
ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN – A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF IN FAMILY OFFENCES

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Abstract: *This research aims to analyze the sexual exploitation through online pornography shows, that takes place in Romania, in the family environment. This type of abuse is represented by cases where children are involved in live pornographic shows on the internet, within which minors perform the sexual acts requested by adult clients who pay for the show. Although a relatively recent phenomenon in our country, this type of abuse has been prevalent for years in other disadvantaged regions of the world. The research focuses on in-family offences and aims to identify the factors that lead to the commission of such crimes. Data was obtained through 27 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with specialists involved in the management of online pornography offences: police officers and psychologists from child protection departments. The results of the study show that, although family sexual exploitation through live-streaming shows is not a very common modus operandi, it has extremely serious consequences for the victims. Discussions with specialists outline two distinct social situations in which this type of abuse manifests: a part of the perpetrators come from economically marginalized families, in the framework of which other deviant behaviors are also registered and within which pornography is used to provide the necessary income for day-to-day living; for the second category of perpetrators, this form of exploitation represents a quick source of substantial income, which is used to provide them with the material comfort they aspire to.*

Keywords: *cybercrime; sexual deviance; child pornography; anomie; social innovator marginalized groups*

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Introduction

The consumption of adult pornography has increased at an accelerated pace with the proliferation of new technologies, in the development of which companies in the sex industry have been significantly involved, anticipating that such investments would prove extremely profitable. However, with the explosion of adult pornography, child pornography, an extremely serious form of child victimization, has also expanded in an uncontrollable manner (ECPAT International, 2018; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2011; O'Brien, 2014, and others).

Online child pornography represents the documentation of a sexual abuse committed against a child, and simultaneously, an extension of this abuse. It causes continuous harm to the victim because, even when the physical aggression ceases and the perpetrator is caught and sentenced to prison, the images remain accessible and can circulate in the alternative space, without the possibility of it being permanently deleted (Eneman, 2005, p. 2).

Statistics cited by the European Commission show that, globally, in 2019, 17 million such abuses were reported, 17 times more than in 2010 (EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse 2020). At the EU level, the increase is equally alarming: from 23,000 in 2010 to over 725,000 in 2019 (US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2020, as cited in E.C. 2020). It is estimated that the volume of pornographic material representing minors will experience unprecedented growth with the development of artificial intelligence tools (Culture reframed, 2023, Internet Watch Foundation, 2024).

In Romania, data from the Romanian Police shows that child pornography has been experiencing a nearly constant and strong increase in recent years. While in 2014, at the national level, 162 child pornography offenses were reported, in 2022 this number increased 5.6 times, reaching 901 (IGPR, 2022).

The DIICOT activity report for 2022 (p. 37) notes "the increase in cases involving the crime of child pornography and the exploitation of minors in the online environment caused by easy access to technology by both offenders and victims (especially in the case of self-production of

pornographic material), but also the emergence of new modes of operation like livestreaming child pornography".

The „Report on the situation of human trafficking in 2022 „, (ANITP, 2023), which concludes that Romania remains the European country from which the most victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation originate, also identifies changes in the ways in which trafficking for sexual exploitation manifests. This official document notes a decrease in the number of victims exploited in homes, on the street, in clubs, and in hotels, but an increase in the number of cases of internet pornography. Data shows both an increase in the number of cases of exploitation through child pornography (from 5 in 2010 to 87 in 2022), as well as an increase in the proportion of this mode of operation in the total number of cases of sexual exploitation of minors, which in 2022 reached more than half (52%) of the total number of minor victims of sexual exploitation. The report also notes that "specialized groups" in the sexual exploitation of victims are directing their criminal their criminal activity towards using mostly virtual means and tools for perpetrating their offenses: pornography, video chat, etc." (ANITP, 2023, p.17).

This research aims to analyze the sexual exploitation through online pornography shows, that takes place in Romania, in the family environment. This type of abuse is represented by cases where children are involved in live pornographic shows on the internet, within which minors perform the sexual acts requested by adult clients who pay for the show. Compared to juvenile prostitution, which involves the direct exercise of the aggression by an adult, in the case of exploitation through online child pornography a second category of perpetrators is involved in committing the crime – those who facilitate the abuse. These are usually adults in the child's proximity (parent, guardian or other trusted person) who actually commit the aggression, carrying out the sexual acts requested by those who pay, or determine the children, based on the authority they have over them, to behave as the clients demand. Thus, the aggressor client, defined as the person who benefits from sexual services in exchange for money, remains the distant author of the act, while the the facilitating aggressor represents the author who makes the physical aggression possible, by identifying and co-opting the child in sexual acts.

This type of abuse is conceptualized in the specialized literature by the term "web child sexual tourism" (Terre des Homme, 2013), as it allows

pedophiles thousands of kilometers away to sexually exploit minors from less economically developed countries, without having to physically travel to those countries.

The live streaming of children sexual abuse is identified by EUROPOL as no longer a trend but as an established reality as early as 2014. A number of sources reported significant increase in the number of online child sexual exploitation and specifically live streaming cases during and after the COVID pandemic, when both children and offenders were forced to stay at home and rely almost exclusively on the Internet for social interaction. (IWF 2023, Europol 2020, Netclean 2020). Most of the cases reported and investigated by law enforcement agencies were perpetrated using relatively non secure methods (social media, chat, dating websites) on the surface web (Napier et al. 2021, Terre des Hommes 2013, IJM 2020). Given the relative technological simplicity necessary to commit live-streaming crimes, there are reasons to believe that the majority of livestreaming of child sexual abuse remain undetected due to the anonymization techniques available to offenders (end-to-end encryption, VPNs, Dark web websites, cryptocurrency payments, etc).

While payment platforms and money transfer agencies have begun to work with law enforcement to detect payment for livestreaming offenses, the appearance and development of anonymous payment methods like cryptocurrency creates problems for law enforcement agencies in identifying and prosecuting live-streaming offenses. (EUROPOL 2020, ECPAT 2017).

In the first part, this paper presents a synthesis of the specialized literature which addresses the issue of child sexual abuse through live-streaming shows. The next subchapter refers to the research methodology, describing the objectives and research questions, the data collection methods and the subject selection method. The third subchapter presents the results obtained, which are structured according to the research questions. The last subchapters present the conclusions and limitations of the research.

Literature Review

Early studies dedicated to analyzing WCST (Terres des Hommes, 2013, 2014) assess that the phenomenon, which has reached alarming

proportions in Southeast Asia, registered the most pronounced increases since 2013. The social and cultural context that favors the important expansion of the phenomenon involves the interaction of a multitude of factors such as a large proportion of the population living in poverty, cheap internet access and widespread coverage within the country, cultural norms that value unconditional loyalty to the family, the limited efficiency of control institutions and the vulnerabilities of the legal system (Terres des Hommes, 2013). Live streaming offenses are especially difficult to combat due to the technologically enabled nature of the crime. Most platforms that facilitate live-streaming offer end-to-end encryption which makes it almost impossible to detect crimes as they happen. Also, the crime does not result in the production of a media file (picture or video) and therefore fails to be detected by ESP's and law enforcement. (IJM2020, WeProtect2023).

According to de Gjermeni (2008), belonging to a disadvantaged group is a key factor in the emergence of child trafficking. Belonging to a marginalized group does not cause exploitation, but it favors it in the context of the manifestation of multiple risk factors. Gjermeni (2008) found that statistically significant predictors of minor trafficking among the marginalized studied groups are drug/alcohol use, poverty, and the presence of people involved in prostitution in the vicinity of children.

The accentuation of social inequalities both globally and within states, which translates into increasing poverty among certain sectors of the population, in parallel with the enrichment of the already wealthy, is a key factor in the expansion of the phenomenon. (Poulin, 2008; Batha, 2020). This fact is supported by the high prevalence of the phenomenon in countries where a large percentage of the population lives below the poverty line and the relatively small amounts paid by offenders for accessing live streaming sexual abuse of children. (ECPAT 2017, Cubitt 2021, Napier 2021a, IJM 2023).

Along side the aforementioned socioeconomic factors, the spread of online child pornography is favored by the lack of a unified and adequate legal framework pertaining to intervention methods in the virtual space. The tightening of legislation regulating the sexual exploitation of children on the internet, through harsher penalties for perpetrators and the emergence of extraterritorial laws that allow persons who have committed criminal acts abroad to be prosecuted in their own country, represent

important steps in the fight against abuse, but the results achieved so far reflect their limited effectiveness (Terres des Hommes, 2013; Dushi, 2020).

The difficulties in regulating virtual space are due to both objective causes and the difficulties generated by moral dilemmas regarding what is permitted and what should be prohibited on the internet. Objectively, cybercrime is characterized by anonymity, transnationalism, and adaptability, features that make it difficult to identify and prove (Nanikian, 1996; Capeller, 2001; Stutton and Mann, 2010). At the same time, in order to discover and prove consumption, access to user data is necessary. This situation raises controversies regarding the violation of users' rights to privacy, intimacy, or freedom of expression. E. Hnason (2019) argues that cyber-libertarianism, which currently governs the use of the internet, has led to its transformation into a space where immoral behavior, including the sexual exploitation of children, is possible. A determining role in perpetuating this tolerant approach is played by technology corporations, which, under the pretext of defending users' rights, protect their financial interests, encouraging "a significant ethical drift [...] that facilitates the sexual exploitation of children through online pornography" (Hnason, 2019, p.14).

Most available studies analyze the specific characteristics of the phenomenon in Asian regions known for having problems with prostitution and which have been consecrated, with the implicit support of state policies, as destinations for sex tourism. Drejer et al. (2023) found that over half of the children abused through live streaming have family members who are also engaged in the same activity. The conclusions of the analysis indicate a high level of community tolerance for people engaging in video-chats with sexual content. The phenomenon of normalization and trivialization of sex work is also identified by R. Poulin in explaining the process by which underdeveloped states have allowed and even encouraged the development of the sex industry (prostitution, sex tourism, pornography) in order to obtain significant revenue for the national budget (Poulin, 2008).

Abuse facilitated by the internet is perceived as relatively harmless due to the lack of physical contact between the abusive client and the victimized child. Moreover, it is considered an easy way to provide an income for the family (Terre des Hommes, 2013; Varrella, 2017). However, the

consequences for the victims are very serious. Victims suffer from high levels of psychosocial distress, such as traumatic sexualization, betrayal, social stigmatization, and helplessness. The traumatic effects are exacerbated by the involvement of parents in the abuse, causing children to feel confusion and conflict of loyalty (Terre des Hommes, 2013).

Family involvement in sex trafficking or production of child sexual abuse material has been documented in different studies (Napier et al. 2021, Salter & Wong 2024, Sprang & Cole 2018, Reid et al. 2014). In 2017, the International Organization for Migration estimated that 41 percent of child trafficking experiences are facilitated by family members and/or caregivers.

The prevalence of family involvement appears to be higher in the case of livestreaming offenses. A study by IJM revealed that 83% of cases were perpetrated or facilitated by family members. Research has identified livestreaming facilitators to be mostly female with a median age between 20 (Napier et al. 2021) , and 27 (IJM 2023).

The psychological and social impact on the victims of familial sexual exploitation appears to be extremely severe and last longer than in the case of victims of sexual exploitation perpetrated by strangers, with a higher incidence of social and developmental damage as well as higher incidence of attempted suicide later in life. (Sprang & Cole 2018, Salter & Wong 2024).

Victims appear to be mostly girls and a large percentage of them aged 12 years or younger. This trend appears to be confirmed by multiple studies and reports. (IWF 2018, IJM 2020).

Analysis of the ways in which offenders identify and contact victims shows that at least some offenses are opportunistic in nature and are being committed by offenders who are not looking for children sexual exploitation material, at least initially.(Napier et al. 2021b, IJM 2020). There have been instances where facilitators or in some cases even victims approached the offender via social media platforms. Many livestreaming CSA offenders have little to no criminal history (Brown et al. 2020) and offend almost exclusively in this way (Cubitt et al. 2021).

Studies on the sexual exploitation of children in Romania

The most documented theme related to sexual exploitation through online pornography in Romanian sociological literature is that of human trafficking. Trafficking for the purpose of exploitation through pornography is just one form of human trafficking; at the same time, human trafficking is just one form of commercial exploitation of persons (according to the legislation in force).

The unfavorable socioeconomic situation of victims/families is a risk factor for minors entering trafficking. Without being able to establish a direct causal link between victimization and poor living conditions, since most minors living in poverty are not subjected to any form of abuse, the lack of income necessary to ensure a decent living and the lack of access to the labor market due to lack of education and necessary training, limit individuals' chances of social mobility. Community poverty (manifested by the lack of jobs, lack of housing, high unemployment) and the lack of effective social policies that allow for the real integration of disadvantaged groups, lead young people to consider emigration as the only hope for material fulfillment. In the absence of information about the realities of human trafficking, emigration represents a major risk situation for human trafficking (ANITP, 2009, 2023; Popescu, 2003; Bogrdogi, 2015).

A dysfunctional family climate and/or the adoption of deviant behaviors also constitute risk factors identified in the families of the victims. In families where minors become victims of exploitation, usually some deviant or even delinquent behaviors manifest (such as alcohol/drug use, domestic violence, a conflictual family atmosphere, interaction with people involved in criminal activities). These elements negatively impact parents' ability to provide attention and emotional and educational support to children (ANITP, 2009, 2023, Popescu, 2023; Bodoroghi, 2015).

From Lăzăroiu's perspective (2001), victims of human trafficking are social innovators who aim to change their disadvantaged situation through emigration, by identifying new solutions that involve taking risks and adopting, in certain contexts, illegitimate means of action. Social innovation fails due to personal characteristics (age, which in the case of young people implies a lack of life experience, low human capital, lack of information about the realities and risks of migration), which are

correlated with characteristics of the environment in which they live (hostile socioeconomic environment, inefficient institutions, social discrimination that through socialization leads to abuse).

Methodology of study

This research aims to describe the methods of online child sexual exploitation and explain the cases occurring within Romanian families, and has the following research questions: How does sexual exploitation through online child pornography committed within families manifest? What are the contributing factors to the emergence of these forms of abuse? What are the consequences for the victims?

To answer the research questions, 27 interviews were conducted with specialists involved in managing cases of online child pornography: police officers and psychologists from county directorates for social assistance and child protection.

The interviewed police officers interact, as part of their specific activities, with perpetrators, victims, and their families, both during hearings and during raids at the scene of the crime. The subjects have between 2 and 10 years experience within the structures in which they carry out their activities. The interview guide focused on the dynamics of crimes, the operating methods they encountered throughout their experience, the economic situation of the perpetrators, their criminal records, the reactions of the perpetrators upon identification, the justifications regarding their own behaviors presented by the perpetrators during the investigations, their way of relating to the victim, the characteristics of the victims, how they related to the aggression during the investigations, the family support received by the victims and perpetrators in this context.

The psychologists participating in the study were selected based on their availability following the invitation we sent by email to all general directorates for social assistance and child protection. Some of the psychologists participating in the study assist victims of child pornography during hearings. Another part of the respondents are involved in counseling activities for victims of child pornography. The interview guide aimed to understand the climate in families where crimes occur, the social integration of these families, their economic situation, the victims' perception of the perpetrator and the aggression, how the victims relate to

the experience of aggression, and the social reactions faced by the victims after reporting the aggression to which they were subjected.

The information presented in this study represents a part of the data collected in the research "Online Sexual Behaviors - Between Normality and Deviance", for which the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Bucharest was obtained. The subjects were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as about the confidentiality of the participants' identity. The discussions did not make any reference to the identity of the victims or perpetrators. Details were removed from the content of the interviews, pertaining to case contents that, without disclosing the personal data of the persons involved, illustrate particularities of the operating modes or characteristics of the victims/perpetrators, which could lead to their recognition. The research results make a significant contribution to understanding how perpetrators act and rationalize their own behavior, facilitating the development of adequate prevention measures.

Research results

Dynamics and modes of manifestation

Police officers, as well as specialists from the DGASPC (Directorate General for Social Assistance and Child Protection), consider that the evolution of the child pornography phenomenon as a whole is alarming. Although cases of online sexual exploitation within the family environment are not the most common forms of child pornography in Romania, they are important due to the very serious consequences they have on victimized children. The emergence of these behaviors is associated, in the opinion of respondents, with the increasing demand for child pornography, with the increasing access to the internet of vulnerable categories from which abusive parents come, with the expansion of videochat businesses in our country, as well as with the increased capacity of the police to identify this type of abuses.

Most often, the perpetrators of these acts are women who come from the ranks of videochat practitioners, who co-opt their children in creating pornographic materials or live erotic shows in order to obtain large sums of money. Most women act on their own, but there have been several cases identified where both the mother and father were involved: "The

mother and father had been working abroad ... for several years. They were discovered abusing their autistic child via videochat" (DGASPC psychologist, 31 years old).

Police officers argue that, in the cases they have investigated, most clients of erotic shows were foreign citizens (especially American citizens, but also French, Belgian, Dutch, English or Canadian).

Most often the victims are young children - from a few months to 7/8 years old. However, there is a significant number of victims aged between 9-12 years. Girls are especially sought after, but there is also demand for boys. Specialists state that there is also a high risk of victimization of children with developmental disorders.

Both police officers and DGASPC psychologists explain the low age of victimized children through the demand from clients who pay for materials, but also as an element of the strategy of abusive parents, who ensure that they will not be reported: "Young children do not know how to speak and are easily blackmailed. Those with psychological problems, intellectual disability or autism, do not realize what is happening or are not taken seriously by those around them. The parents believe that because they are small, they will not remember what happened" (DGASPC psychologist, 32 years old).

Perpetrators acting with the aim of obtaining income to increase material comfort

Socio-economic situation

Most facilitators are women who are married or are involved in family-type relationship. Most are women with a high school degree or vocational education. Only a portion of the female perpetrators have held a job throughout their lives. Most have been supported by their family - husband or partner. The household income is based on the money brought home by the life partners and covers the necessary expenses for the family's maintenance. Interviews with DGASPC specialists have identified situations where women had a job at one point but quit. They started videochat activities to obtain sums of money that they use to increase their comfort level: (they use the money) "to renovate their house, to buy designer clothes, go to the hairdresser, get dressed up, buy toys, sweets for children" (DGASPC psychologist, 35 years old). In a smaller

number of cases, women had a job at the time they offended, being employed as a baker or saleswoman.

For these women videochat represents a form of financial independence that they did not have before starting this activity and allows them access to a comfort level that they would not have been able to access otherwise.

The findings made by the police during house searches show that most homes had an appearance that was common for the environment in which they lived. Urban families live in spaces with access to utilities and are rather well-maintained. In rural areas, households, although more modest and lacking some utilities, like most rural homes, have the capacity to provide the basic necessities in terms of comfort: "they have thermal windows, electronic equipment, and appliances." In exceptional situations, the living conditions exceed those of the neighborhood: "She had built two houses from videochat" (police officer, 36 years old). "She lived in a villa, not a house. She had money from her husband who worked in construction in England" (DGASPC psychologist, 45 years old).

The abusive parents were dissatisfied with their material situation, which they perceived as unsatisfactory. According to the interviewed police officers, during the hearings, the perpetrators present their behavior as being determined and justified by economic pressures that they cannot otherwise cope with; in order to obtain the necessary income for a decent living, they performed certain actions that they do not perceive as having very serious consequences.

Specialists talk about an addiction that develops in the case of some videochat practitioners. They become dependent on the large sums of money they earn, so that, at a certain point, what they do can no longer be justified by the desire to improve their standard of living. Even when they reach a level above the population average, such people continue to practice videochat and exploit their children: "Her husband had told her to stop. They had everything they needed, they had a house, a car... And she continued. Because it was easy money" (police officer, 40 years old).

Videochat becomes a way of life for such people, which also becomes attractive to people around them:

"In one case, both the mother and the daughter and the aunt were doing videochat. They had brought each other into it" (police officer, 32 years old).

The interviewed specialists do not have data regarding the existence of other risky behaviors in these families. However, the subjects speak of a significant number of reconstituted families.

In essence, this text discusses how women involved in online sexual exploitation of children often come from relatively stable economic backgrounds but are motivated by a desire for increased financial comfort and independence. The study highlights the addictive nature of this activity and how it can become a way of life, even when the perpetrators have met their basic needs.

The rationalization of one's own behavior

The reactions of the abusers when identified and confronted by the police outline the hypothesis that they do not comprehend the severity of their own actions. The perpetrators try to rationalize their own behavior by claiming that what they are doing does not affect the children. During interactions with the police throughout the investigations, abusive parents provide arguments such as the fact that minors are too young to understand what is happening to them, that they lack discernment and that these memories will not stay with them, that the sexual acts they perform on children do not have a violent character and that the children perceive everything that happens as play. Psychologists interpret this discourse of the abusers as a means by which they try to diminish their feelings of guilt towards themselves and to improve their image in front of the authorities.

However, the fact that in many situations parents only mimic sexual acts, or are involved as active partners in sexual games, without actually engaging in sexual intercourse, are elements that support the hypothesis of a lack of awareness of the devastating impact that this form of aggression, which also involves a form of incest, has on the victim."

The value system of these parents is assessed as being distorted, centered on meeting material needs: "They care about the children, but not as much as they care about the money they can get from them. They take care of them, feed them, but that's all they understand about caring for a child. They don't think about how much harm they are causing" (DGASPC psychologist).

Testimonies of specialists who witness scenes where children are removed from families to be taken over by DGASPC, confirm the existence of

attachment relationships with children: "It's a tragic scene when the children are taken away. The children are crying, the mothers are crying too. They care about the children in their own way" (police officer, 37 years old).

The care for children also results from the way they are treated - children are cared for, clean, well-dressed, they buy toys for them. The fact that there have been cases where parents invested the usual money from videochat, including in children's education, is another element that confirms a different scale of values than that of the majority of the population and, at the same time, a dysfunctional perspective on the role of a parent: "The daughter and the mother were both doing videochat. The mother had involved her daughter when she was [...] years old. Now she was in high school. And when the daughter didn't have money, the mother gave her money to pay her tuition at a private high school" (police officer, 37 years old).

At the same time, interviews with police officers reveal cases where the child is transformed into a tool for making money: "She had a 9-year-old child and was thinking of having another one, because the market is not interested in the older ones. And she was thinking of having a child specifically for that" (police officer, 44 years old).

Psychologists argue that abusive parents are aware of the prohibition, but by valuing money more, they choose to violate it: "The mother and father abused their two daughters. The father was actively involved, mimicking sexual acts [...]. They superficially realize that it is not good, because they know they can be caught. But the drive for money is stronger" (DGASPC psychologist, 33 years old).

The psychologists interviewed talk about the existence of psychological problems that explain the parents' ability to abuse their own children. Their hypothesis is that the life experiences of the abusers have negatively influenced the way they have developed their sexuality and/or attachment: "It also depends on how this child appeared. If it appeared because it was wanted, if the relationship with the partner is an assumed one and not forced, or she herself to have found herself in the position of a mother without being psychologically prepared for this role. Because she was forced or because she feels restricted. There are people in whose case this instinct simply does not develop. This is also true for women" (DGASPC psychologist, 40 years old).

Perpetrators belonging to marginalized groups

A distinct category of cases of online child pornography committed within families for the purpose of profit is represented by perpetrators who come from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. They are individuals with very low human and socio-professional capital. Social mobility is not possible because there is no adequate schooling and no interest in such an activity: "some are our beneficiaries. In such families, only one works, or none works. More often the woman works [...] They have little money, they earn 1000-1500 lei" (DGASPC psychologist, 44 years old).

Along with unfavorable socio-economic conditions, in families where abuse through the online sexual exploitation of children was recorded, other antisocial behaviors were also recorded, such as domestic violence, alcohol consumption, prostitution, and pimping: "They are our clients from the area. They have no resources; they live on benefits, and they don't have a job. Very few have a stable income. They also commit crimes, they also face violence [...] they engage in all sorts of illegal activities" (DGASPC psychologist, 41 years old).

Consequences for the victims

The sexual exploitation of children through online pornography draws attention due to the very young age of the victims. Children are, in most cases, too young to be aware of the abusive situation they are in and do not fight back: "video-chat is not done by force" (DGASPC psychologist, 44 years old). The psychologists participating in the study describe the process of co-opting children into these activities as being based on manipulation: children are told that there are no alternatives, and they believe this. In case of refusal, blackmail is resorted to, parents exploiting the children's naivety and saying that if they do not comply, they will not have money to buy the toys they want, to give them the sweets they ask for, or even to buy food. In this way, they manage to overcome the opposition of the little ones. To ensure that the little ones will not talk, abusive parents resort to threats and emotional blackmail: "If the police find out, (the parents say) they will kill themselves, or the police will come and beat up dad and take him to jail, you will end up in a children's home." (DGASPC psychologist, 41 years old).

Police have identified that, in homes where searches have taken place, children had access, in addition to age-appropriate toys, to sex toys.

Psychologists argue that the development of sexuality in these children is profoundly affected. It is stimulated before they reach the biological age for such urges/activities, and this also influences their physical development, stimulating hormonal processes that influence the growth process, as well as cognitive development. At the same time, these minors are educated outside the moral norms that guide sexuality at the societal level, which will predispose them to adopting deviant sexual behaviours, in the absence of an effective recovery and resocialization process.

Parents exploit the children's attachment to them and ask them to make sacrifices. The degree of toxicity in such parent-child relationships is extremely dangerous: children do what children should do, they listen to their parents, based on a dysfunctional loyalty relationship. However, children show symptoms of trauma: although they are too young to understand the deeply corrupt nature of the actions they are involved in, although they do not have the capacity to categorize as wrong what is happening to them, they do not have basic notions of sexual morality, they present psycho-somatic symptoms: they have language development problems, suffer from enuresis, or have problems relating to others.

Children are attached to their parents, for whom they find excuses, repeating the same discourse with which they were manipulated by their parents. Psychologists argue that separation from abusive parents is perceived by children as a greater trauma than the one they are subjected to during exploitation. Most victims are removed from the family and institutionalized, fewer end up in the care of family members. Adaptation to the state system is another shock that only a portion of children manage to overcome. Essential in the recovery process after sexual abuse is the support and affection offered by significant people in the child's life, but these children do not benefit from this essential element of support because their parents are convicted. The prospects for recovery are extremely fragile in the absence of sustained and professional intervention. Recovery from this type of sexual abuse necessarily involves long-term psychological assistance. DGASPC introduces the victims to a counselling program that can be useful but is not enough. It is necessary to develop specialized therapy services for recovery after sexual abuse, which were not available at the time the interviews were conducted (2023).

Conclusions and limitations of the research

Sexual exploitation on children through live streaming is not a very common form of abuse. However, it represents the most serious manifestation of the child pornography phenomenon, given the extremely serious consequences it has for the victims. Children victimized within the family are manipulated by their own parents and determined, on the basis of a dysfunctional loyalty relationship, to sacrifice themselves for the entire family - to engage in sexual activities, in order to get the money needed by the parents. After the discovery of the abuse, the abusive parents are convicted, and the minors are most often removed from the family, adding a new trauma to the initial one - that of institutionalization. The shock that the children go through is accentuated by such interventions, but so far no alternative solutions have been identified. In this context, I appreciate that the need for prevention is the main direction of action that is emerging. At the same time, additional efforts are needed to place the victims in their own extended families, this approach being likely to contribute to the stability and emotional support necessary for the physical and psychological recovery process that the victimized child will go through. The answers regarding the consequences of the aggression on the victims confirm the severity and modes of manifestation identified by Terre des Hommes (2013).

The study confirms the data from studies conducted by Terre des Hommes (2013) and Varrella (2017) and shows that the lack of physical contact between the child and the abusive client causes parents who mediate the abuse to perceive the child's involvement in sexual acts as tolerable, and even as an easy way to obtain money.

The discussions with specialists have outlined two distinct social situations that favor the sexual exploitation of children through online pornography. A part of the perpetrators come from disadvantaged categories, which are characterized by early school dropout, limited social interactions, lack of interest in schooling, and lack of stable jobs. These categories fall into the category of marginalized groups defined as "minority groups of individuals who are more or less permanently or even traditionally disadvantaged, according to dominant values or norms" (Ferreol apud. E. Balica, 2002, p.1). Along poverty and isolation faced by these groups, the coexistence of a dysfunctional climate or of different deviant behaviors (drug/alcohol

consumption, domestic violence, prostitution, and pimping) emerge as risk factors in the emergence of the online sexual exploitation of children.

However, child pornography produced for commercial exploitation does not only occur among disadvantaged groups. Specialists talk about abusive parents who are part of categories with a lower standard of living but who have the resources necessary for survival: they have a constant source of income, they have their own home, they can provide food and care for their children. They are described by specialists as families that do not stand out in the community they belong to. These people are dissatisfied with their economic situation and, at the same time, are limited by the lack of human capital necessary to access the material well-being they see around them. For such parents, child pornography becomes a quick source of significant income.

The perpetrators want to overcome the material disadvantages they face by resorting to innovative behavior, in the sense in which it is described by R. Merton (1938). While victims of human trafficking are social innovators who, in order to get out of the hostile socioeconomic environment, find the solution of emigration (Lăzăroiu, 2001), parents who exploit their children through child pornography are social innovators who choose illegal and immoral strategies to achieve their goals. Abusive parents pursue the material well-being and financial comfort promoted by Romanian society as desirable objectives. Given that the means necessary to achieve these goals are not accessible to them in a social context that is characterized by strong social inequalities and inefficient social mobility programs, abusive parents resort to the commercial sexual exploitation of their own children to obtain the material comfort they desire.

The limited number of interviews I was able to conduct represents the main limitation of the research. Although the data obtained is based on the analysis of a limited number of subjects and considers only cases identified by authorities, it represents a starting point in understanding the dynamics and particularities of manifestation of a worrying phenomenon that affects Romanian society, and which has not been analyzed so far in sociological research.

A strength of the study is the target group, which consists mostly of specialists with expertise in the field. The specialists who participated in the semi-structured interviews, and whom I would like to thank on this

occasion, are people who are directly involved in managing child pornography cases, having significant professional experience that allows them to know and understand the phenomenon and, consequently, to formulate informed conclusions on this topic.

Carrying out quantitative analyzes based on the analysis of files drawn up following the discovery of child pornography offenses and/or conducting representative surveys among people convicted of child pornography could allow for the completion and generalization of the results obtained. In addition, future research can contribute to a better understanding of the topics analyzed in this paper, by studying the perception of the population regarding what is permissible or dangerous in terms of sexuality that manifests itself in virtual reality and by knowing the attitudes and beliefs that underlie the consumption of online pornography. The results of such research must be considered in conducting awareness campaigns for target groups regarding the legal, social and personal implications of accessing child pornography.

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