sufficiency as a primary characteristic of masculinity, leading them to avoid help-seeking behaviors. Thus there is a need for positive role models in on-line gaming settings and communities to challenge this perception.

To ensure safety, we need to define safety

- * Safety is not a new topic for the online gaming world, but the issue is often interpreted through the lens of data protection and privacy, rather than as one of physical and sexual integrity, mental health or wellbeing;
- * Objective safety and the perceived feeling of safety might vary significantly according to environmental factors such as culture and location and individual factors such as age, gender, disability, race or ethnicity.
- * These factors influence and are influenced by the language associated with safety, and definitions of safety are important for external and internal advocacy purposes. Similarly, online gaming platforms need to think holistically about the language of safety offline and online;
- * Safety is a core child protection issue requiring collective and proactive prevention efforts that can take place outside of commercial competition;
- * While cooperation to detect, report and remove child sexual abuse material has improved in recent years, more established companies should advise smaller companies on how to implement basic safety features with limited resources. Similarly, companies should not implement features (e.g., direct messaging) if they do not have the complementary tools to protect their users and keep children safe.

WE NEED TO RETHINK HOW WE EDUCATE CHILDREN, PARENTS AND ALL GAMERS TO BUILD SAFE GAMING COMMUNITIES

- 🕒 It is common for children to use multiple platforms at the same time and the safety features on some of these can be bypassed, for example when conversations move from online gaming chat to social media platforms;
- 🕒 While it may be common for children to “break the rules”, online platforms need to consider how their policies, safety guidelines and community guidelines are accessible and relevant for all, especially children. Because children might engage differently with their platforms, companies should have a specific approach and strategy to cater this audience;
- 🕒 For example, most user education does not currently include guidelines for engaging in healthy relationships in online gaming platforms. Addressing this need goes beyond content and chat moderation, and could include proactive encouragement of positive and healthy behavior and life skills;
- 🕒 To make user education such as guidelines and policies accessible, gaming companies should take into account factors such as the age, gender, language and disability (inter alia) of users, and actively integrate safety and inclusivity considerations into the design of products;

- 🕒 Encouraging positive behavior by children should complement efforts to educate parents and caregivers. Globally, adult tech-literacy is generally low compared to that of younger generations. This can mean limited understanding or interest from responsible adults in their children's online gaming lives, including the potential benefits and risks of their engagements;
- 🕒 Parents and caregivers should be involved in a conversation around their perception of safety and their concerns, as well as to challenge their own biases about this engagement. Particularly, parents and caregivers could be supported in challenging their own gender biases about child safety;
- 🕒 While some promising practices already exist, online gaming companies should allocate more resources to designing interactive ways for users (and families) to learn about gaming and safety policies and guidelines;
- 🕒 Child safety by design should be integrated by default into training and curricula within the sector; this means within design, engineering, product management, policy and marketing teams.

CALL TO ACTION

1

Prioritize the voices and experiences of child and youth gamers at the center of the safety conversation: building child and youth participation into the creation of safety mechanisms and guidelines in online gaming platforms is critical to their relevance and sustainability.

“

Kids can be vulnerable, but they are also brilliant – and some companies had many more successes once they involved kids in the design of their products and spaces

”

2

Build a globally diverse community of practice to bring gender considerations into the mainstream of safety policy, product and process design: acknowledging the need for diverse perspectives is a crucial starting point to transition from responsive, top-down or mono-cultural approaches to safety in online gaming.

HOW CAN WE DO THIS?

1

IDENTIFY GOOD PRACTICES

on involving young gamers in the co-design of safety, diversity, equity and inclusion, wellbeing and other features of gaming environments;

2

MAP EXISTING INITIATIVES

with a gender and/or wellbeing focus in and outside online gaming;

3

CONVENE WITH TECH INDUSTRY

to define and share current practices and potential approaches that could be implemented and scaled up;

4

CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR DIALOGUE

on what works and what needs improvement in terms of safety and gender;

5

ARTICULATE AND SHARE WHAT WE KNOW ALREADY

with a “business mindset” to equip industry allies in the online gaming sector with actionable steps to understand and support actions on child safety and ensure buy-in;

6

EXPLORE LOCALIZATION

of existing standards and frameworks for different gaming genres and socio-cultural settings;

7

ENGAGE WITH EXISTING TERMINOLOGY AND TAXONOMY

initiatives to ensure clarity and consistency of terminology in line with broader cross-sector standards;

8

APPLY EXISTING AND NEW RESEARCH

to develop an evidence-based business case and guidance for mainstreaming child safety and wellbeing with a gender lens within design, innovation and marketing within the online gaming world.

