Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children

# From Risky Connection to Inclusive Protection

## Indigenous Children in Bolivia and Online Sexual Exploitation

2026

VOICE IDENTITY project

*Identity, Diversity, and Exploitation: Navigating and Tracing Intersectionality related to Tech-facilitated Sexual Exploitation of Youth*

# Acknowledgements and Imprint

*From Risky Connection to Inclusive Protection*is a four-part series about the risk and protective factors of different groups of children in relation to online sexual exploitation. The reports are the outcome of the VOICE IDENTITY project, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Down to Zero Alliance and its programme *Stepping Up the Fight Against Sexual Exploitation of Children*.

VOICE-IDENTITY is a project of the Down to Zero Alliance, led by Terre des Hommes Netherlands and the second phase of the VOICE study (Values, Opinions, and Insights from Children and their Caregivers about E-safety), which was a collaboration between ECPAT International, Eurochild, and Terre des Hommes Netherlands. For more information, please read the full report or accessible version:

**full report** **accessible version**

We want to thank the data collection team in Bolivia, who worked with great care to safeguard the wellbeing of all respondents. Above all, we are deeply grateful to the children, parents, and stakeholders who shared their time, experiences, and perspectives with us.

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**PUBLISHED BY:**
Terre des Hommes Netherlands
Grote Marktstraat 43
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The Netherlands
**https://int.terredeshommes.nl**

**SUGGESTED CITATION**
Terre des Hommes Netherlands. (2026). *From Risky Connection to Inclusive Protection: Indigenous Children in Bolivia and Online Sexual Exploitation.* The Hague: Terre des Hommes Netherlands.

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# Introduction

# Introduction

**Indigenous children** remain among the most marginalised populations in the world, facing systemic exclusion rooted in historical inequalities, colonial legacies, and persistent rural poverty (Hooker, 2005). The United Nations (2009) defines Indigenous Peoples as communities with historical and cultural continuity to pre-colonial societies, maintaining distinct languages, traditions, and collective ties to their territories. Globally, there are more than 476 million Indigenous people across 90 countries, accounting for about 6.2% of the world's population and representing over 5,000 distinct groups (United Nations, 2009). Despite this diversity and global presence, Indigenous communities continue to experience exclusion from quality education, healthcare, and participation in decision-making processes. These inequalities restrict Indigenous children's rights and opportunities from an early age.

**Digital connectivity** holds the potential to challenge these long-standing exclusions. The internet can expand access to information, strengthen cultural visibility, and connect young people across geographic divides. For Indigenous youth, digital platforms can serve as spaces for self-expression, collective mobilisation, and the transmission of cultural knowledge. Studies from Canada, Australia and New Zealand have shown that Indigenous young people use online spaces to sustain their cultural identities, foster social networks, and amplify their voices in national and global conversations (Quispe, 2013; eSafety Commissioner, 2023).

In practice, however, the **digital sphere often reproduces and deepens offline inequities.** Indigenous populations are frequently excluded from the benefits of digital participation due to poor infrastructure, economic barriers, and persistent discrimination (Intahchomphoo, 2018). The lack of affordable internet access, limited digital literacy training, and absence of culturally relevant online safety information can increase children's exposure to harm. Indigenous children face particular risks, including cyberbullying, racial discrimination, and hate speech targeting their cultural identities and languages (Carlson & Dreher, 2018). In some contexts, these inequalities intersect with broader vulnerabilities such as poverty, displacement, and social exclusion, heightening the risk of online grooming and sexual exploitation. Misrepresentation and cultural appropriation in digital media can further marginalise Indigenous voices, while surveillance and data misuse threaten collective rights to privacy and self-determination. As a result, the same technologies that offer opportunities for empowerment can also expose Indigenous children to new and complex forms of harm.

Among these concerns is **online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC)**, defined as "*all acts of a sexually exploitative nature carried out against a child that have, at some stage, a connection to the online environment*" (ECPAT International, 2016, p. 17). OSEC includes acts such as grooming, the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), live-streamed sexual abuse, and the coercion of children to perform sexual acts in exchange for money, gifts, or promises thereof (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023). While the global understanding of OSEC has expanded in recent years, research exploring its intersection with indigeneity remains scarce. The few existing studies show that Indigenous children, particularly girls, may experience unique vulnerabilities shaped by overlapping forms of marginalisation. In Australia, for instance, Aboriginal girls have reported high levels of unwanted sexual contact online and deception through fake social media profiles (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020). These patterns have been linked to systemic exclusion, racism, gender inequality, and a lack of culturally relevant online safety education (Heritage, 2024).

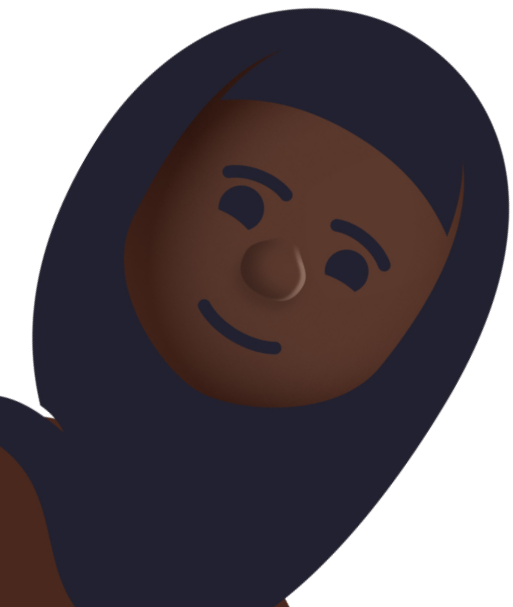
Existing research focuses on high-income settings and there is **a critical lack of evidence from low- and middle-income countries**, where both digital access and protection mechanisms are more limited. Bolivia provides a particularly important context for addressing this gap. According to The Indigenous World report (Mamo, 2025), Bolivia is home to 36 recognised Indigenous Peoples, with nearly half of the population identifying as Indigenous. The largest groups are Quechua and Aymara, both residing primarily in the Andean region. Aymara youth have increasingly engaged with digital tools such as blogs, community radio, and hip-hop collectives to preserve and promote their language and culture online (Quispe, 2013). These examples illustrate how digital participation can serve as a form of cultural resilience and self-determination.

Despite this, significant inequalities persist. While Bolivia has expanded national internet infrastructure in recent years, rural Indigenous municipalities remain disproportionately underserved, with connectivity that is often expensive, slow, and unreliable (Gigler, 2015). This creates a dual form of exclusion: **limited access to technology and online spaces that rarely reflect Indigenous languages, cultures, or lived realities**. While Aymara identity provides children with a strong sense of belonging and pride, it can also become a source of marginalisation in digital environments dominated by Spanish-speaking, urban norms (Eisenberg, 2013).

To date, no research has examined how Indigenous children in Bolivia, particularly Aymara children, perceive and experience online risks related to sexual exploitation. Moreover, **children's own voices are largely absent from existing evidence**. This study seeks to address this gap, by:

1. exploring how indigenous children in Bolivia perceive online safety and navigate risks of OSEC;
2. identifying their specific needs for protection in digital environments; and
3. highlighting the actions that caregivers, communities, and policymakers should take to ensure their safety online.

This research forms part of the **VOICE–IDENTITY** project, a four-part study examining how identity characteristics such as gender, disability, and indigeneity shape children's experiences of online sexual exploitation. By focusing on distinct identity groups, the study aims not to portray children as inherently vulnerable, but to recognise how intersecting identity factors influence access to and experiences within digital spaces. Rather than reducing children to categories, this approach centres their lived realities, agency, and sources of resilience. Ultimately, the study aims to amplify Indigenous children's voices and ensure that their perspectives inform practice, advocacy, and policy, contributing to digital spaces that are more inclusive, equitable, and protective for all.



# Methods

# Methods

**VOICE-IDENTITY:** *Identity, Diversity, and Exploitation: Navigating and Tracing Intersectionality related to Tech-facilitated Sexual Exploitation of Youth,* is a study conducted in 2025, that forms part of the broader **VOICE project** (2024) *Values, Opinions, and Insights from Children and their Caregivers about E-Safety*. The methodology was developed by Terre des Hommes Netherlands and adapted to the Bolivian context in collaboration with Fundación Munasim Kullakita, a Bolivian NGO that protects and supports children, women, and families in vulnerable situations. These situations include commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence.

To centre the perspectives of Indigenous children, the research adopted a **qualitative design**. Data collection combined a literature review, semi-structured interviews with caregivers and stakeholders, focus groups with children and a short survey. These methods were designed to capture diverse experiences and to generate in-depth insights into both risks and protective factors related to online safety. The research protocol and tools were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee Social Sciences of the Radboud Universiteit in the Netherlands (ECSW-2024-135), in line with ethical standards for research with children.

### Box A: VOICE project (2024) Values, Opinions, and Insights from Children and their Caregivers about E-Safety

This report compares findings of Indigenous children with data from 30 Bolivian non-Indigenous peers (12-17 years old) from urban areas collected through three focus groups and a survey in 2023 (ECPAT International et al., 2024). For Indigenous parents, it will be compared to 250 parents (urban 70.8%, rural 28.4%) collected through a survey in the same year. This secondary use of the VOICE data helps contextualise the specific vulnerabilities and strengths of Indigenous children in relation to their peers, which will be shown in boxes throughout the results.

## Literature review

The literature review combined grey and academic sources, identified through search terms such as "*online child safety*" and "*online sexual abuse and exploitation*" in combination with "*Indigenous*" or "*native*" or more specific categories (e.g., "Aymara"). Searches were conducted using Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the EBSCO databases. Sources were screened through a two-stage process: first by reviewing titles and abstracts, and subsequently by full-text reading. Studies were included if they focused on OSEC, online violence or safety, or internet use in relation to Indigenous communities; were published from 2013 onwards; and met established credibility criteria for authority, accuracy, coverage, objectivity, date, and significance (Tyndall, 2010). Data were extracted systematically, with entries capturing each source's focus, methodology, and key findings relevant to the research questions. Insights from this review informed the development of interview guides, ensuring that data collection was built on existing evidence while addressing identified gaps in knowledge.

## Group interviews with children

In collaboration with Fundación Munasim Kullakita, 20 children between the ages of 14 and 17 from the Aymara communities of Guaqui and Huancollo, rural areas of the department of La Paz in Bolivia, were recruited to participate in a focus group discussion. The process was carried out alongside teachers and educational directors who selected the group of adolescents. Participation was higher among adolescents from the Huancollo community (65%) than among those from the Guaqui community (35%). The 20 participants were divided into two subgroups: one consisting of 10 female adolescents and the other of 10 male adolescents. The separation of boys and girls was done preemptively, as the discussion of the research topic was deemed to be more appropriate among individuals of the same gender. Each group participated in two sessions of approximately two hours.

During the focus group sessions, various participatory activities were conducted to engage the Aymara children and facilitate open discussion safely and appropriately. The activities included guided brainstorming about the participants' online experiences and concepts of online risks, including OSEC, creative exercises using picture-based storytelling, as well as creating a problem tree and an in-session survey.

## Caregiver and stakeholder interviews

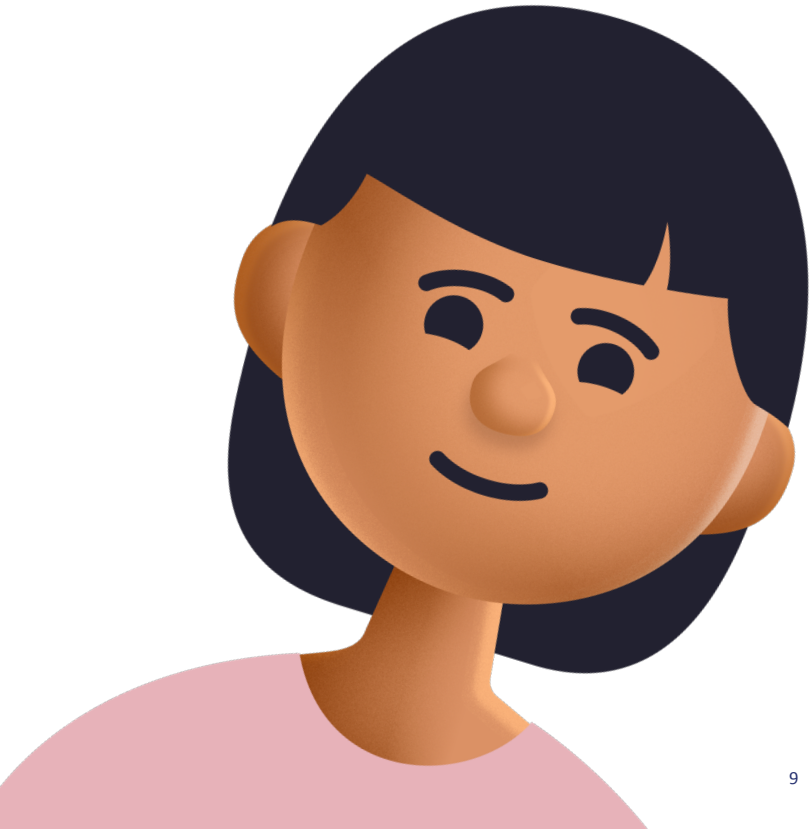
Individual, semi-structured interviews were held with caregivers and stakeholders, following a similar topic list, including online behaviour of Indigenous children, benefits and challenges, cultural and societal views of Indigenous children, and support needs. The caregivers of the children included in the study were contacted. For each child, one caregiver participated, resulting in 20 caregivers, of which 18 were parents and two were uncles. Of the caregivers, 60% were female and 40% were male. Twenty stakeholders were included in the study who had expertise or experience in working with Aymara children in Bolivia. They represented the educational system, ministries of government and justice, and child protection specialists.

## Data collection and analysis

For all respondents, participation was voluntary, and they were reminded they could pause or quit the interviews at any time without any consequences. Consent forms were provided in written form, but read out and further explained when that was required, to ensure that every respondent understood what they were joining and why.

The research design originally included audio-recording and transcription of the interviews. In practice, the children's sessions were recorded through summary notes rather than full transcripts. As such, the analysis draws on these narrative summaries instead of direct quotations from children. The caregivers' and stakeholders' data were collected via audio recording with participant consent. The recordings were transcribed, translated, pseudonymised, and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using ATLAS.ti Web software. Each transcript was coded by two researchers, using a pre-made codebook based on the research questions and the socio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1974).

With the **Ecological Systems Approach**, Bronfenbrenner (1974) conceptualises child development to occur within a set of four nested systems, each influencing and interacting with the other. The child is in the centre. The microsystem is directly around the child, representing direct environments such as family, peers, and teachers. Around that system is the mesosystem, capturing interrelationships between the settings in the microsystem, such as parents interacting with teachers, that also influence the child. The furthest away is the macrosystem, representing the broader socio-cultural context. For instance, societal norms, policies and laws provide the overarching framework within which the child develops. Recognising the increasingly central role of digital technology in children's lives, Johnson and Puplampu (2008) proposed the addition of the techno-subsystem within the microsystem. This includes children's interactions with digital devices, online platforms and the socio-technical architecture of the internet. We return to this model in the conclusion.



# Results

# Results

After describing the Aymara people, the results are organised around three main themes. The first part explores what Indigenous children are doing online, including their patterns of internet use, preferred platforms, and motivations for going online. The second examines how Aymara children perceive safety and risk in the digital environment, including their awareness of online sexual exploitation. The final part highlights cross-cutting themes that illuminate the broader social and cultural context shaping children's online experiences, such as intergenerational gaps, parental disempowerment, gender norms, migration, and the role of community justice systems. Together, these findings offer an understanding of how the digital world intersects with Aymara children's everyday lives, aspirations, and vulnerabilities.

### Box B: Aymara people

The Aymara are one of the largest Indigenous groups in the Andes, with a population of over two million people across Bolivia, Peru, and Chile (Eisenberg, 2013; Mamo, 2025). In Bolivia, they are mainly concentrated in the highland regions of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí, where they maintain strong cultural traditions centred on collective life, reciprocity, and deep ties to the land (Canessa, 2014). Aymara communities have long valued knowledge transmission through oral storytelling, community assemblies, and intergenerational learning, with elders playing a central role in teaching values related to solidarity, work, and respect for nature (Arzubiaga, 1993).

These social structures provide a strong sense of belonging and mutual care but also exist within a broader context of economic inequality, rural isolation, and limited access to state services. Many Aymara families live in remote areas where roads, schools, and internet infrastructure are scarce. Children often face barriers to education, healthcare, and digital participation that reflect a wider pattern of structural exclusion (Ministerio de Educación, 2022). Connectivity in rural Aymara areas is limited and costly, and public schools frequently lack computers or consistent internet access. As a result, children's engagement with digital spaces tends to occur through mobile phones, often shared among family members or borrowed from peers (Gigler, 2015).

Despite these challenges, Aymara identity remains a powerful source of resilience. The community's emphasis on cooperation, shared responsibility, and cultural pride shapes how children and families understand new technologies (Eisenberg, 2013). Digital tools are sometimes seen as both an opportunity for modernisation and a potential threat to cultural continuity. For young people, especially adolescents, the internet represents a space of exploration and aspiration, a way to access education, connect with peers, and engage with broader worlds beyond their immediate environment. For parents, however, the digital world can be perceived as unknown and risky, particularly when exposure to online content challenges traditional values or when they feel unprepared to guide their children's digital lives (Byrne et al., 2016).

## What Indigenous Children are Doing Online

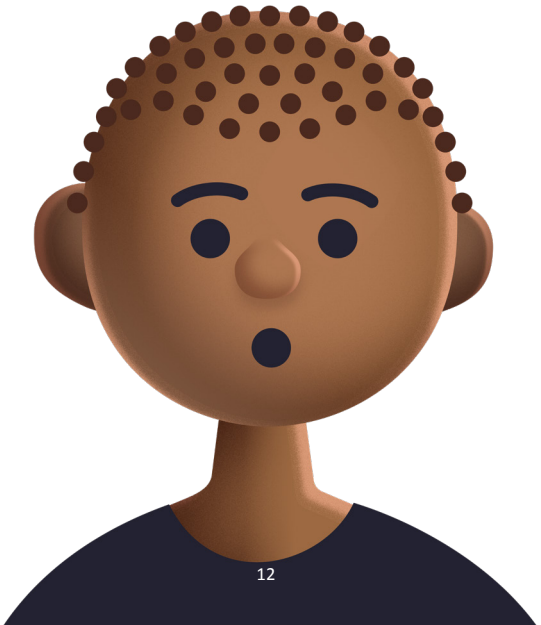
The children in our sample gained access to social media or games at an average age of 12.2 years and spent an average of 3.2 hours per day online. The most popular apps were TikTok (used by 8 children), WhatsApp (7), and Facebook (6). Fewer children reported using the mobile game Free Fire (4), Instagram (3), or other platforms such as YouTube or Warcraft. Children said they were mostly in contact with friends (86%), followed by family members (64%), and some also communicated with teachers (29%) or people they only met online (25%). In terms of online conversations, children most often mentioned homework, games, school, educational content, and family matters.

They enjoyed the entertainment aspects of the internet, especially games, videos, and socialising with peers, but also valued being able to learn new things and keep up with trends. Their dislikes were mostly connected to particular platforms, especially where they felt unsafe or found certain content unnecessary. For example, some mentioned negative experiences with TikTok, Facebook, or WhatsApp, pointing to risks of unsolicited contact or inappropriate videos.

### Box B: Comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children - online behaviour

There are a lot of similarities between the Aymara and non-Indigenous children. Both groups mainly communicated with friends and family, with smaller proportions of both groups mentioning teachers or people they met online. Across both samples, children described using the internet for entertainment (games, videos, and chatting), keeping in touch with others, and accessing information.

Aymara children reported going online for the first time at an average age of 12.2 years, slightly later than non-Indigenous children, who started around 11.5 years old. They spent an average of **3.2 hours per day online,** compared with **around 4.2 hours** among non-Indigenous children. The apps used by Aymara and non-Indigenous children were similar, with both groups indicating to use TikTok and WhatsApp. However, Aymara children reported using Facebook and never mentioned YouTube, one of the apps that non-Indigenous children reported to use most frequently.



## How Aymara Children Feel about the Online World and Their Safety

In the survey, we also asked Aymara children how they felt about online safety, both in general and in relation to OSEC. The results can be found in table 1. With regards to their general safety feeling online, most children feel safe (50%) or very safe (15%) online. Girls tend to be a bit more mixed about their online safety perception. Boys tended to be more on the positive side of the scale (78%) than the negative side (11%), while 55% of girls were positive, one girl was neutral (9%) and 36% of girls said to feel somewhat unsafe (36%).

**Table 1. Overview of survey results about feeling safe online and safe from OSEC**

| | How safe do you feel online? | | Total | How safe do you feel from OSEC? | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls | Boys | | Girls | Boys | |
| Very safe | 1 (9%) | 2 (22%) | 3 (15%) | 3 (27%) | 4 (44%) | 7 (35%) |
| Somewhat safe | 5 (46%) | 5 (56%) | 10 (50%) | 2 (18%) | 3 (33%) | 5 (25%) |
| Neutral | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (5%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (11%) | 1 (5%) |
| Somewhat unsafe | 4 (36%) | 1 (11%) | 5 (25%) | 4 (36%) | 1 (11%) | 5 (25%) |
| Very unsafe | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (5%) |
| Rather not say | 0 (0%) | 1 (11%) | 1 (5%) | 1 (9%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (5%) |
| **TOTAL** | 11 | 9 | 20 | 11 | 9 | 20 |

When asked what feeling unsafe meant to them, many were **concerned about unauthorised access to accounts and personal data**, such as "*being afraid that someone will [get] access to my account [resulting in me] losing my privacy*,"[1] "*that my account can be stolen*"[2] or "*knowing they can hack my account and get my data*."[3] Many of the children mentioned the risk of strangers scamming and hacking in particular.

The safety perception around OSEC showed similar patterns of positive versus negative safety feelings (60% to 30% for OSEC versus 65% to 25% in general), with similar gender differences. Interestingly, more children, both boys and girls, expressed feeling very safe from OSEC (35%) than in general (15%). Looking at their reasoning, this may be because their **top worries centred around privacy and personal data**, and not OSEC. Just one boy mentioned worries about OSEC explicitly: "*Because they talk to me online and ask me to upload photos and videos in exchange for making money*."[4]

**1.** Girl from the Aymara community, 15 years old
**2.** Girl from the Aymara community, 16 years old
**3.** Boy from the Aymara community, unknown age
**4.** Boy from the Aymara community, 14 years old

In addition, some children seemed to feel protected from OSEC, for instance through:

- being well informed ("*I have information about what could happen*")[5];
- safety options on platforms ("*no one can contact me on social networks*")[6];
- their own protective strategies, such as a girl tending to "*not accept friend request from weird people*"[7];
- an abstinence approach: "*I avoid leaving the house, talking to strangers and posting people or photographs on social networks in my life*"[8], and;
- children feeling confident about parental supervision[9] and control[10].
  Not all children agreed. The ones that felt less safe from OSEC said so because they felt that there are "*a lot of risks and I'm not safe*."[11] And feeling that these risks can happen to anyone: "*anyone can talk to you and send you forbidden content*."[12] One child felt ill-informed about what could happen online: "*I feel insecure because I don't have the experience to know the dangers of social media*."[13] This points to the variety of children's feelings about being safe online and from OSEC, with varying levels of digital literacy and preparedness to navigate the online world.

The children also mentioned which apps and platforms were safe or unsafe. In response to the question regarding which online platforms made them feel safest, 9 out of 20 participants (45%) answered *WhatsApp,* making it the most frequently mentioned platform. Children felt safer on *WhatsApp* because it limited contact to people that have their number, with children mentioning they "*don't talk to many people*"[14] or that they "*only talk to my friends and family*"[15] The second category mentioned was games, more specifically *Free Fire*, mentioned by 4 children (20%). Some explained they played the games offline, which helped their feeling of safety, because "*in games without the internet, [...] they can't contact me*."[16] **Safety therefore seemed to be tied to the extent to which platforms extended beyond their own circle of trust**. Platforms focusing on contacts they were familiar with were deemed as more safe, similar to the offline mode of games.

In response to the question regarding which online platforms made them feel less safe, participants most frequently identified social media platforms, such as *Facebook, Instagram and TikTok*. *Facebook* was mentioned most often, primarily due to the ease with which strangers can make contact through friend requests, mentioning that "*unknown people can find you there*"[17], and children get sent "*requests from people [they] don't know.*"[18] One child explained that this also happens in games, namely in "*Free Fire, the people who play are people with a character, and ask for [your] phone number.*"[19] This indicates that **online games, where people hide their real identity behind a character, could be a gateway to further contact and potentially grooming**. While *Facebook* and online games were mentioned as less safe because of contact risks, *TikTok* seemed to be marked as unsafe because of content. One girl said it made her "*feel insecure*"[20], while another mentioned that the platform allows "*visualisations where they tell you things that are bad*."[21]

**5.** Girl from the Aymara community, 15 years old
**6.** Boy from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**7.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**8.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**9.** Girl from the Aymara community, 16 years old
**10.** Boy from the Aymara community, 14 years old
**11.** Girl from the Aymara community, 15 years old
**12.** Boy from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**13.** Boy from the Aymara community, unknown age
**14.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**15.** Girl from the Aymara community, 16 years old
**16.** Boy from the Aymara community, 15 years old
**17.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**18.** Girl from the Aymara community, 16 years old
**19.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**20.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old
**21.** Girl from the Aymara community, 17 years old

## Box C: Comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children - online safety perception

When comparing Aymara children with their non-Indigenous peers, a slightly different pattern emerges in how safe they feel online. Indigenous children felt safer than non-Indigenous children, with nearly one in three Aymara children feeling safe online (50% somewhat safe and 15% very safe online), compared to around 40% of non-Indigenous children who said they felt somewhat (23%) or very safe (17%). Comparable proportions of the group felt unsafe, with 25% of Aymara children described feeling somewhat unsafe, and no one to feel very unsafe and 23% of non-Indigenous children reported feeling somewhat unsafe (20%) or very unsafe online (3%).

When asked which platforms made them feel safest, Aymara children most often mentioned **WhatsApp (45%)** and **offline games (20%)**, while non-Indigenous children highlighted **WhatsApp (50%)** and **YouTube (20%)**. Across both groups, children viewed broader social media platforms as less safe and expressed similar concerns about **unwanted contact, fake profiles, hacking, and exposure to inappropriate content**. However, non-Indigenous children articulated these threats with greater detail and frequency, particularly fears about the link between online and offline harm. Non-indigenous children frequently mentioned how online behaviour could lead to offline consequences, for instance, fears of being kidnapped when "*posting [their] location*"[22] or pictures of where they live, or risks related to trafficking and exploitation. One non-Indigenous girl shared: "*A guy spoke to me once like that on Facebook. He talked to me nicely, he was attentive and we chatted a lot, but I was afraid he would kidnap me*."[23] Others in the same group added to this worry that online platforms can be "*very dangerous because of human trafficking and smuggling, and that many people are disappearing because of this*"[24] and "*they use these networks to recruit and kidnap young people*."[25]

These detailed accounts suggest that **non-Indigenous children may have higher awareness of online sexual exploitation risks**, likely due to greater exposure to the internet, more time spent on open social media platforms, and higher digital literacy. In contrast, Aymara children rarely described such experiences. In one survey question, 40% of Aymara children believed they were *just as safe* from online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) as others, 30% felt *safer*, 10% *less safe*, and 20% preferred not to answer. None explicitly linked their sense of safety to being Indigenous, but rather to family rules and the types of platforms they used.

This perceived safety may, however, reflect **a lack of awareness rather than an absence of risk**. Studies have shown that children in rural or Indigenous communities tend to have lower digital exposure and limited access to online safety information, which can result in a reduced understanding of online risks (Oguine et al., 2025). Conversely, urban children, often with broader access and more online experience, report higher awareness of online threats and greater concern for their safety.

In short, Aymara children's higher reported sense of safety may not indicate that they are genuinely safer online, but that their restricted internet use, rural isolation, and limited exposure to explicit online harm lead to lower awareness of potential risks. As digital access expands in rural areas, awareness-raising and safety education will be key to ensuring that increased connectivity does not translate into increased vulnerability.

## Cross-Cutting Themes

*Traditional Knowledge Systems and the Intergenerational Digital Divide*

For the Aymara, learning and communication have **historically relied on local, community-based systems** such as radio, oral exchange, and observation within the family and village (Candler, 2021). These networks remain important for preserving language and transmitting values of reciprocity and collective responsibility. The growing presence of digital technology, however, is **reshaping how knowledge is produced and shared**.

**Community radio** continues to play an important role in this landscape. Families described radio as a trusted source of news, language preservation, cultural programming, and education, especially in areas where schools lack stable internet access or public services. For many indigenous communities, radio remains not only a medium of information but a symbol of collective belonging, allowing families to stay connected to local events, regional dynamics, and cultural identity (Tapia et al., 2024).

However, children's learning pathways are shifting. Even where connectivity is limited or intermittent, young people increasingly access information through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube. They do so in small windows of opportunity, with peers, during visits to relatives in town, or in community centres that have a signal. These platforms offer not only entertainment, but also new spaces for socialisation, education, identity exploration, and communication beyond the community.

This transition does not replace traditional knowledge systems, but rather **layers new, globalised forms of learning onto existing ones**. Yet access to digital spaces is uneven and shaped by longstanding structural inequalities, including geographic isolation, cost of devices and mobile data, and limited investment in rural technological infrastructure (Ministerio de Educación, 2022). As a result, digital participation is often fragmented, improvised, or shared across family members and neighbours.

The coexistence of these two knowledge systems, one grounded in community life and the other in digital networks, is reshaping how children and adults encounter information, authority, and influence. Many children grow fluent in digital environments more quickly than the adults around them, while parents remain more deeply rooted in local information networks such as radio, schools, and community assemblies.

This shift in where knowledge comes from, and how it circulates, **creates a widening generational gap not only in skills, but in worldviews and points of reference**. The implications of this gap are most strongly felt in the domain of parenting and protection, where caregivers navigate unfamiliar technologies that have rapidly become central to children's social worlds.

**22.** Girl from the Aymara community, 15 years old
**23.** Girl from an urban area of Bolivia, 13 years old
**24.** Girl from an urban area of Bolivia, 17 years old
**25.** Girl from an urban area of Bolivia, 13 years old

### *Parenting and Digital Literacy in an Intergenerational Divide*

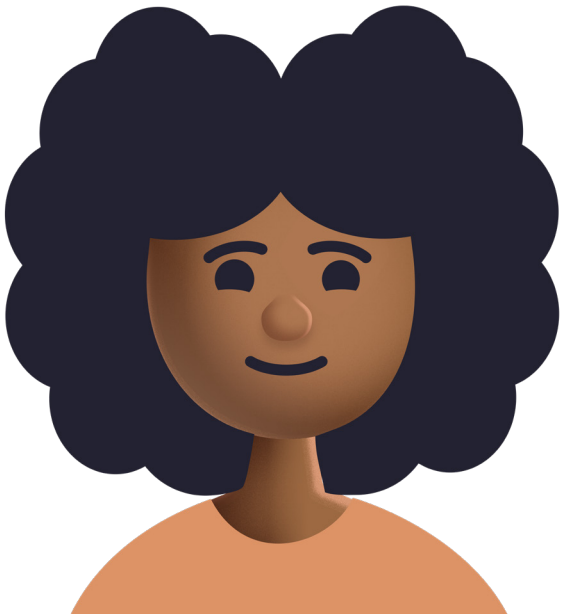
As digital technologies enter children's lives more quickly than they reach adults, many **parents expressed feeling unprepared to guide or protect their children online**. These feelings were linked not to a lack of interest or care but to broader histories of exclusion from schooling, infrastructure, and training opportunities available in urban areas. As one parent put it, "*Because we are from the countryside, in the rural area we don't know anything*."[26]

Parents frequently described a **sense of distance from the online** world that their children navigate daily. Some explained that they rely on their children to operate phones, data packages, or apps. One father shared, "*My children alone manage the internet; I don't know how I could give them protection*."[27] This shift in who holds knowledge can feel disempowering and makes it difficult to offer guidance or recognise risks before they occur.

The uncertainty surrounding what children might encounter online reinforced fear-based forms of protection. One mother explained, "*Since we don't know what they see on the internet, they can be kidnapped. It is very risky, we do not have much information… and our children are naive.*"[28] In this context, caregivers often prioritised restricting internet access, limiting time online, monitoring indirectly, or delaying device ownership.

These strategies were rooted in care, but they also reflected the **lack of accessible support**. Stakeholders emphasised that "*The responsibility always lies with the parents, but not all of them have the necessary information or tools.*"[29] Many rural families are managing agricultural work, household responsibilities, and economic pressures, leaving limited time or resources to learn about digital safety.

Across families, there was a clear desire to protect children, but **very few avenues to learn how to do so**, especially in ways that align with community values and daily realities. Parents repeatedly expressed openness to training or guidance, particularly if delivered through trusted, familiar channels such as local schools or community radio. These findings echo broader regional patterns. Across Latin America, **the digital divide remains intergenerational as well as geographic**: adults in rural areas have fewer opportunities to learn digital skills and often perceive the internet as a space for the young (Robinson et al., 2020). Research suggests that family-centred approaches, particularly those combining community workshops and school-based sessions, can help build parents' confidence and promote constructive mediation (ECPAT International, 2023; Plan International, 2020). In summary, parents' limited digital literacy among Aymara families stems less from unwillingness than from systemic exclusion. Adults' strategies to protect children are grounded in care but constrained by fear and lack of information.



**26.** Parent from the Aymara community
**27.** Parent from the Aymara community
**28.** Parent from the Aymara community
**29.** Expert from the Child and Adolescent Ombudsman's Office of Desaguadero

## Box D: Comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children - parents' confidence in keeping their children safe online

Across both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, parents in Bolivia recognised that the internet exposes children to new forms of risk but felt differently about their capacity to manage them. Quantitative data from **non-Indigenous parents** show relatively high self-ratings of digital safety knowledge (average scores of 8.1 out of 10 for general online safety and 8.3 for OSEC), reflecting confidence in their ability to keep children safe. Their confidence, however, often rested on restrictive rather than enabling strategies: limiting children's access, monitoring devices, or trusting schools to provide digital guidance, rather than engaging in open dialogue about online behaviour.

Among **Indigenous parents**, confidence was markedly lower and rooted in **structural exclusion**. Most described themselves as lacking both digital skills and opportunities to learn them. Parents frequently deferred to their children's greater expertise, saying they "*don't know how to help*" or "*can't control what they do online*." Work outside the home, limited connectivity, and scarce resources constrained their ability to monitor or guide children.

Overall, while non-Indigenous parents overestimated their digital capacity but struggled with meaningful mediation, Indigenous parents expressed low confidence stemming from systemic barriers and generational gaps. Both groups relied heavily on restrictive measures, underscoring the need for family-centred digital literacy programmes that build parents' confidence through culturally relevant and context-appropriate approaches rather than punitive control.

### *Rural Disconnection, Migration and Aspirations for Modernity*

For many Aymara children, the online world represents modernity, learning, and connection beyond their communities. Limited access to schools, technology, and work opportunities drives young people's interest in digital spaces as an entry point to opportunity. Yet these aspirations coexist with **persistent structural barriers**, weak internet coverage, poor infrastructure, and limited investment in rural areas, which deepen exclusion (Ministerio de Educación, 2022). As one expert explained: "*The government prioritises cities; in the rural area, there is no diversification of technology*."[30]

Participants consistently linked this systemic exclusion to **migration towards urban centres**. Caregivers described how adolescents move to cities like El Alto or La Paz "to study" or "look for work". Such mobility, while driven by hope, can increase exposure to trafficking, online exploitation, and coercion, especially for children unfamiliar with urban environments or without access to protection services (ECPAT International, 2023). Children also recognised these risks. Several mentioned hearing about false job offers and deceptive online messages targeting adolescents seeking work or companionship.

**30.** Expert from the Special Force against Crime

This pattern highlights the **interconnection between rural and Indigenous identities**, which were often difficult to separate in practice. Participants rarely distinguished between the two, with parents often describing themselves simply as "*people from the countryside*."[31] In this context, being from a rural area and Indigenous identity overlapped, shaping similar barriers to education, connectivity, and protection. While Indigenous status may intensify exclusion through language and discrimination, the data suggest that these risks are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct, making it challenging to differentiate vulnerabilities or benefits that stem specifically from indigeneity versus rurality (IACHR, 2017).

### *Gender Norms, Silences and Unequal Protection*

**Gender norms** strongly shaped how both adults and children in Aymara communities understood OSEC risks. Participants consistently described online risks as something that primarily affected girls. In the focus groups, when asked about OSEC, children only gave examples of men contacting adolescent girls to make them fall in love and then abuse them.

This narrative **reinforces the belief that only girls are vulnerable**, leading to stricter control over daughters' internet use and less recognition of boys' exposure to online harm. Such views reproduce traditional gender hierarchies, positioning girls as needing protection and boys as naturally resilient. In practice, these beliefs deepen the digital divide. Girls' restricted access limits their ability to learn, communicate, and seek help online. Some adolescents said they would hesitate to report online abuse for fear of losing access altogether. This dynamic creates a cycle of silence, where girls remain unprotected precisely because of the fear of further restriction or blame, while boys' experiences of risk remain largely invisible.

Experts also highlighted how **stigma around sexuality and gendered expectations of behaviour affect both prevention and response**. Discussions of online harm are often avoided in families and schools due to discomfort with sexual topics. One expert noted, "*In addition, the stigma surrounding sexuality issues can make it difficult for children to report these situations*."[32] This silence prevents open communication and leaves children without accurate information about online grooming or consent. Similar patterns have been observed across Latin America, where social and cultural norms discourage open discussion of sexuality, perpetuating children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Castaneda, 2021). These findings mirror broader regional trends showing that **gendered protection strategies** often restrict girls while overlooking boys, reinforcing inequality rather than addressing underlying risks (Plan International, 2020; Moss et al., 2023).

### *Community Trust and Parallel Justice Systems*

In many Aymara communities, protection and conflict resolution are embedded in **systems of collective decision-making and local authority**. Families often turn first to community leaders, elders, or teachers rather than to state institutions when problems arise. This reliance on local structures reflects deep social trust and cultural traditions of mutual support, but it also exposes a gap when dealing with forms of harm that are new, less visible, or mediated by technology. Stakeholders explained that community justice mechanisms are not used to deal with digital forms of abuse. Experts observed that local leaders handle what they can see, meaning that online sexual exploitation is often perceived as external to community life and therefore not addressed. This limited understanding reflects the broader digital gap between urban and rural systems of justice and protection.

**31.** Parent from the Aymara community
**32.** Expert from the General Directorate for Combating Human Trafficking and Human Smuggling

Caregivers' interviews echoed this pattern of **distrust in local authority and hesitation toward formal reporting**. When asked why they thought Aymara children were at greater risk of OSEC than others, an expert shared, "*distrust of institutions, as I mentioned earlier, who prefer community justice, may be determining factors*."[33] Many parents said they would first seek help from a community representative or school before approaching government institutions, citing fear of discrimination, bureaucratic barriers, or a lack of culturally appropriate support. Experts also noted that official child-protection mechanisms are highly centralised in Bolivia: specialised police units, legal aid, and psychosocial services are concentrated in cities such as La Paz and El Alto. For rural Aymara families, reaching these services can mean travelling several hours, and at considerable cost.

Children and parents both described the **absence of local institutions** capable of responding to digital or sexual-exploitation cases. One group of adolescents said they had heard that victims of domestic violence had to go to the city of El Alto, which is 200 kilometres away, because the necessary services did not exist in their regions. This sense of distance, both physical and institutional, contributes to feelings of neglect and reinforces community-based problem-solving, even when these mechanisms lack the tools or mandate to address online abuse.

These patterns mirror broader findings across Latin America, where Indigenous and rural populations often rely on customary systems for child protection due to limited access to formal justice (IACHR, 2017; Plan International, 2020). Such systems can be protective in their emphasis on dialogue, collective accountability, and restorative resolution. However, without integration into national protection frameworks, they risk leaving online harms invisible and unaddressed.

Strengthening protection, therefore, requires **bridging the gap between community and formal systems**. Culturally adapted training for community leaders, teachers, and local organisations could help them recognise and respond to online exploitation, while establishing clear referral pathways to formal services. Using trusted communication channels, such as community radio, schools, and local assemblies, can help build awareness and demystify digital crimes. By connecting traditional protection practices with emerging forms of online harm, these efforts can ensure that communities remain trusted spaces of care while also becoming effective gateways to justice.

**33.** Expert from the Child and Adolescent Ombudsman's Office of El Alto

# Conclusion

# Conclusion:

## Layers of Risk and Protection in Indigenous Children's Lives

This study offers valuable insights into the risk and protection of Indigenous children of the Aymara community in Bolivia related to online sexual exploitation of children. The findings reveal both the opportunities the internet offers for connection and learning, and the structural barriers, cultural, infrastructural, and institutional, that heighten vulnerability. Indigenous children are not a homogeneous group online: their risks and protections vary by gender, socio-economic status, and family context, and are shaped by broader community norms and the unequal distribution of services. The socio-ecological model helps to illustrate how these risks and protections interact across layers of children's lives. The conclusions are presented below across each level of the model, with recommendations tailored to each layer (see Figure 1).

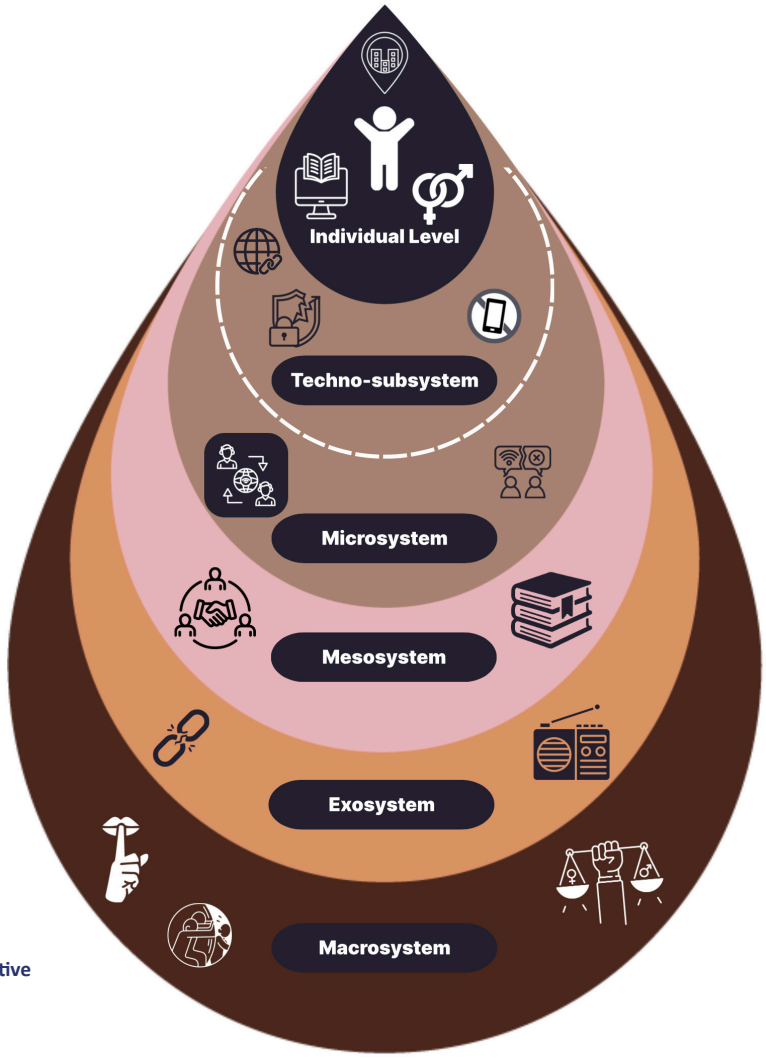



**Figure 1. Risk and protective factors for Indigenous children in Bolivia in the Socio-Ecological model**

At the **child level**, limited digital literacy, narrow understandings of online exploitation, and gendered perceptions of risk leave children without the tools to recognise or report harmful behaviour. While most adolescents use the internet for study, games, and social connection, few feel confident about protecting their privacy or identifying manipulation. Boys often perceive OSEC as a "girls' problem," and girls, in turn, fear losing online access if they disclose abuse. Strengthening digital literacy for both genders, and addressing the social norms that equate safety with silence, is key to meaningful protection.

In the **techno-subsystem**, structural inequalities in access to devices, internet coverage, and culturally relevant content continue to shape children's online experiences. Many children rely on borrowed phones or shared devices, while schools in rural areas often lack computers or stable connectivity. Ensuring affordable, reliable, and inclusive digital infrastructure is fundamental, but it must be paired with platforms and tools that children can understand and navigate safely in their own languages.

Within the **micro-system**, families remain children's primary source of care and guidance, yet parents' limited digital knowledge and resources often translate into restrictive rather than supportive strategies. Adults' sense of digital disempowerment reflects systemic exclusion from education and information. Parents want to protect their children but lack the means to do so. Building their confidence through community-based digital literacy programmes in Aymara and Spanish, using trusted channels such as schools and radio, can transform this care into empowerment rather than control.

At the **meso-system level**, the linkages between families, schools, and services were often weak. Parents relied on teachers for children's protection, but schools lacked updated curricula on digital literacy, while community-level services were under-resourced or distant. Within the **exo-system**, community radio emerged as an important protective channel for sharing safety messages in local languages, yet it was not consistently harnessed for child protection. Strengthening collaboration between parents, schools, NGOs, and community leaders is essential to ensure children receive coherent safety education and have clear referral pathways when risks arise.

The **macro-system**, where cultural norms, policy frameworks, and justice systems converge, most strongly determines whether protection is inclusive or exclusionary. Gendered norms that frame online risks as a threat only to girls, combined with stigma around sexuality, restrict open conversation and deepen the digital divide. Meanwhile, Indigenous families' reliance on community justice reflects both trust in traditional structures and the absence of accessible formal services. Travelling long distances to report abuse or seek help is often unfeasible, leading to informal resolutions that leave digital harms invisible. Integrating customary protection systems into national frameworks, through culturally adapted training and clear referral pathways, could bridge this gap between local trust and institutional response.

Across all levels, the findings reaffirm that **children are not only subjects of protection but active participants in it**. Aymara children are already navigating digital worlds, balancing curiosity with caution, and seeking spaces to learn and express themselves. Recognising their agency and involving them and their communities in designing responses ensures that protection does not mean restriction, but rather inclusion and empowerment. If the internet is to become a tool of equity rather than exclusion, protection efforts must begin with those who have been historically left behind. Inclusive, community-driven, and culturally grounded approaches are essential for Indigenous children in Bolivia to access the online world as a space of safety, identity, and opportunity.

## Box E: Recommendations

**For Children**

- Strengthen digital literacy and online safety skills, including recognising manipulative behaviour and protecting privacy.
- Create safe spaces for discussion (in schools or youth groups) where adolescents can share experiences without fear of losing access.

**For Families**

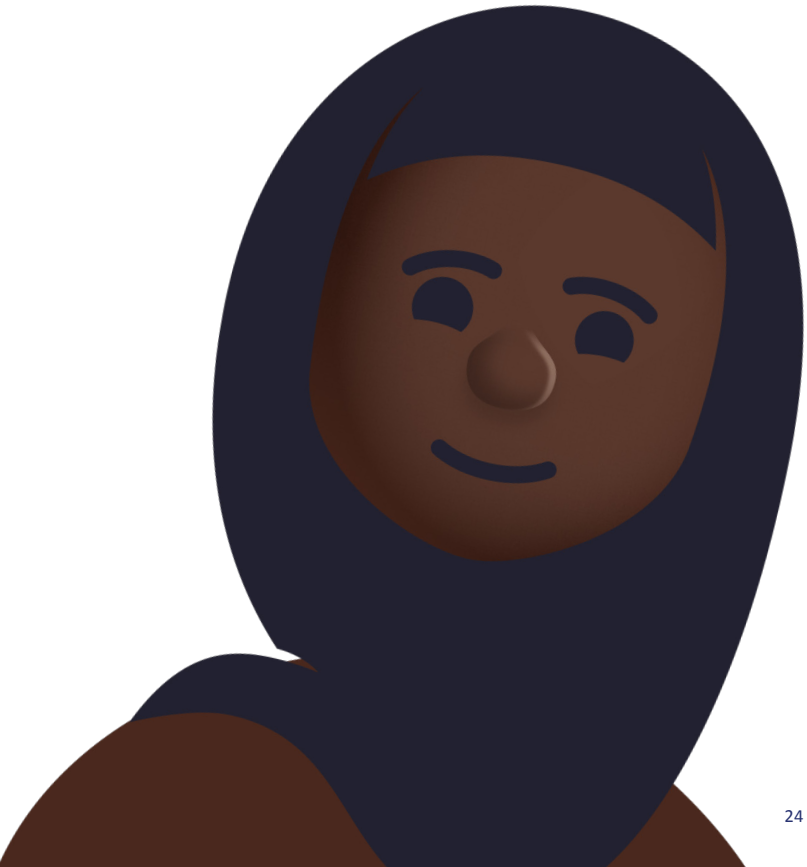
- Offer community-based digital literacy workshops for caregivers, delivered in Aymara and Spanish through trusted community structures.
- Strengthen caregiver confidence by providing clear, simple information on signs of online risk and where to seek help.

**For Schools & Community Services**

- Integrate basic online safety education into school activities.
- Improve coordination between schools, community leaders, and child protection organisations to establish clear help-seeking pathways.

**For Policy & Local Governance**

- Strengthen local reporting and support mechanisms so families do not need to travel long distances.
- Work with Indigenous authorities to align community protection practices with child protection standards.



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# VOICE IDENTITY project 2026

Report 2: Indigenous Children in Bolivia and Online Sexual Exploitation

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children