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PROJECT REPORT

**UNDERSTANDING
AND COMBATING
GROOMING*:
DANISH AND BALTIC
COOPERATION**

The report paper has been developed as an output of international cooperation project “Understanding and Combating Grooming: Danish and Baltic Cooperation” (April - June 2024) which aims to facilitate a good practice exchange between Danish and Baltic non-governmental organizations, with a focus on the issue of *grooming*.

GROOMING*

actions or behaviors used to establish an emotional connection with a minor, and sometimes the child's family, to lower the child's inhibitions with the objective of sexual abuse.

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RECOGNIZING GROOMING

Grooming is a manipulative process used by predators to gain the trust of a potential victim, usually a child or adolescent, with the intent of exploiting them sexually or for other abusive purposes. It involves establishing a connection and gradually breaking down the victim's defenses to prepare them for exploitation. Grooming can take place online and offline. The phenomenon of online grooming refers to a process whereby a perpetrator gradually gains the trust of a child with the goal of sexually abusing him/her/them. Groomers place themselves in roles that allow them access to children, such as club leaders, carers and teachers. Investigators found that the grooming process involved “normal” adult-child interactions, such as playing games, buying gifts and trips to the park (which isolated victims). On the surface, these behaviors would not necessarily flag any concerns.

The process of grooming frequently occurs through social media platforms (mainly on Instagram and Snapchat as well as TikTok), chat rooms and online gaming, and it often takes place without the child's knowledge on the identity of the perpetrator. Notably, the number of grooming cases is on the rise as during the pandemic COVID-19 not only online users grew exponentially but also technology use increased as a result of closures and movement restrictions.

Grooming can be sexual, romantic, financial or for criminal or terrorism purposes, and can target both children and adults. The common aspect is that a perpetrator manipulates a victim by building trust and rapport. The key to grooming is a power dynamic within the relationship: age, gender, physical strength, economic status or another factor.

KEY ELEMENTS OF GROOMING:

Trust Building: The predator works to gain the trust of the victim by showing interest, offering attention, and providing emotional support.

Isolation: Gradually isolating the victim from their friends and family to create a dependency on the groomer.

Desensitization: Introducing sexual content or discussions in a way that normalizes inappropriate behavior and reduces the victim's resistance.

Control and Manipulation: Using psychological manipulation, threats, or blackmail to maintain control over the victim and ensure their compliance and silence.

STAGES OF GROOMING

1. Targeting the Victim

- Offenders often look for vulnerable children and choose them based on ease of access to them or their perceived vulnerability. Offenders may use frequent places where children gather, both online and offline, such as social media platforms, gaming sites, schools, or parks.
- Predators gather information about the child, such as their interests, family background, and emotional needs, to better tailor their approach.

2. Gaining Trust and Access

- Offenders often pose as friends, mentors, or someone the child can confide in. They may share common interests or pretend to be of a similar age to create a bond.
- Gradually, they start pushing boundaries to see how the child reacts, often under the guise of affection or friendship.

3. Fulfilling Needs of the Victim

- Groomers exploit the child's emotional needs by providing support, understanding, and attention that the child may not receive elsewhere.
- They may give gifts or favors to make the child feel indebted or to create a sense of obligation.

4. Isolation

- The predator encourages the victim to keep their relationship secret, often by making them feel special or by creating a sense of fear or shame about others finding out.
- They work to isolate the victim from their friends and family, making the victim more dependent on them.

5. Sexualization

- Gradually introducing sexual content or conversations to normalize the behavior.
- Progressing to physical contact, explicit images, or sexual acts. This stage often involves coercion, threats, or blackmail to maintain control over the victim.

6. Maintaining Control

- The predator uses threats, guilt, or emotional manipulation to maintain the victim's compliance and silence.
- The ultimate goal is to exploit the victim sexually, often resulting in long-term psychological and emotional damage.

Tactics Used in Grooming

1. **Online Deception:** Predators create fake profiles and identities on social media and gaming platforms to approach and interact with the victim.
2. **Gradual Process:** Grooming can be a slow and deliberate process, sometimes taking months or even years to gain the victims trust and control.
3. **Psychological Manipulation:** Offenders use psychological tactics to manipulate the victims emotions and perceptions, making the victim believe the relationship is consensual or normal.

Grooming creates long-lasting harms while preventing the likelihood of disclosure. Victims are often manipulated to “acquiesce” to the abuse. Many grooming victims report feelings of shame or guilt about complying, which stopped them from disclosing. In contrast, adult victims of offenses that do not involve grooming (which are more likely to be committed by strangers) do not report the same levels of shame or responsibility.

WHAT GROOMING BEHAVIOR LOOKS LIKE IN CHILDREN

While some predators use fake profile pictures and fake ages to pose as peers, many never attempt to hide the fact that they are adults because teens often feel validated by the idea of having an older “friend” who appears attentive and supportive. Online predators may use shared hobbies or interests (real or fake) to establish an online relationship with the minor. Interaction then progresses to gaining the kids trust by complimenting them, listening sympathetically, and engaging in increasingly personal conversation. Over time, these exchanges evolve into sexual conversations, and can eventually result in children sending inappropriate photos or agreeing to meet in person. There are warning signs that may indicate that a child/teenager is being groomed by an online predator.

Child/teenager:

- begins to spend an increased (even excessive) amount of time online;
- becomes very secretive about online activities and won't allow you to see their screen or view their social media accounts. He/she may become possessive of phones or personal devices, or quickly switch tabs or screens whenever they realize someone might see it;
- begins using mature or sexually explicit language that you would not otherwise expect them to know;
- becomes unusually withdrawn or emotionally volatile;
- Sexually explicit photos or pornography on devices or computers that the child/teenager uses.

!!! Not all of the mentioned above signs show that the child or teenager is being groomed. This is not a final list of signs and there might be other red flags.

PROFILE OF GROOMERS

Adults seeking to sexually groom youth online often emphasize common interests, shared likes, and dislikes, and mutual hobbies with the youth they are targeting (Lorenzo-Dus & Izura, 2017; Williams et al., 2013). Also of note, this information (e.g., likes and dislikes, favorites, and hobbies) was among the most commonly shared pieces of information that participants included on their chat room profiles, and therefore, this information was publicly available to the online community. This suggests that the adult strangers may have used public profile information to help encourage the perception that they shared the youth's interests. Flattery was frequently reported by participants. In the context of online grooming, flattery can serve as a bridge between the trust development or rapport-building stages of grooming and the introduction of sexual content (Black et al., 2015).

Most of the offenders are **good listeners**. They will spend their time talking with the targeted child/adolescent, paying attention to their story. They will also ask questions and empathize so at the end child/teenager feel grateful and happy to have such attention and interest.

They are also good **manipulators**. Groomers will make the child feel special and make them believe that this relationship is very unique and important. When the relationship is created and a child/teenager feels safe, the offender will start probing for secrets. They may share their secrets and then ask you to share yours, like "can I ask you something?" or "have you ever done something you're ashamed about," or "are you a virgin?" etc. Sooner or later the groomer might start dropping subtle nuances that make their victim fear that one day the relationship will come to an end. This fear is designed to make a child/teenager worry about losing the connection with the offender, which will lead to "work harder" to please the predator.

Groomers are persuasive. They will start confiding about other people and their faults, using words like **'trust me'**.

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S VULNERABILITIES TO GROOMING

As the adolescent brain is still developing, areas that control decision-making, threat detection, and responses may still be maturing and particularly vulnerable. Relationship development is a central task of adolescence, and thus youth may be vulnerable in situations with older adults who initiate relationships and offer the youth attention they may otherwise not receive.

When child abuse happens, it's influenced by factors within the individual, their family, and surrounding environment. Research shows there isn't a single risk factor that causes abuse. Instead, a combination of multiple risk factors reduces a child's resilience, making them more vulnerable to abuse.

Particular vulnerabilities to consider

Gender

Girls are more likely to be targeted than boys. However, it is crucial to challenge the assumption that boys are not at risk of sexual abuse.

Age

Some studies suggest that abuse is most common before puberty, while others say the risk is highest during adolescence. However, in the online world, teenagers might be more likely to receive unwanted sexual solicitations than younger children or adults.

Interpersonal features

Victims of sexual abuse may have low self-esteem, are easily persuaded, have behavior difficulties, emotional suffering, and immaturity. Research shows that certain personality traits increase the risk of grooming. Specifically, traits like low self-confidence and low self-esteem make young people more vulnerable to being targeted by offenders.

Family

Various factors within a family can increase the risk of grooming. These include single-parent families, poor relationships between parents or between a parent and child, and dysfunctional family dynamics.

Relationships and friends

Young people who have difficulty with social interactions, have few or no friends, and feel alienated are more likely to be vulnerable to grooming.

IMPACTS OF GROOMING

The grooming process can inflict psychological, emotional, physical, or spiritual harm, varying widely among individuals. Here are several potential impacts on survivors:

Depression and Anxiety: The betrayal of trust inherent in grooming can leave individuals feeling pain and disillusionment. This can affect their mood, overall outlook on life, relationships, self-worth, and future prospects.

Difficulty Trusting Others: Groomers initially present themselves as safe, but once exploitation occurs, it disrupts the survivor's understanding of healthy relationships, making it hard to trust others moving forward.

Increased Risk of Victimization: Studies suggest that survivors of grooming may face a higher risk of future harm. For example, females who experienced child sexual abuse are reportedly 2-13 times more likely to experience sexual violence as adults.

Confusion: Groomers alternate between caring and exploitative behaviors, causing confusion. This inconsistency, coupled with approval from other adults, can make it difficult for survivors to recognize the abnormality of their experiences.

Guilt and Shame: Survivors often feel guilt and shame, believing they caused or failed to stop the manipulation. Perpetrators maintain power by denying their exploitative behavior and avoiding responsibility, leaving survivors to blame themselves.

Emotional Dependency: Groomers manipulate targets to reinforce dependence, making affection conditional on compliance. This fosters a fear of losing the positive aspects of the relationship, complicating the decision to resist.

Distorted Reality: Groomers use gaslighting to distort the victim's perception of reality, causing self-doubt and making it easier to control the narrative. This self-distrust can persist even after the grooming ends.

Trauma Symptoms: Survivors may experience symptoms of a dysregulated nervous system, including flashbacks, nightmares, hypervigilance, anger outbursts, and difficulty with daily functions. These are the body's responses to surviving deception, manipulation, objectification, control, and gaslighting.

THE ROLE OF BYSTANDERS IN ADDRESSING GROOMING INCIDENTS AMONG MINORS

On the surface, grooming can resemble a close relationship between the offending adult, the targeted child, and sometimes the child's caregivers. The grooming process is often deceptive because the offender may be well-known or respected in the community, making it easy for people to trust them. Due to the phenomenon's deceptive nature, the role of bystanders in noticing, intervening, and reporting is particularly crucial.

The non-governmental organization Darkness to Light, which empowers adults to prevent, recognize, and respond responsibly to child sexual abuse through awareness, education, and stigma reduction, has developed a framework called The 5 Steps to Protecting Children™. This framework is based on the understanding that adults are responsible for the safety of children and should take proactive measures to protect them from sexual abuse. The steps serve as a guide for developing protective behaviors against abuse

Step 1 - Learn the facts

Understanding the facts about child sexual abuse can help you better protect the children in your life.

Step 2 - Minimize opportunity

If you eliminate or reduce isolated, one-on-one situations between children and adults, as well as children and other youth, you'll dramatically reduce the risk of sexual abuse.

Step 3 - Talk about it

When we talk to children in age appropriate ways about our bodies, sex, and boundaries, children understand what healthy relationships look like.

Step 4 - Recognize the signs

Signs of abuse aren't always obvious, but they are often there. Emotional or behavioral changes are often the most common signs, rather than physical evidence.

Step 5 - React responsibly

It's our responsibility to react appropriately to suspicion, disclosure, or discovery of abuse. Suspicion of sexual abuse means you've seen signs in a child, or you've witnessed boundary violations by adults or other youth toward a child.

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN ACT RESPONSIBLY:

1. **Stay Calm and Listen:** If a child discloses abuse, remain calm, listen carefully, and avoid expressing shock or disbelief. Your reaction can influence the child's willingness to share details or seek help.
2. **Provide Reassurance:** Reassure the child that they did the right thing by telling you and that the abuse is not their fault. Let them know that you believe them and that they are not to blame for what happened.
3. **Avoid Interrogation:** Don't ask leading questions or press for details. Allow the child to share what they are comfortable with. Instead of interrogating, let the child speak freely to avoid contaminating the investigation.
4. **Ensure Safety:** Ensure the child's immediate safety by removing them from the environment if the abuser has access to them. Seek help from authorities or child protection services if necessary.
5. **Document Observations:** Document your observations and what the child disclosed as accurately and thoroughly as possible. Include dates, times, and descriptions of behaviors or physical signs that led to your suspicion.
6. **Report to Authorities:** Follow your local protocols for reporting suspected abuse to the appropriate authorities, such as child protective services or law enforcement. Reporting is not only a moral obligation but also a legal requirement.
7. **Seek Professional Support:** Encourage the child and their family to seek professional support, including counseling and legal assistance, to address the emotional and psychological impacts of the abuse.
8. **Follow Up:** Stay engaged and supportive. Follow up to ensure that appropriate actions are taken and that the child receives ongoing support and care.
9. **Maintain Confidentiality:** Protect the child's privacy by not discussing the disclosure or your suspicions with others who do not need to know. Share information only with those directly involved in the investigation and care of the child.
10. **Know Your Limits:** Recognize the limits of your role and seek guidance from professionals who specialize in handling cases of child sexual abuse. Don't try to handle the situation on your own.
11. **Seek Immediate Medical Attention:** If you find physical signs that you suspect are sexual abuse, have the child physically examined immediately by a professional who specializes in child sexual abuse. Utilize social services and the Barnahus model in your country, which offers child-friendly multidisciplinary support and assessment in such cases.

UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSES OF GROOMING

In the Baltic countries, deeply ingrained harmful gender roles, norms, and stereotypes significantly contribute to the perpetuation of grooming. Traditional societal expectations dictate that men should display dominance, assertiveness, and control, while women are expected to embody passivity, submissiveness, and obedience. These entrenched ideals often create power imbalances within relationships, making individuals more vulnerable to grooming tactics.

Moreover, authority figures such as teachers, coaches, and youth leaders hold considerable respect and trust within their communities, including young people. Exploiting this trust, perpetrators of grooming manipulate their victims under the guise of mentorship or guidance, leveraging their positions of authority to exert control over vulnerable individuals. This is compounded by societal traditions that place a high value on the words of authority figures, while teenagers are frequently marginalized and their claims for possible inappropriate conduct are not taken seriously. As a result, grooming cases often turn into disagreements between what the adult says happened and what the minor says happened, making it hard to conclude if grooming really took place.

Grooming has a gendered angle as well. It has been shown through research that depending on the gender of the victim, the aftermath of the abuse shows differently. For instance, male victims of grooming often face stigma and shame due to societal norms that demand men to embody strength and invulnerability. This stigma can deter male victims from seeking help or reporting abuse, allowing perpetrators to continue their harmful actions without consequences. Conversely, female victims, particularly adolescents and young female adults, are often subjected to victim-blaming attitudes. Their experiences risk to be untrusted and belittled via well known misogynistic arguments often associated with assault, such as "she was asking for it" with their behavior, attire, and communication style scrutinized and held responsible for their own sexual assault. This blame-shifting away from the perpetrator exacerbates the trauma and obstructs the pursuit of justice and support.

Cultural norms surrounding privacy and family honor may discourage individuals from speaking out about instances of grooming or seeking assistance, fearing a lack of credibility and facing the burden of providing evidence. This culture of silence emboldens perpetrators, who operate without being held accountable, knowing their actions are less likely to be exposed or challenged. Victims often lack the information and support needed to navigate these situations and do not know where or to whom to turn for help. Insufficient sex education in schools exacerbates the problem by fostering a lack of awareness and understanding of healthy relationships, consent, and boundaries, leaving individuals more vulnerable to grooming tactics.

Furthermore, hypersexualized media and cultural norms that equate value with sexual desirability distort perceptions of healthy relationships and boundaries, making it easier for perpetrators to exploit individuals' desires for attention, affection, or validation. Moreover, the glorification of sexualized behaviors from older men towards younger women further perpetuates harmful attitudes and behaviors within our society.

Breaking stereotypes

Grooming is often facilitated by common misconceptions and stereotypes that pervade society. For instance, there is a widespread belief that perpetrators of grooming are typically strangers to the victim, when in reality, research suggests that perpetrators often have a relationship of trust with the victim (McAlinden, 2006). Additionally, there is a misconception that children may willingly participate in abusive situations, further complicating the identification of grooming behaviors (Miller et al., 2014). Contrary to popular belief, grooming does not solely occur online; rather, it can take place in various settings, including face-to-face interactions (Craven et al., 2007).

Moreover, there is a mistaken assumption that children are safe in institutional settings, leading to a lack of vigilance and oversight in these environments. This misconception, coupled with the belief that perpetrators can be easily identified, creates a false sense of security (Sullivan & Beech, 2002). Furthermore, there is a prevailing notion that attentive parents can instinctively detect grooming and recognize when their child is in danger (Miller et al., 2014)..

These complex interactions of societal norms influence systems and individual behavior warrant multifaceted prevention and intervention efforts to address grooming in the Baltic States. But before discussing prevention and intervention tactics, let's take a look at grooming realities in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Denmark.



GROOMING REALITY IN LITHUANIA

The phenomenon of children's sexual abuse was brought to the forefront in Lithuania only in 1996. During the time of the Soviet Union, official statistics weren't collected about such abuse and children who experienced it. In 2000, crimes, which included and were connected with sexual abuse of children, were included in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Lithuania. Even now, according to indicators from Lithuania's Dept. of Statistics, there were only 50 crimes in 2020, relating to sexual abuse in a close or family environment that were reported. In 2021 this figure was 47. According to 2021 data from the State Children's Rights and Adoption Agency under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour there were 239 possible children's sexual abuse cases reported (41 boys, 198 girls). In 2022 there were 300 children sexual abuse cases reported, 328 cases in 2023.

Lithuania has seen an increase in reported cases of online grooming. This aligns with broader European data indicating a rise in online sexual offenses against children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as children spent more time online. Grooming cases in Lithuania, like in many other countries, are a significant concern. While specific case studies from Lithuania are limited, there are some relevant insights and general trends that can be drawn from available research done in Lithuania and in Europe.

In 2020, representative study by Vilnius University (VU) by dr. Paulina Zelviene and dr. Ieva Daniunaite, revealed high child abuse prevalence in Lithuania. The results showed that the psychosocial functioning of adolescents is associated with severity and types of abuse experiences. 71 % of adolescents (aged 12 - 16) reported at least one type of abuse over their lifetime. The results indicated that for each type of abuse two different groups of adolescents can be distinguished in terms of the severity of abuse, and four classes 'less-severe', 'peer sexual', 'adult sexual', and 'severe abuse' were identified. One in three adolescents experience sexual violence online.

In 2022, a group of Mykolas Romeris University (MRU) researchers conducted a representative survey of 2,000 young adults (18-29 years old) about their various forms of sexual abuse experienced in childhood (up to 18 years of age). The results indicated that 15,9% of participants had experienced sexual abuse in childhood. There were more incidents of abuse among women than men (18,5% and 13,5% respectively).

The research also revealed that often the perpetrator was another young individual. The results of the research indicated that not only adults, but also children's peers, are an important part of sexual abusers. Therefore, trying to stop the sexual abuse of children or examining the mentioned incidents or planning intervention, it is necessary to pay attention to those factors.

In 2024, high profile cases of grooming in church were revealed. Over the last three years, Lithuania's catholic dioceses may have investigated 11 cases of various types of abuse of minors (that have not been made public), according to a recent report by the Centre for Investigative Journalism Redakcija. Investigative journalist Birutė Davidonytė says church authorities have so far avoided disclosing the details of these probes.

This report revealed that one of the working priests has been convicted by all the courts and the Supreme Court for molesting two first-graders. His crime has been definitively and indisputably proven. But he continues to work as a priest in several parishes in one district in Lithuania.

In 2024 the Ministry of Social Security and Labor, together with partners, presented an initiative to introduce QR code for all people working with children in formal and informal settings. It is suggested that each person working with children would have generated QR code stating that the person did not commit any violence against children, this QR code would be checked by employers before hiring a person, also it could be checked and requested by parents, it would also apply to all people having activities with children outside education system (tutors, priests and etc.) This initiative is yet to be supported by the Parliament.

LEGISLATION AND POLICY

In Lithuania, as in many countries, existing laws may struggle to keep up with the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Implementing robust online safety regulations and ensuring they are effectively enforced remains a significant challenge.

In Lithuania a child is a person till the age of 18. The national age of legal sexual consent is 16 years of age, as specified in Article 151 of the Lithuanian Criminal Code. Lithuanian society has high rates of victim blaming attitudes in the EU, young people starting from as young as 14, are being blamed for "being mature for their age", "looking a certain way that is provoking" and etc. This attitude fuels rape culture. Having in mind that in 2018 Lithuania raised the age for alcohol consumption from 18 to 20, it is very weird that the age of consent remains 16, consent in cases of grooming can be manipulated and gained using power and control over the child.

There are number of articles in Lithuanian criminal code connected with sexual violence and exploitation of children: 150 (Sexual Assault) 151 (Sexual Abuse), 151 (Satisfaction of Sexual Desires by Violating a Minor's Freedom of Sexual Self-Determination and/or Inviolability), 152 (Grooming of a Person under the Age of Sixteen Years), 153 (Sexual Abuse of a Person under the Age of Sixteen Years), 162 (Exploitation of a Child for Pornography), 307 (Gaining Profit from Another Person's Prostitution), 308 (Involvement in Prostitution), 309 (Possession of Pornographic Material).

Under Criminal Code article 152 Grooming of a Person under the Age of Sixteen Years, only 1 case was registered in 2022 and 1 case in 2023, due to underreporting there are no special actions for prevention of grooming, it is included in the general prevention of sexual violence against children, that creates a problem for the topic of grooming to be lost.

CHALLENGES

A group of Parliament members together with NGO's initiated changes to Criminal Code of the Republic of Lithuania introducing institute of consent to articles relating to sexual violence, including sexual violence against children. These suggested amendments created nationwide **debate on consent**.

Majority of the Lithuanian population did not understand what consent was, there was a wave of misinformation that this would enable false accusations against presumed perpetrators, that one would need to get written consent for sex and etc. These debates showed that there is lack of understanding on how to change culture of rape, prevalent in Lithuania to culture of consent, using good practice examples from other countries.

This debate also encouraged NGO's to prepare detailed analysis of articles in Lithuanian Criminal Code that regulate sexual violence. Suggested changes include:

Inclusion of consent, as now the formulation heavily based on use of force is misleading and add to the myths of rape that contribute to impunity e.g. *"A person who, against a person's will, satisfies his sexual desires through anal, oral or interfemoral intercourse by using physical violence or by threatening the immediate use thereof or by otherwise depriving the victim of a possibility of resistance or by taking advantage of the helpless state of the victim shall be punished by arrest or by a custodial sentence for a term of up to seven years."* (Lithuanian Criminal Code article 150, part 1). This formulation also enables the myth that sexual violence, including sexual violence against children is a crime of passion with intent to "satisfy desires", as it is well known that this crime has nothing to do with passion and is fuelled by a need to access power and control over another human being.

This formulation also contribute to **victim blaming attitudes** saying that victims can “provoke” sexual violence by the way they act, dress and etc., which leads to the impunity and repetition of the crime.

Grooming may have very serious effects on a child's development and further life. For example, the physical effects of sexual abuse can disappear over time, but the psychological trauma for the child's psyche can be especially severe and remain even in adulthood. Keeping in mind that children often suffer such physical abuse from those in their family circle or from individuals known to them. Penalty for grooming a Person under the Age of Sixteen Years is a fine or by restriction of liberty or by arrest or by a custodial sentence for a term of up to one year.

Although, legal and regulatory frameworks play a crucial role in combating grooming, these can be insufficient or not effectively enforced. While laws exist to protect children, the implementation of these laws can be hampered by limited resources, lack of specialized training for law enforcement, and the difficulty in tracking and prosecuting online predators who often operate across international borders.

Preventing grooming in Lithuania, as in many countries, faces a variety of challenges. One significant issue is the **rapidly evolving nature of technology**, which provides new opportunities for predators to exploit vulnerable children. The anonymity and accessibility of online platforms make it easier for groomers to target and manipulate children without immediate detection (WeProtect Global Alliance) (Human Trafficking Front). For example it is very hard to track grooming happening using live streaming.

Live broadcasting platforms such as Twitch, YouTube Live, TikTok Live, and others have become increasingly popular in recent years. These platforms allow users to broadcast themselves in real-time and interact with their audience through chat and other features.

While these platforms offer new opportunities for entertainment and social interaction, they also present new risks and challenges, with online grooming being one of them.

The target group are individuals who use or are exposed to live broadcasting platforms, particularly young people who are more vulnerable to grooming activities. The actors involved in grooming incidents on these platforms can vary, but typically involve adults who use manipulation tactics to exploit young people. Grooming on live broadcasting platforms puts young people at risk of harm and exploitation.

Another challenge is **the lack of awareness and education among both children and parents about the risks of online grooming**. Many parents and educators might not fully understand the extent of the danger or the methods used by groomers. Consequently, they may not take adequate measures to monitor their children's online activities or educate them about safe internet practices ([Human Trafficking Front](#)). For example, during training for students that NGO Ribologija provides, one teacher shared a case of a 12 year girl who proudly said to her that she is being supported by a 30 year old sugar daddy from the Middle East using online communication.

Cultural factors can also contribute to the problem. In some cases, there is a **stigma** attached to discussing sexual abuse and exploitation, especially with children and teenagers, which can prevent victims from coming forward and seeking help. Children are not aware of the phenomenon of online grooming. In certain cases, minors may lack a full understanding of their victimization, as they might not recognize or comprehend the extent to which they are being harmed. Even when they do, the groomers start blackmailing them to not speak to their parents or the police. This is challenging not only because many cases go unreported, which also allows the perpetrators to continue unbothered their grooming activities, but also because in many cases that are eventually reported, the victim has already been under a lot of pressure by the perpetrator.

A crucial aspect of prevention is educating children, parents, and educators about the risks of online grooming and safe internet practices. Ensuring that these groups have the knowledge and tools to recognize and respond to grooming attempts is vital. [Ribologija](#) and other NGOs like Missing Persons Families Support Centre ([through EU initiative CESAGRAM](#)) are dedicating efforts in providing training on grooming and its connection with missing children, human trafficking and other crimes.

Overall, while Lithuania faces significant challenges in preventing online and offline grooming, ongoing efforts to enhance awareness, strengthen legal frameworks, and leverage technological tools for detection and prevention are critical steps in addressing this issue.

EXISTING RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

- [Child helpline](#) - provide emotional support for youth in need and provide information on possible dangers online.
- [Youth line](#) - provide emotional support for youth in need.
- [Friendly internet initiative](#) - you can report harmful content on the internet and it will be passed to institutions. On the same page you can choose either to report or to get support in the Child help line. This page also has [free resources](#) for training on safety on the internet for different age school children segregated by age, recommendations for schools and parents, different interactive games that could be used to empower dialogue. Also you can find [guidelines for service providers](#) to ensure children safety online.
- [State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service](#) - state institution responsible for protection of children rights in Lithuania, administrator of child helpline 116 111.
- [Ribologija](#) - the only NGO in Lithuania working solely on prevention of sexual violence online and offline, develops prevention tools and provide capacity building trainings for experts working with children, youth and adults (e.g. prevention of grooming online, prevention of sexual violence online and etc.)
- [Missing Person Families Support Centre](#) - provide support for missing children and their parents (international 24/7 hotline 116000.lt) as grooming can become a reason for running away from home. This NGO also provides training on prevention of exploitation of children online and offline, and works with human trafficking, including trafficking of children.
- [Uzuoveja](#) - center for sexually exploited children run by state. Experts working in Uzuoveja provide short term support services for children victims of all forms of sexual violence and their parents, they also provide training and consultations for experts working with children.
- [National Information About Sexual Violence Centre](#) - provide emotional and informational support for victims of sexual violence from the age of 18, including also adults that survived sexual violence in their childhood. This center provide support via phone and chat also for experts working with the topic of sexual violence, methodological support is available.
- [Specialized Assistance Center](#) - provide support for victims of domestic violence and intimate partner violence. Free legal, psychological consultations for everyone from the age of 16.

URGENT ACTIONS FOR LITHUANIA

- **Ratification of Istanbul Convention** - as Lithuania still did not ratify Istanbul convention, the country does not have a definition of gender-based violence. This creates problems in organizing prevention measures.
- **Amendments to Criminal Code of the Republic of Lithuania** introducing institute of consent.
- **Data** on child grooming. Due to lack of research on the topic, it is difficult to have efficient targeted measures to prevent grooming. Data on prevalence of grooming and the situation that youth face would enable them to create data driven training programs, review practices of law and implementation of laws connected with grooming.
- **Focus on prevention.** Strategy against grooming of children with concrete plans for prevention and budget for the measures should be in place. Majority of state funds go to support victims of different forms of violence, leaving very little budget for actual prevention.
- **Strengthening awareness raising among experts** working with youth. Experts providing support for victims of gender-based violence and working with youth in formal and informal settings lack of knowledge on grooming starting from definition of what grooming is, reporting mechanisms and etc., especially technology facilitated sexual violence against youth. In Lithuania a new model is tested - having experts of gender equality and gender - based violence in municipalities, it would be great to train existing working experts on the topic of grooming, as they are a point of contact in municipalities between different stakeholders. Also in Lithuania one “Life skills” lesson per week is mandatory, programs on prevention of grooming could become part of this lesson plan.
- **Awareness raising campaigns targeting youth.** Youth do not need information about how bad and dangerous using the internet is. This is irrelevant. They need information on tactics used by groomers, signs on when conversation transforms from friendly to grooming, information on how to support yourself and your friends that survived grooming.

GROOMING REALITY IN LATVIA

A 2022 study by the Latvian Safer Internet Center revealed that out of 6,600 participating children, over 1,000 reported experiencing online grooming. Furthermore, about 17% of these children were solicited for nude photos, and 60% complied with the requests. However, specific data on in-person grooming remains elusive.

According to the report prepared by the Ministry of Interior, in 2023, compared to 2022, 113 children suffered from cruelty and violence and 33 were incited to engage in sexual activities. Additionally, 47 children were exposed to pornographic performances, faced restrictions on intimate entertainment, or experienced violations of the rules on the circulation of pornographic material. Although the number of child rape cases decreased to 45 and instances of sexual violence dropped to 108, these figures remain alarmingly high. These statistics represent the data available in Latvia regarding minor sexual abuse. However, there are no specific statistics on grooming, and it remains unclear if these instances of abuse are related to or result from grooming behaviors.

The conversation surrounding grooming in the public sector gained momentum with the release of the short film "Confessions of my Childhood Body" in 2023, directed by Emilija Karetnikova and based on true events. The film portrays the story of a seventeen-year-old girl who experiences grooming during her time at a youth camp, where the seemingly friendly demeanor of an adult masks criminal intentions. This narrative sparked discussions and prompted more individuals to come forward with their own experiences of grooming by teachers, trainers, and camp leaders.

In response to these revelations, the documentary "Leaders Hug" ("Līdera Apskāviens" in Latvian) was created, highlighting eight stories of young women groomed by leaders of the same youth camp, K.I.D., between 2013 and 2019. Despite these narratives coming to light, there remains a lack of comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data on in-person grooming

LEGISLATION AND POLICY

In addition to the need for updating criminal laws to address grooming, there is also a necessity for stricter consequences for adults who are bystanders in grooming situations. This extends beyond mere inaction; those who actively cover up the actions of their fellow colleagues, such as teachers or trainers who are groomers, should face legal repercussions.

Despite the existing provisions in Latvian criminal law Sections 160 and 161, which target sexual offenses against minors, there remain significant hurdles in holding grooming perpetrators accountable and ensuring justice for victims. To confront these challenges, legal reforms must be undertaken. Specifically, provisions must explicitly recognize grooming as a behavior indicative of violent or abusive intent, acknowledging its manipulative and long-term nature. Furthermore, legal definitions of consent must be clarified to reflect the coercion and invalidation often present in grooming situations, where perpetrators exploit their power over victims.

The current age of consent in Latvia, set at 16 years old, can create ambiguity in grooming cases, as offenders may argue that minors have willingly consented to the relationship. However, it is crucial to understand that grooming tactics are designed to manipulate and coerce minors, blurring the lines of consent and exploiting their vulnerability. As evidenced by victim testimonies, professionals such as prosecutors, judges, and police officers face difficulties in addressing grooming cases due to the nuanced manipulation employed and the absence of overt physical violence.

Furthermore, legal loopholes and jurisdictional challenges complicate enforcement efforts, particularly in cases spanning multiple jurisdictions, including online platforms. Therefore, in addition to updating legal frameworks, it is vital to prioritize awareness-raising and education initiatives for professionals in the justice system. Strengthening legal frameworks to explicitly address the predatory nature of grooming will empower authorities to hold perpetrators accountable and ensure justice for victims.

CHALLENGES

There is a **lack of awareness and understanding among the general public, law enforcement, and legal professionals about the dynamics of grooming and its impact on victims**. This results in underreporting of grooming incidents and inadequate responses from authorities. Societal attitudes towards victims of grooming can often involve stigma and blame, particularly when victims are minors. Victims may face skepticism, judgment, and even ostracization from their communities, which can discourage them from reporting the abuse and seeking justice. Grooming often involves sophisticated psychological manipulation tactics by perpetrators, which can create confusion and self-doubt in victims. This manipulation may lead victims to believe that the abusive behavior is normal or that they are somehow responsible for the abuse, further complicating efforts to prosecute offenders.

Comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights education in Latvian schools is urgently required, as currently there is no holistic mandatory curriculum within the school system that addresses these themes. This includes essential topics related to grooming prevention, such as understanding healthy relationships, recognizing and establishing personal boundaries, consent, identifying unhealthy or abusive behaviors, and the importance of bystander intervention. Implementing such a curriculum is crucial for equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to protect themselves and others from grooming and related forms of exploitation. Additionally, other non-formal education approaches such as workshops, training, and youth forums are essential. These platforms allow young people to develop competencies related to boundaries, consent, and the distinction between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Understanding grooming, including its characteristics, purpose, and tactics, is crucial. It is also important to learn about the **bystander effect** and the significance of intervention, as well as understanding the process of reporting harassment and abuse. This holistic approach is critical for early prevention of grooming.

Moreover, education efforts should not be limited to young people alone. Adults, who often serve as bystanders in grooming situations, also require education. They often **lack understanding** of the negative effects grooming can have on victims' well-being and the importance of intervening and reporting the abuser. Additionally, they need to understand the potential consequences of covering up someone's grooming behavior, particularly for fellow teachers or trainers.

EXISTING RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In Latvia, there is currently no specific organization dedicated solely to addressing the issue of grooming, encompassing policy advocacy and victim support. Nevertheless, several organizations possess expertise and resources relevant to grooming-related issues:

- [The Centre for a Safe Childhood "Dardedze"](#) is a non-governmental organization advocating for every child to have a secure upbringing, emphasizing the preventability of violence. They strive to equip both adults and children with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support for ensuring safety.
- [The NGO "MARTA Center"](#) offers professional social, legal, and psychological services to adult victims of violence and human trafficking. They also provide assistance to women and their children facing vulnerable life situations.
- [The Society "Skalbes"](#) operates a 24-hour crisis intervention service for both children and adults in crisis situations. Their primary focus includes providing psychological consultations via in-person visits and telephone calls, particularly in cases of domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and child abuse.
- [The Child Protection Center of the Republic of Latvia](#) not only shares expertise and protects children's rights in various cases but also operates a 24/7 children's helpline (116111). This helpline aims to offer psychological support to children and teenagers facing difficult situations.
- [The Latvian Safer Internet Centre](#) focuses on educating and raising awareness within society about safer internet usage. They offer opportunities to report internet breaches and illegal content through their Hotline and provide professional consultations with psychologists via their helpline (116111). Additionally, the center endeavors to raise awareness and educate children and their families about online grooming.
- [Barnahus Latvia](#) is a place where different specialists, including investigators, doctors, forensic experts, psychologists, prosecutors, and others, gather together in a specifically designed space. This multidisciplinary approach allows them to simultaneously listen to the child's story for the purposes of investigating sexual abuse, conducting a forensic medical examination, performing a pediatrician's examination, and providing support to the victimized child and non-offending relatives.

While these organizations may not exclusively focus on grooming, they play vital roles in addressing various aspects of child protection, violence prevention, and internet safety, all of which intersect with the issue of grooming.

URGENT ACTIONS FOR LATVIA

Development and implementation of comprehensive education programs within schools and communities focused on raising awareness about grooming, healthy relationships, consent, and the importance of reporting abuse. Research by Gámez-Guadix et.al (2018) helps to show that the development of an emotional bond between aggressor and victim plays a key role in the dynamics of grooming and should be a priority in the interventions. This link appears to be built by the adult's use of compliance and persuasion strategies on the victim. For this reason, preventive interventions should educate adolescents by warning about these strategies and their potential influence on the victims. Such awareness could neutralize the impact of the principles of influence and avoid developing an emotional bond with the potential aggressor. Moreover, warning about the use of persuasive techniques by offenders could in turn reduce the effectiveness of the use of deception and bribery, enhancing the probability of the minors interpreting such behaviors as manipulative and aimed at obtaining sexual contact. Therefore these programs should include both formal sexual and reproductive health education in schools and non-formal education approaches such as workshops, training sessions, and youth forums. It's crucial to ensure that these programs are culturally sensitive and address the specific challenges and attitudes prevalent in Latvian society.

Reviewing and updating existing legal frameworks to explicitly address grooming as a behavior with violent or abusive intent. This includes clarifying legal definitions of consent to account for situations involving grooming, where consent may be coerced or invalidated due to the power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. Stricter laws and consequences should also be established for adults who are bystanders or cover up the behavior of groomers, particularly within professional settings such as schools or youth organizations.

Strengthening support services for grooming victims by investing in organizations that provide psychological, legal, and social support to survivors of grooming and sexual abuse. This includes enhancing resources and training for professionals such as prosecutors, judges, and police officers to effectively handle grooming cases and support victims throughout the legal process. Additionally, investing in helplines and crisis intervention services specifically tailored to assist victims of grooming is needed, ensuring accessibility and confidentiality.

Strengthening cross-sectorial and interdisciplinary cooperation is imperative for effectively combating grooming in Latvia. This necessitates collaborative efforts between governmental and non-governmental sectors, social and child protection services, the judicial system, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and other relevant stakeholders. By fostering coordination and information-sharing among these diverse entities, Latvia can develop a comprehensive and integrated approach to address grooming effectively. This collaborative effort will enhance the identification of grooming cases, streamline victim support services, improve legal responses, and ultimately contribute to the prevention and prosecution of grooming offenses.

In addition to the outlined actions, there is a critical need to enhance **data collection mechanisms** to better understand the prevalence and patterns of grooming in Latvia. By establishing robust data collection systems that gather information from various sources, including law enforcement agencies, social services, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions, policymakers can gain valuable insights into the scope of the issue and tailor interventions accordingly. This data-driven approach will enable more informed decision-making and resource allocation to effectively combat grooming at both the individual and systemic levels.



GROOMING REALITY IN ESTONIA

The topic of grooming is rarely discussed in Estonian society, and data on the phenomenon is scarce. However, the protection of children from sexual abuse has been actively addressed for many years, with state institutions investing in raising awareness and implementing concrete measures to tackle the issue and safeguard minors.

Increased recognition of the seriousness of sexual abuse, particularly in cases involving children and young people, is most likely also behind the rise in reporting. According to the Police and Border Guard Board, a total of 731 sexual crimes were registered in 2023, representing an increase of nearly a quarter compared to the previous year. This rise is primarily attributed to a higher frequency of reporting sexual crimes against children.

Nearly 90 percent of these registered sexual crimes involved a minor victim, with about half of these cases occurring online and not involving physical contact. Last year's statistics revealed that, for sexual crimes involving minors, the average age of the victims was 12, with the youngest victim being just one year old. In 39 percent of the cases, the offender was a close family member or other relative. In 45 percent of the cases, the crime was committed by a non-family acquaintance, such as a friend of the victim's parents or an instructor at a sports or hobbies group.

At the same time, data on sexual crimes alone cannot demonstrate the full scope of the problem of abusing children and adolescents. Over the past couple of years, there have been cases, mostly in sports, where grooming has likely been a part of the abuse. In addition, some media and information portals have opened the topic. For example, the opinion and stories platform Levila collected [stories](#) from young people about their experiences with grooming and feminist organization Feministeerium published an in-depth [article](#) about the concept of grooming.

In addition, some prominent cases have been disclosed, gaining significant attention and sparking discussions, among other things, about the essence and prevalence of grooming in Estonia. For example the case against Fredo, the coach of the women's soccer team, emerged in March 2021 after one of his alleged victims, Mia Belle, shared her story on TV. Mia said that Fredo had subjected her to sexual abuse over a lengthy period of time, beginning in 2007 when she was 14 years old. Later, Fredo was found guilty and sentenced under section 143(2) of the Criminal Code, which concerns engaging in sexual intercourse by an adult with a person under eighteen years of age, where the offender has taken advantage of the victim's dependency on them, or has abused a position of influence or trust.

Another case involves sports once again. In February 2023, the Estonian Athletics Association (EKJL) barred Mehis Viru from working as an athletics coach due to violations of professional codes of conduct. The EKJL board decided to impose an indefinite ban on Mehis Viru in response to allegations of abuse and psychological and sexual harassment.

According to the association's board, Mehis Viru had allegedly committed significant and repeated violations of these regulations over an extended period, rendering him unfit to work as a coach or in any other sports-related role. These alleged violations occurred over a prolonged period and affected several athletes, one of whom was reportedly a minor. Many allegations are linked to the Under-20 Athletics World Championship held in Cali, Colombia, during the summer of 2022. Several witnesses described Viru's alleged behavior as "inappropriate, unnatural, immoral, wrong, embarrassing, or uncomfortable for the national team." In addition to Estonian witnesses, Dmitrijs Miikevičs, a former top Latvian athlete and now coach, shared his observations. Miikevičs described what he observed as "strange," to the extent that he initially assumed Viru was the athlete's father due to the amount of time they spent together—eating, walking around, sitting in the hotel lobby, etc. "The relationship between them also seemed inappropriate and seemed like seduction on the part of the coach. I didn't understand what was going on, but I thought there were signs of sexual harassment. I have two daughters and I would never allow such a relationship with an older man. In my opinion, this is completely wrong and deserves to be investigated," Miikevičs added in his comments to the Estonian public (ERR News, 20.02.2023).

LEGISLATION AND POLICY

For about a decade, the debate on protecting minors from sexual abuse focused considerably on the age of consent. Non-governmental organizations advocated for more than ten years to raise the age of sexual consent in Estonia from 14 to 16. In 2022, a legal amendment was enacted, stating that adults are not allowed to engage in sexual relationships with children under 16 years of age with a Romeo and Juliet clause added.

Several sexual offenses against minors are prohibited under **the Penal Code** as follows:

- Proposing a meeting with a person under eighteen years of age who is not capable of comprehending the situation, or a person under sixteen years of age, or concluding an agreement to meet them, and performing any act to prepare for the meeting with the intent to commit a sexual offense listed in the Penal Code, is punishable by a fine or up to three years' imprisonment.
- Engaging in sexual intercourse or commission another sexual act by an adult with a person under eighteen years of age, by taking advantage of the victim's dependency on the offender, or by abusing influence or trust, but without using force or in situations where the victim is capable of resisting or comprehending the situation, as defined by the Code, is punishable by two to eight years' imprisonment.
- Engaging in sexual intercourse or any other sexual act with a person under sixteen years of age by an adult is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, unless the age difference between the adult and the person aged fourteen to sixteen is no more than five years. If the act is committed against a person under fourteen years of age, it is punishable by up to eight years' imprisonment.
- Proposing a meeting with a person under eighteen years of age who is not capable of comprehending the situation, or with a person under sixteen years of age, or concluding an agreement to meet them, and performing any act to prepare for the meeting with the intent to commit a sexual offense, is punishable by a fine or up to three years' imprisonment.

Grooming may be prosecuted also under other provisions and laws, such as those related to harassment, stalking, or fraud. Since comprehensive discussion about grooming is limited in Estonian society, the debate about the legal challenges to protect children and adolescents from grooming is also not prominent. However, it is evident that a legal debate addressing grooming in criminal law is needed. This debate should not only focus on the perpetrators but also consider the consequences for adults who are bystanders in obvious grooming situations.

CHALLENGES

Despite the legal implications and occasional attention on issues like abuse in sports, **grooming remains a pervasive and often overlooked problem.** Many victims may not realize they are being manipulated until it is too late, allowing perpetrators to go undetected for years. To address this issue, it is crucial for individuals to recognize the warning signs of grooming and for law enforcement and other authorities to take these cases seriously. Unfortunately, this is not yet the reality in Estonia.

In addition, due to the lack of attention to the topic, **the reality faced by victims is neither thoroughly researched nor adequately understood.** It is well-documented that the long-term consequences of grooming for victims can be devastating and far-reaching. These consequences include emotional trauma, such as anxiety, depression, and **post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, as well as difficulties in trusting others and forming healthy relationships. Such impacts can profoundly affect victims emotionally, psychologically, socially, and even physically. It remains uncertain if, how, and to what extent the state victim support system can effectively support victims of grooming.

EXISTING RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In Estonia, there are currently no institutions or organizations specifically dedicated to addressing grooming. However, several organizations possess expertise and resources relevant to grooming-related issues and are available to assist victims of grooming:

[Lasteabi \(Child helpline\)](#) - Child Helpline is available 24/7 throughout Estonia in case of child-related concerns. Calling 116 111 is free for the caller, and calls can be made even if there is no call time. Counseling is provided in Estonian, Russian, and English. Child Helpline can also be contacted via online chat from the same website or via email info@lasteabi.ee

[Children's House](#) - a child-friendly and multi-disciplinary state service that is provided in order to help sexually abused children and their families.

[National victim support service](#) - victim support centers are located in all major cities. Victim support is for everyone affected by crime, violence or event of crisis.

[Estonian Union for Child Welfare](#) - a non-profit umbrella organization that contributes to ensuring children's rights and shaping a child-friendly society.

[Targalt internetis](#) (Safer Internet Centre) - a project run by both the state and civil society, aimed at promoting smarter internet use by children and their parents and preventing the online distribution of child sexual abuse material.

[Feministeerium](#) - an independent feminist organization focused on communication, advocacy, and empowering the feminist community. Their website provides extensive information on gender issues, sexual abuse and other related topics, such as grooming.

URGENT ACTIONS FOR ESTONIA

- **Raising awareness about the essence and implications of grooming** is crucial. Politicians, policymakers, the media, civil society, and other stakeholders should be more informed about this issue and actively engaged in addressing it. Additionally, awareness needs to be raised among individuals who work with or have direct contact with children. This can be achieved by providing information, creating multimedia resources, and encouraging teachers, youth workers, social workers, family members, and young people to discuss these issues openly. The goal is to reduce the number of young people vulnerable to grooming.
- To initiate a **legal discussion** about grooming within the Estonian legal framework, it is essential to research current definitions and laws. The objective should be to specifically address grooming in legislation, recognizing it as behavior with violent or abusive intent.
- **Empower, train, and equip** services that come into contact with potential grooming cases. This includes improving resources and providing training for professionals such as prosecutors, judges, and police officers to effectively handle grooming cases and support victims during criminal proceedings, in victim support services, and through psychological assistance.
- Spotlight on **creating safer environments**. Organizations such as sports clubs, youth centers, civil society groups, camps, and schools can adopt a situational crime prevention approach to eliminate opportunities for perpetrators to abuse children and young people. This involves altering environments to minimize potential harm, making it more challenging for offenders to act, reducing the appeal of committing crimes, and lessening children's vulnerability. To improve children's safety, organizations must foster a positive culture where all adults actively identify and address risks to children's well-being.



GROOMING REALITY IN DENMARK

The fight to combat grooming started in Denmark around the turn of the millennium. From 1969 and 11 years on, it was fully legal to buy and sell, edit and publish images and videos of child abuse in Denmark. Being illegal in most other countries, Denmark was a leading supplier of sexual material with children to the rest of the world. The Danish “sexually open mindedness” was taken to the extremes when leading experts on children encouraged parents to experiment sexually with their children. Children were sometimes referred to as “adult decoys” blaming the children for the sexual “relationships” with adults. This dark chapter in Danish history has a strong connection to the view on in-person grooming in Denmark today and might be part of the reason why it has been so difficult to combat grooming. Victims of grooming from that time are only now beginning to speak out. Several documentaries and books have been published in the last years, with victims who often grew up in the Danish cultural elite.

The exception that proves the rule is the journalist Kristian Ditlev Jensen who published the auto fictional novel “It will be said” in 2001. The book got the attention of both public and politicians and with descriptions of the grooming process from an inside perspective, it made grooming visible to some extent. Still no legislative initiatives were taken and although being an acknowledged phenomenon, no actions were taken to combat or prevent grooming at that time.

In the last 5-7 years the prevalence of grooming in online spaces has been widely acknowledged. Protection of children against grooming has become a central focus area on a political level, as the digital development has made it easier and more accessible for adults to contact children via the Internet and Social Media. Although being a widespread problem with thousands of victims, we haven’t seen any Danish victims speak out yet.

Some verdicts in cases of in-person grooming came to public attention in the 2020s. The grooming process was judged as a mitigating circumstance and young girls at the age of 12 or 13 years were referred to having a “boyfriend-girlfriend-like relationship” with adult men by the courts.

The case that shook the public most was a case from 2021 where a 13-year-old girl was victim of sadistic sexual violence and the perpetrator was acquitted of having raped the girl because the court found that she had had sex with the perpetrator voluntarily. Instead of rape he was sentenced by a milder section of the Criminal Code: sexual intercourse with a minor.

The cases from the justice system, acknowledgement of prevalence of online grooming, victims of grooming that spoke out (e.g. Lea Elias Isen "The man who raped me for four years got a light sentence because he was good at grooming.")) and NGO's like Save the Children Denmark, the Danish interest organization for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, Landsforeningen Spor, and other NGO's lobbying for criminalization of grooming has had a large impact and significant role in passing of legislation on July 1st 2023 that criminalizes grooming.

In 2023 grooming was also appointed as a prosecutorial focus area in legal practice. This means that the local police before indictment must submit all cases of grooming violation to the state attorney with the draft of indictment.

LEGISLATION AND POLICY:

Insights from Save the Children Denmark

Save the Children Denmark, a member of the global Save the Children network, has been advocating for children's rights since 1919. Their recent initiatives shed light on the complexities of grooming, both in-person and online, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive legislative and policy measures to address this issue effectively.

Recognizing the Multifaceted Nature of Grooming

In a recent meeting with Save the Children Denmark, it was emphasized that grooming is no longer confined to in-person interactions but has expanded significantly into the online realm. This shift necessitates a broadened perspective, recognizing that online grooming often serves as a precursor to physical encounters.

Emerging forms of exploitation, such as sextortion, where artificial intelligence is misused to manipulate profile pictures to coerce victims into sexual acts, were discussed. It was noted that boys are often targeted with monetary threats, whereas girls are manipulated through fear of image distribution and potential involvement in pornography. Addressing these evolving threats requires updated legal frameworks and vigilant enforcement.

Barriers to Seeking Help

The meeting also highlighted the barriers that prevent children from seeking help, including fear, shame, and self-blame. Peer education was identified as a critical intervention strategy, given the significant role peers play in encouraging victims to seek support. Recognizing the insidious nature of grooming, which often involves a gradual building of trust by the perpetrator, underscores the need for early intervention and prevention efforts.

Legal Framework and Prosecution Challenges

The discussion on legal frameworks focused on the need for refining language and definitions within the Danish criminal code to effectively combat grooming. Key issues include defining grooming with cohesive elements, particularly those involving the introduction of sexual content by the perpetrator. Challenges in prosecution, especially in proving intent and securing convictions, were thoroughly examined. Evolving legal discourse now reflects a more nuanced understanding of the exploitation of minors, but implementation remains a critical challenge.

Initiatives and Advocacy

Proactive measures, such as the ["Deletelt" helpline](#), were highlighted as essential tools in addressing online threats. However, issues such as victim blaming and societal stigma persist, necessitating collaborative efforts across governmental bodies, NGOs, legal experts, and law enforcement agencies. Training for stakeholders in implementing legislative changes was deemed crucial for effective enforcement and support provision.

Legislative Change Process: Save the Children Denmark's Approach

Initiating the Process: The legislative change process began with raising awareness through media and political engagement. NGOs conducted a comprehensive review of the criminal code, leading to discussions with policymakers and the formation of a working group under the Ministry of Justice.

Three-Year Endeavor: This process spanned three years, driven by the need to build public support. The working group defined grooming parameters for all stakeholders, including judges, and addressed critical issues such as age parameters (15 to 18) and the complexities surrounding consent obtained through grooming tactics.

Collaborative Efforts: Representatives from national cybercrime authorities, child rights NGOs, legal professionals, law enforcement, and the ombudsman's office formed a collaborative working group led by the Ministry of Justice. This multi-sector approach ensured a comprehensive strategy to tackle grooming.

Data Collection and Proposal: The process began with collecting qualitative data from victim narratives, helplines, support services, and field experts. The Ministry of Justice's subsequent paper reinforced the need for comprehensive action to address grooming effectively.

In conclusion, Save the Children Denmark's approach to addressing grooming highlights the need for a multifaceted strategy involving legislative reform, public awareness, and a robust support system for victims. The ongoing efforts emphasize the importance of a coordinated response to effectively combat grooming and protect children's rights in Denmark and beyond.

The **Criminal Code of Denmark** can be accessed here: <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Denmark-Criminal-Code.pdf>

Sections where changes were made in relation to grooming: § 223; § 225; § 231; § 235 and § 264 d.

Contacts:

<https://redbarnet.dk/>

EXISTING RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In Denmark children and young people under the age of 18 have statutory rights to legal aid, counseling and support if they are victims of sexual abuse including grooming. The state and municipalities therefore have the obligation to support the victim.

- **[The Danish Barnahus](#):** In the Barnahus, relevant authorities gather to ensure a coordinated and interdisciplinary effort of high quality. In the house, the child or young person meets the professional who is used to talking to children and young people about abuse. It can be the police, social workers and psychologists. The purpose is that children who have been exposed to sexual or violent abuse receive qualified and gentle care in one, child-friendly place. The Barnahus will in 2024 start to offer the children trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT). After the initial process in the Barnahus, the municipalities should provide support for the victim and their family. There are 98 municipalities in Denmark and the support varies very much. Often municipalities are inclined to have a focus on family-oriented efforts - or no support at all - and do not support the child's/young person's need for trauma focused treatment. Bearing in mind that disclosure of childhood sexual abuse - especially in cases of grooming - in a very large percentage of cases happens well after the age of 18, most survivors will not have statutory rights to support in Denmark. Therefor the NGO's play a large role in supporting victims who suffers from long term consequences of childhood sexual abuse after the age of 18:
- **[CSM East, CSM South and CSM Mid North](#):** Offers free specialized psychological treatment. The volunteer section also offers counseling, support and social network.
- **[Kvisten](#)** offers individual psychotherapy, psychotherapeutic group therapy as well as telephone counseling.
- **[Joan-Søstrene](#)** offers counseling for female survivors.
- **[Landsforeningen Spor](#)** facilitates virtual and local peer-to-peer communities where survivors can meet and participate in a network with peers. Spor runs an experience-based telephone helpline.
- **[Help Victims of Violence](#)** is an NGO that offer help to victims of person-related crime, such as sexual assault. They offer counseling, legal aid and guidance for victims, as well as support of relatives.

URGENT ACTIONS FOR DENMARK

Data

In Denmark we don't know the prevalence of grooming and childhood sexual abuse. There's a need for a prevalence study on a representative section of the population.

In the past 10-12 years it hasn't been possible for researchers to raise funds to research into perpetrators behavior. Studies like mapping out perpetrators' patterns including grooming patterns or what prevents non-active pedophiles from acting out would be aspirational. Private funds don't want to be associated with childhood sexual abuse, and therefore the state must take action so that we gain more knowledge that can help preventing grooming and convicted perpetrator's relapse.

Raising awareness

Many adult victims of grooming live with the late onset consequences of the childhood sexual abuse and are still in the belief that they participated voluntarily in the sexual abuse. Awareness raising campaigns would help survivors to reach out for help and report the abuse.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE STUDY VISIT IN COPENHAGEN APRIL 2024

Representatives from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia participated in a study visit to Copenhagen in April 2024 to gain insights and learn from the experiences of various NGOs working on violence prevention and intervention, particularly concerning grooming. This visit provided valuable opportunities to understand different strategies, best practices, and challenges faced by organizations in addressing this critical issue.

JOAN SØSTRENE

Joan Søstrene is an organization specializing in **counseling women who have experienced violence, rape, incest, or sexual harassment**, integrates victim advocacy with political campaigning effectively. Their approach is both proactive and inclusive, with a strong emphasis on political efforts to support and protect victims' rights. Joan Søstrene's advocacy is notably driven by a team of 12 women who are deeply involved in **political campaigning** and **working towards legislative reforms**, particularly in areas concerning rape and consent laws. This team is dedicated to **advancing victims' rights and empowerment, ensuring that their voices are heard in the political arena**.

The organization's volunteer involvement is another significant aspect of their work. Volunteers at Joan Søstrene undergo a rigorous onboarding process that spans 5-6 months. This period includes shadowing experienced counselors during sessions and providing assistance to other volunteers. This comprehensive training ensures that volunteers are well-prepared to offer support to survivors and engage effectively in advocacy work.

Outreach efforts by Joan Søstrene primarily leverage social media to connect with survivors, aiming to provide accessible support and raise awareness about their services. However, the organization faces challenges in reaching younger generations, partly due to its long-standing association with older women. Despite these challenges, Joan Søstrene remains committed to bridging this gap and enhancing their outreach strategies to better connect with all demographics. The organization's structured **volunteer training program** and proactive use of social media for outreach exemplify effective strategies for engaging with and supporting survivors while advocating for systemic change.

THE SEXISM PROJECT

Rooted in the principles of the UK Everyday Sexism Project, initially developed by Laura Bates, the Sexism Project is a **volunteer-led initiative designed to provide a platform for individuals to share their personal experiences with sexism**. This project aims to build a **supportive community** where people can express themselves freely without fear of judgment or isolation. By showcasing a wide range of experiences—from seemingly harmless jokes to severe incidents like femicide—the initiative seeks to highlight the pervasive nature of sexism in society.

During the discussions, several critical themes emerged, beginning with the necessity of **open conversations about consent** and the development of robust legislative measures to protect individuals from sexual assault and harassment. Participants delved into the **complex nature of sexism, exploring its intersection with biological sex, gender, and societal structures, revealing how deeply it is embedded in everyday life**. A narrative shift was advocated for, suggesting the adoption of terms like **"sexualized violence"** to more accurately represent victims' experiences and challenge societal perceptions.

The **role of the media** in perpetuating sexist attitudes was another significant point of concern, as it often exacerbates societal divisions and misunderstandings about sexism. The discussion also expanded to include the phenomenon of the **"Manosphere,"** a collection of online communities known for extreme misogyny, highlighting the urgent need to confront these toxic ideologies. Emphasis was placed on understanding the behavior of perpetrators to gain better insights into the root causes and patterns of grooming and sexual violence.

Concrete suggestions were made for conducting educational workshops focusing on consent, respectful flirtation, and bystander intervention, aiming to foster a culture of mutual respect and equality. Success stories like **DareGender** in Denmark were shared as exemplary models for engaging boys and men in the pursuit of gender equality. The profound **impact of language** on shaping societal perceptions was underscored, particularly in redefining victimhood and reframing discussions around sexual violence. Strategies for community engagement were discussed, including leveraging social media as a PR tool, offering workshops with minimal fees, and tailoring outreach efforts to different sectors such as schools and businesses.

The meeting concluded with a call to action to address sexism as a systemic issue, advocating for nuanced discussions and holistic approaches to drive meaningful societal change.

ACTIVISM AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE.

MEETING WITH LEA ELIAS ISEN

In a meeting led by Lea Elias Isen, the discussion centered on **how activism can drive societal change, particularly in addressing grooming, sexual abuse, and the critical role of bystanders in prevention.** The conversation emphasized the importance of integrating individual voices into policy and advocacy frameworks to foster meaningful change.

Incorporating survivor and ally narratives into the advocacy efforts of NGOs and institutions emerged as a crucial strategy. **By hearing personal stories, a deeper empathy and understanding is cultivated, leading to more effective policies and intervention strategies.** Participants explored the dynamics of grooming, recognizing that perpetrators often exploit victims' vulnerabilities, presenting themselves as trusted figures who fill emotional gaps in their lives. The lack of language to articulate victims' experiences and the blurring of boundaries contribute to the complexity of these situations.

The role of bystanders in preventing grooming and abuse was highlighted as crucial. **Trusted adults and peers must step in to support victims and confront abusive behavior.** There was a call to challenge the normalization of age gaps and inappropriate conduct, which can often mask abusive dynamics. Recognizing **traits of abusers, such as narcissism, lack of empathy, and entitlement,** and identifying red flags like **boundary crossing and the sexualization of relationships** were emphasized as critical steps in prevention.

Storytelling was identified as **a powerful tool for activism,** essential for raising awareness and challenging societal norms. By normalizing survivor experiences and encouraging open dialogue, storytelling helps to destigmatize abuse. The group also stressed societal responsibility in addressing grooming and abuse, suggesting **a shift in focus from individual perpetrators to broader systemic failures.** The normalization of certain language and behaviors was recognized as contributing to a culture that perpetuates abuse. The importance of learning from past mistakes and correcting misconceptions was also highlighted, as creating a culture of open dialogue is vital for continuous improvement in addressing abuse and supporting survivors.

The meeting underscored the necessity of activism in combating grooming and sexual abuse, calling for a **collective societal response.** By amplifying individual voices, challenging societal norms, and empowering bystanders, the aim is to create a safer and more supportive environment for survivors while preventing future abuse. Ongoing education, advocacy, and community engagement were deemed essential for achieving lasting change.

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