THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE AND IN-PERSON CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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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 developed together with national 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 seven countries:

- **Children who experience in-person sexual violence are at far higher risk of also experiencing online child sexual exploitation and abuse.**
- **Children who are more vulnerable to in-person sexual violence are also more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and abuse – in some cases by the same offender.**
- **A scarcity of data remains on the precise links between online and in-person sexual violence.**

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 samples of approximately 1,000 children aged 12 to 17 were obtained in seven countries from Eastern and Southern Africa, and six countries in Southeast Asia between December 2020 and April 2021.[1] This brief presents children's self-reported experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse across seven different countries. The analysis is based on a sample of around 7,000 internet-using children from Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Uganda, Cambodia and the Philippines, collected as part of the *Disrupting Harm* project.[2]

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.

1. 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). 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.

2. These seven countries were selected from the countries included in the Disrupting Harm project on the basis of having sufficient incidence of online and in-person violence in the sample to generate statistically robust findings on the links between the two phenomena.

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Children face risk of violence in digital spaces, as well as in school or within families or communities. Bullying, hate-speech, grooming and sexual exploitation and abuse now occur via social media, online gaming platforms or direct digital messaging.

Children's experiences of violence in digital spaces are connected to violence in other contexts. For many, online bullying is a continuation of bullying they experience in their daily lives at home, at school or in their neighbourhoods. Some children are asked or coerced – at times by a single offender – to share self-generated sexual images online, in-person or in both spaces. Offenders also use social media or instant messaging to push children to meet them in-person, facilitating sexual abuse. While there is a scarcity of data about how online and in-person violence against children are related, these links matter for how to design prevention programmes and response strategies.

Children across seven countries were asked if – in the past year – they had encountered someone who offered them money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos; or been asked by someone online to meet in person to do something sexual; or if someone had shared sexual images of them without their consent; or if they had been threatened or blackmailed online to engage in sexual activities. If a child had any of these experiences in the past year, they were asked if they knew who the offender was the last time it happened.[3]

Children were also asked questions about experiencing in-person sexual violence at home, with peers, at school or in their community.[4] **In all countries, children who had experienced in-person sexual violence were at much higher risk of also experiencing online child sexual exploitation and abuse** (see Figure 1).
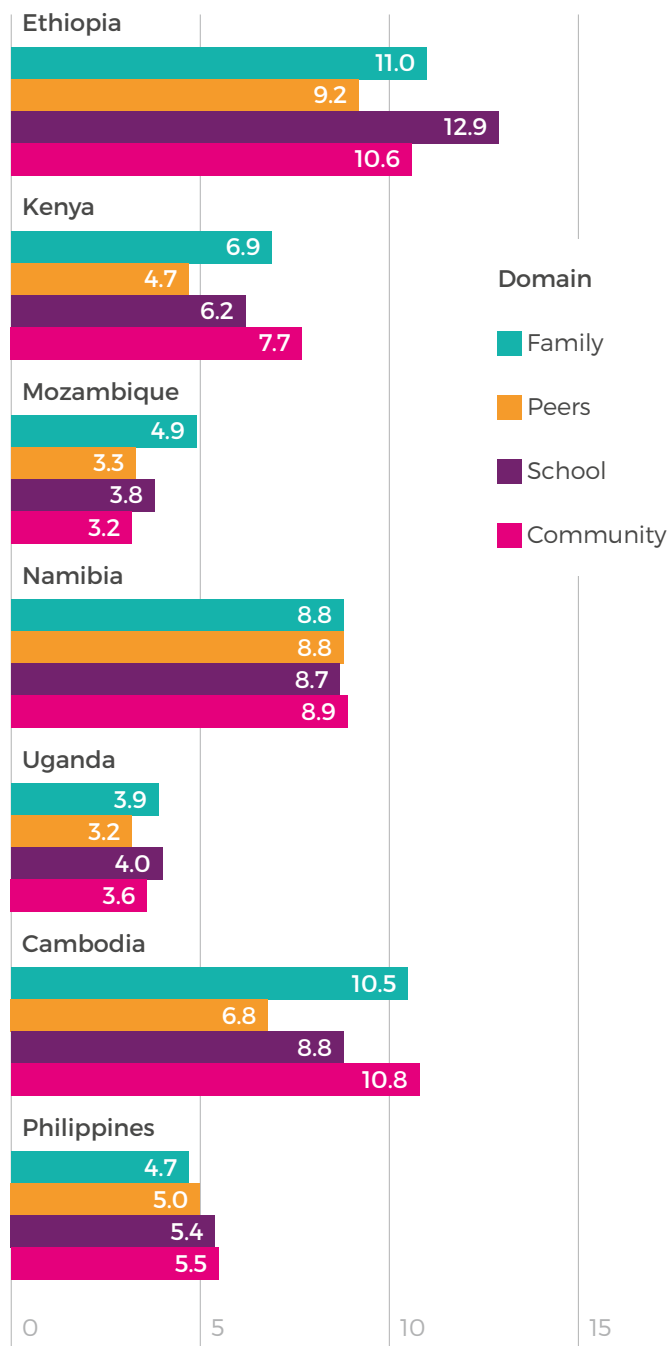
The strongest effect was in Ethiopia where children who had experienced in-person sexual violence at school were more than ten times as likely to have also experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse.

Even in Uganda, where the patterns were weakest, children who had experienced in-person sexual violence in different domains were around three times as likely to experience online sexual exploitation and abuse.

Figure 1: Links between in-person sexual violence in different domains and online sexual exploitation and abuse, controlling for age and gender in seven countries
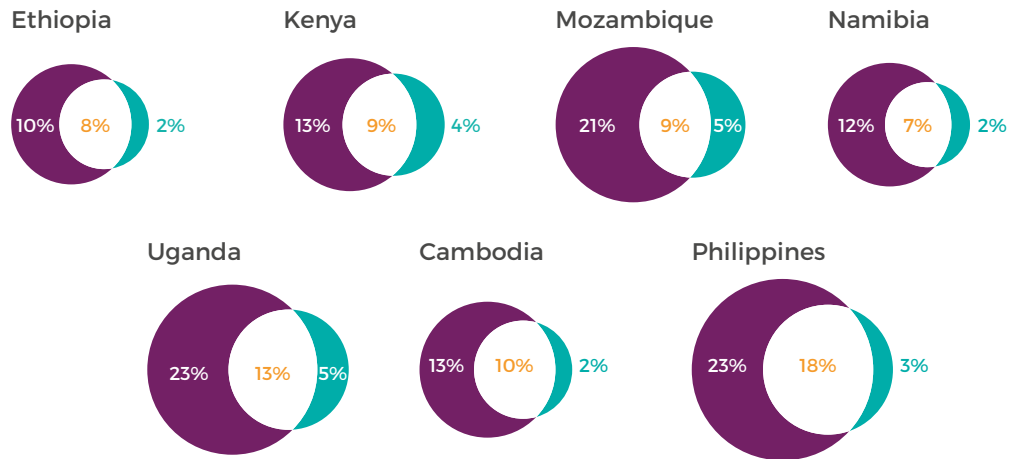

Increased risk of online sexual exploitation and abuse (number of times)

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Put differently, online sexual exploitation and abuse appears to primarily affect a subset of children who are *also* experiencing in-person sexual violence. In all seven countries, only a small portion of children who experienced online sexual exploitation had not also experienced some form of in-person sexual violence (see Figure 2).

However, the timing of these events is unknown. Children surveyed could have been subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse online before or after they experienced it in-person. It could also be that a single perpetrator would target a child both online and in-person, in tandem.

Figure 2: Overlaps between online and in-person sexual abuse

- ⬤ Offline only
- ◻ Both online and offline
- ⬤ Online only

Ethiopia — 10% | 8% | 2%

Kenya — 13% | 9% | 4%

Mozambique — 21% | 9% | 5%

Namibia — 12% | 7% | 2%

Uganda — 23% | 13% | 5%

Cambodia — 13% | 10% | 2%

Philippines — 23% | 18% | 3%

What needs to change in light of this data?

1. **The impacts of technology-facilitated sexual violence should be taken into account in the overall child protection response.** Online sexual exploitation and abuse is strongly related to other forms of sexual violence that children experience in their lives. It should not be viewed as separate. Children more vulnerable to in-person sexual violence are also more vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

2. **The overlap between online and in-person sexual violence suggests these harms should be addressed together.** However, we need evidence to understand the precise links.

In some cases, the overlap might be caused by a shared vulnerability, while in others, it could be a consequence of the many ways in which digital technology can facilitate in-person sexual violence against children.

3. **Caregivers, communities, educators and other professionals need up-to-date information and support on child sexual abuse and how it can be perpetrated through technology.** This should dispel common misconceptions about sexual abuse, including the misconception that online abuse is not a serious form of abuse.

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