

DATA INSIGHT 1

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CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN 12 COUNTRIES IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA



About the *Data Insights* series from *Disrupting Harm*

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by the End Violence Fund through its Safe Online Initiative. The project is implemented by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF and generates national evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response.

So far, new evidence about online child sexual exploitation and abuse has been collected through Disrupting Harm in thirteen countries: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Viet Nam). Up to nine primary research activities were undertaken in each country including surveys and interviews with more than 13,000 children, as well as caregivers, and other professionals with child protection mandates. Thirteen country reports were published in 2022, presenting the consolidated findings of all activities conducted within each country, along with targeted recommendations stakeholders. Country reports can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF are used as the basis for the *Disrupting Harm* Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organisation(s) that produced each brief. While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

- Disrupting Harm data shows that across 12 countries, anywhere between 1-20% of children had experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.
- Generally, girls and boys are experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse in fairly equal proportions. There are no clear patterns by age, though more older children were noted in most of the 12 countries.
- Scaled to the population, data shows that tens of thousands, or even millions, of children in each country are being subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse each year.

For one of the research activities, *Disrupting Harm* gathered insights directly from children through a household survey, about a range of different experiences that can constitute online sexual exploitation and abuse. Nationally representative random samples¹ of approximately 1,000 children aged 12 to 17 were obtained in each of seven countries from Eastern and Southern Africa, and six countries in Southeast Asia between December 2020 and April 2021. Data is presented from 11,912 of those children in 12 countries, on their self-reported experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse.²

As children's online engagement increases globally, the incidents of violence that a considerable proportion of children are subjected to in settings such as schools, communities or families, are also occurring via digital

interactions. Sexual exploitation and abuse occur through social media, on gaming platforms or via direct digital messaging.

Digital technology can also facilitate in-person sexual exploitation and abuse against children and make addressing it more difficult. Offenders seeking to sexually exploit and abuse children today use

Defining online child sexual exploitation and abuse

Situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. It can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.





Figure 1: Estimated proportions of internet-using children aged 12–17 who experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed.

Country	Total	Boys	Girls	12-14	15-17
Philippines	20.2%	21.8%	19.0%	18.2%	22.0%
Uganda	18.0%	16.0%	20.6%	8.1%	22.1%
Mozambique	13.4%	11.3%	15.6%	13.1%	13.5%
Kenya	12.2%	13.4%	11.2%	8.9%	14.9%
Cambodia	11.4%	13.4%	9.2%	14.4%	8.5%
Ethiopia	10.6%	11.5%	8.8%	8.8%	11.2%
Thailand	9.2%	8.7%	9.5%	10.3%	8.2%
Namibia	9.1%	8.5%	9.7%	6.1%	11.4%
Malaysia	4.0%	3.9%	4.0%	3.7%	4.2%
Tanzania	3.6%	3.9%	3.1%	3.0%	4.0%
Indonesia	2.2%	2.1%	2.3%	2.4%	2.1%
Viet Nam	0.7%	0.5%	0.9%	0.8%	0.6%

technology to contact, groom or abuse children directly. Images and videos depicting in-person child sexual abuse can be accessed, sold and shared more widely and rapidly than ever before.

There is a growing sense of urgency to understand and tackle sexual exploitation and abuse of children, including abuse that occurs online or is facilitated by digital technologies. But the extent to which children in different countries experience online sexual exploitation and abuse is still unknown. Reliable data on its prevalence is scarce, partly because of the ethical and methodological challenges of measuring such a personal and sensitive experience, but also due to an inconsistent and often unclear understanding of how child sexual abuse manifests in the digital environment.

Reported child sexual abuse material⁴ circulated online is frequently used to estimate the scale of this problem. While this is a useful data point, quantifying reported child sexual abuse materials only captures materials that have already been identified, frequently includes older and recirculated materials and only quantifies sexual abuse that resulted in the production of abuse materials that were shared or stored online. In other words, it presents a limited picture of the extent to which children experience online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Children's experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse across 12 countries

In the *Disrupting Harm* household survey, children were asked whether they had experienced different actual or potential forms of online sexual exploitation and abuse.⁵ For this analysis only four clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse were included.

Children were asked if *in the past year*, they had experienced any of the following:

- 1. Someone offered you money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos
- **2.** Someone offered you money or gifts online to meet them in person to do something sexual
- **3.** Someone shared sexual images of you without your consent
- **4.** Someone threatened or blackmailed you online to engage in sexual activities

If a child responded 'Yes' to any one of these, the respondent was counted in the aggregated figure as having been subjected to a clear instance of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year. Aggregated results for the 12 countries are presented in Figure 1 above.

Disrupting Harm data show that across the 12 countries, anywhere between 1-20% of children had experienced at least one form of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.

While most countries ranged between 9 per cent to 20 per cent, four of the 12 countries showed substantially lower rates. The variation in results is likely related to what children in these countries are actually experiencing, but may also reflect more extensive under-reporting, or differences in how the surveys were conducted within some of the countries. Research is therefore encouraged that – like the *Disrupting Harm* approach – collects multiple sources of data alongside surveys to ensure the most valid representations of this sensitive topic.





Gender

Looking across the data from the 12 countries, there are no clear overall patterns in terms of gender differences.

Although slightly more boys reported sexual abuse in some countries and girls in others, the differences are minor, suggesting that generally, girls and boys are experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse in fairly equal proportions.

This result suggests the need for interventions that target all children, girls and boys alike. Specific interventions that are sensitive to boys and girls could also elevate effectiveness.

Age

In terms of age, the *Disrupting Harm* data for the African countries showed that proportionately more of 15-17-year-old children had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse compared with those aged 12-14 years. This pattern is seen in some of the Asian countries as well. However, it was not the case in Cambodia or Thailand, where it was more common for younger children aged 12-14 to report these experiences. This data should inform the different interventions that are necessary for different age groups, and as recommended throughout the *Disrupting Harm* national reports, tailored age-appropriate awareness-raising and education could be more effective.

Conclusions

Disrupting Harm data highlights that, in two thirds of the 12 countries analysed, between 9 per cent and 20 per cent of children reported that they had experienced at least one instance of clear online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to being surveyed. The estimates presented here are based on representative random samples, meaning that results are generalisable to national populations and can be scaled up by applying the proportions to census data.

Scaled estimates presented in the national reports produced by *Disrupting Harm* show that tens of thousands, or even millions, of children in each country are being subjected to severe instances of online sexual abuse each year.

Despite this sobering situation, pathways to effective action are evident. Governments in many of the countries where a *Disrupting Harm* assessment was conducted are already progressing in their national prevention and responses to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. With the addition of the comprehensive *Disrupting Harm* evidence and suggested recommendations, these governments will be able to take further action to tackle this critical issue.

The *Disrupting Harm* project highlights four critical challenges and recommendations for all countries involved:

- 1. Awareness is low. Invest in awareness raising campaigns that increase awareness of what online child sexual exploitation and abuse is, how to spot it, and how to seek help. These campaigns should be evidence-based, developed in consultation with children, and consistently evaluated for their reach and impact.
- 2. Cooperation between internet service providers and law enforcement is not always working well. Strengthening collaboration requires creating pathways for processing law enforcement data requests, training internet service provider staff to respond to data requests for ongoing cases and detecting and removing related content on their servers, as well as providing law enforcement authorities with associated information to help identify offenders and victims.
- 3. Children rarely report their experiences to the police or helplines; they mostly disclose to people they know and trust. Create resources to help people in the community provide support and facilitate formal disclosure and reporting. Programmes where people in the community are trained on what the reporting process involves, and how to listen and support children disclosing abuse, can be beneficial to those who have experienced these crimes. In parallel, efforts need to be made to strengthen trust between children and the public institutions and officials meant to support them, as otherwise children may remain unlikely to report.





4. Frontline workers, law enforcement and justice professionals often lack capacity, knowledge and resources to provide comprehensive and child-centered support to children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse. Invest in the knowledge of police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, statutory social workers, and frontline social workers on this topic. Regularly occuring, skill-based trainings should be mandatory, evaluated, and continuously updated in line with emerging evidence on children's experiences, digital development, and patterns of offending.

It is expected that many of the challenges identified through the first set of *Disrupting Harm* national assessments are present in other parts of the world, but with important differences both in children's experiences, and in each country's capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.

This reinforces the need for high-quality, comprehensive, national evidence-generation efforts to determine the extent to which children are exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved.

Suggested citation:

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- 1. While the quality of the samples obtained was high in all countries, the challenges of researching private and sensitive experiences inevitably results in some under-reporting. This means that the true proportion of children experiencing online sexual exploitation and abuse is likely a bit higher. It is suggested that the reader interprets the estimates as a good approximation of the extent to which internet-using children in these countries are subjected to the forms of online sexual exploitation and abuse presented here.
- 2. This represents 11,912 of the total children across 12 countries (South Africa was excluded from the analysis due to methodological differences with the tool used which prohibited collective analysis). Data were collected between December 2020 to April 2021. The sample of approximately 1,000 children in each country was a stratified random cluster sample with random walk within clusters. Children were randomly selected at household level if they were between the ages of 12-17 and had used the internet at least once in the past three months.
- 3. ECPAT International (2019). Ethical Considerations in Research on Sexual Exploitation involving Children. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- 4. Child sexual abuse material', refers to various forms of materials photos, videos, audio, any other recording or representation that depict acts of sexual abuse and/or focus on the genitalia of a child. It is important to note that child sexual abuse material is the preferred term, subsuming older terminology such as 'child pornography'. Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Thailand: ECPAT International, 40.
- 5. The *Disrupting Harm* household survey asks about a range of experiences that can constitute child sexual exploitation and abuse. By actual forms, we refer to instances that clearly constitute sexual exploitation and abuse. By potential forms, we refer to experiences that in some cases constitute sexual exploitation and abuse but in other cases might not; for example, children can be asked to share sexual images with someone else online by an offender intending to groom them, or by a romantic partner. The latter is not necessarily part of the *Disrupting Harm* definition of online sexual exploitation and abuse, unless the images are further shared without permission, or used to blackmail or threaten the child.

