

CHILD SAFEGUARDING TEAM

Who are we

The Child Safeguarding Team (established in 2010) within the Issues Affecting Children Program of International Center "La Strada Moldova" consists of an **attorney** and several **psychologists**, who provide assistance throughout the criminal proceedings to the children victims and witnesses of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Our mission

To ensure the rights and interests of children are respected throughout the entire criminal procedure in order to avoid repeated victimization; and to ensure that all the principles of restorative justice are followed.

Area of competence

Any form of sexual violence against children, whether it is sexual abuse or sexual exploitation, represents our area of activity. **The use of informational technologies** as a means of recruiting, enticing or as an environment to commit the abuse or exploitation, represents the defining element of our specialization. We provide legal and psychological assistance to the child victim or witness of the following offences:

- Rape (art. 171 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova)
- Violent actions of a sexual nature (art. 172 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Sexual harassment (art. 173 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Sexual intercourse with a person under the age of 16 (art. 174 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Perverted actions (art. 175 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Child enticement for sexual purposes (art. 175/1 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Child trafficking (art. 206 para. (1) a) of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Child pornography (art. 208/1 of the Criminal Code of the RM)
- Child prostitution (art. 208/2 of the Criminal Code of the RM)

Our principles

- Ensure the balance between criminal justice and the best interests of the child;
- Confidentiality and protection of the identity of the victim;
- Avoid interventions that have low benefit for the child, but where the risk of damage is high;
- Involving the child in the decision-making process that concerns him/her.

Who can request our services

- Law enforcement agencies;
- Professionals in the field of child protection and related fields (social assistance, education, health).

Our services

- ✓ **Assist and consult law enforcement agencies** during the period of investigation;
- ✓ **Provide specialized psychological assistance to the children and the members of their families** throughout the criminal proceedings;
- ✓ **Provide specialized legal assistance and consultation to the children and the members of their families;**
- ✓ **Child-friendly hearing spaces** for children victims/witnesses of sexual abuse or exploitation.

✓ Contacts

- ✓ **Tel.:** +373 78 330 406, +373 78 405 660
- ✓ **Web:** siguronline.md, lastrada.md
- ✓ **Working hours:** 24/7.

During the first semester of 2020, the Child Safeguarding Team (CST) has provided legal and psychological assistance to 53 children-victims of various forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. 26 of these refer to new cases registered during the reference period.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significantly lower number of cases requiring legal and psychological assistance compared to the same period last year. In the first months since the pandemic state was declared, court hearings and some legal proceedings in criminal cases involving children have been suspended. In the period March-May we have provided direct assistance in legal proceedings involving children in a limited number of cases, as to avoid the exposure of beneficiaries to health risks.

Trends in offline child sexual abuse and exploitation

1. Sexual violence is committed by someone from the child's circle of trust

The restrictive measures and auto-isolation policies have determined an increase in the number of cases of sexual abuse committed by someone from the child's circle of trust. During this period, we have registered a higher number of cases of sexual violence committed by the biological father of the child, the partner of the mother who lives in the same house as the child, or by another person from the child's circle of trust (for example: a relative, neighbor, family friend).

2. The precarious economic situation has determined the continuation of sexual exploitation of children during the pandemic

Despite the restrictions imposed by the authorities instituting a quarantine regime through self-isolating at home, during the pandemic period there have been 4 cases of child sexual exploitation through trafficking. It is certain that, during this period, the children have continued to be sexually exploited and forced to provide sexual services to a smaller number of clients compared to the time before the pandemic. Profile websites still featured new and updated ads for erotic massages. It is known that traffickers from Moldova use this type of advertising to identify consumers of sexual services (clients). This makes us believe that the demand and the supply of sexual services have been and will continue to be active.

3. The financial vulnerability of the victims, which was aggravated by the pandemic, has affected the victim's ability to cover minimal transport costs to travel to the criminal investigation body or to the court to take part in the legal proceedings

After the restrictions related to the pandemic state were eased, multiple victims have told us that they do not have the financial resources to travel to the city in order to take part in the legal proceedings planned. In 4 instances, La Strada Moldova has covered the transport costs for the victims, to ensure the continuation of the criminal proceedings or of the act of justice.

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Trends in online child sexual abuse and exploitation

1. *The number of potential cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation reported on the www.siguronline.md platform has tripled compared to the same period in 2019*

In the period January-June 2020, on www.siguronline.md there have been 34 reported cases of potential online sexual abuse, 30 of which came from children, while 4 came from adults (parents or teachers).

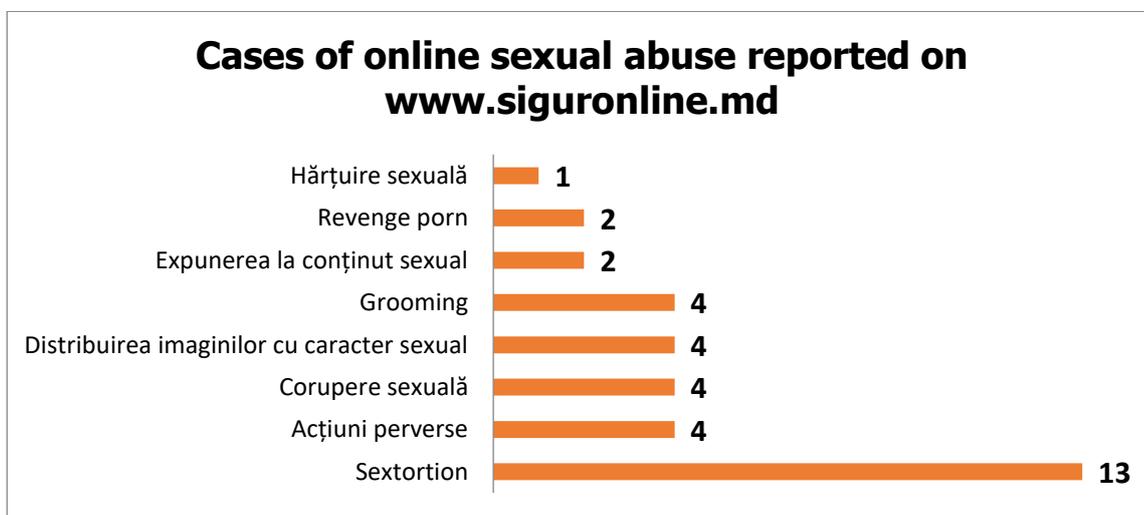
- **5 children** who have written in the chat to the siguronline.md consultant have been provided with psychological and legal assistance by the La Strada professionals
- **4 requests** have been made offline (outside the chat's active hours), and
- in **9 cases**, children have left the chat before the consultant managed to get their contact details.

In all these cases we have reached out by email to the person who started the conversation, trying to restore the connection. In only one case the child has refused to give contact information and in another the child has provided us with the wrong telephone number and we weren't able to contact him/her. In another case the friend of a child contacted us, and we asked him to encourage his friend to contact us.

- In **7 cases**, children have spoken to us about situations that have happened a while ago and which have been solved after involving their parents (4 cases) or after applying technical solutions: block or report functions on social media (3 cases). In the latter situations the children have been encouraged to discuss with such situations with trusted people.
- In **6 cases**, we have been contacted by children or parents from Romania and we have redirected them to similar services in Romania.

Before the pandemic, children facing such unpleasant situations online sought help offline (most often from friends) or at least they could distance themselves from these situations by not accessing or limiting the access to the Internet. Now however, they could not interact in real life, nor limit access to the Internet, because all lessons, communications with friends etc. have been moved online. In these circumstances, children had to look for solutions online as well.

Children that have faced an online sexual abuse are both girls and boys of different ages. The types of abuse they have been exposed to have been different as well.



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It is important to mention that this classification is based on the various types of abuse, and not the legal classification criteria.

- 2. Four children have reached out about their online sexual abuse experiences following the informative activities carried out by teachers from the "Intersection. Online Safe Zone" community*

Despite the pandemic situation and the remote learning process, involving teachers along with the pupils in activities about online safety has contributed to promoting the siguronline.md service among children. Four children who have gone through online sexual abuse and have written to us through siguronline.md, have been provided with legal and psychological assistance free of charge during the trial.

- 3. Many children have told us about previous experiences of online sexual abuse and asked for advice on how to avoid such situations in the future*

After watching the [video](#) launched within the campaign dedicated to Safer Internet Day (February), multiple children have confessed to us about similar experiences they encountered previously, how they managed to overcome them, either by talking to a parent or by reporting the person who was sending them messages of a sexual character. The children have told us about the feelings they had while they were going through the abuse, how they understood that what was happening wasn't okay and how they've overcome the situation by discussing it with their parents.

- 4. Children say about repeated experiences of online sexual abuse*

We have registered 2 cases of repeated online sexual abuse. In both cases the abusers have promised the children that as soon as they send them photographs of a sexual nature, they would leave the child alone. At first the children did as requested, hoping that they would get rid of the threats, but later they understood that the blackmail could continue so they decided to ask for help through www.siguronline.md.

- 5. A new type of online sexual abuse was registered – revenge porn*

Revenge porn involves sharing intimate images or videos of a person without his/her consent as an act of revenge. Usually, the images or videos of a sexual character of the child are distributed online by the abuser when the child decides to break up with them, and they do it in order to "embarrass/shame" the child, or "ruin the child's reputation", without asking the child for anything else in return.