



DISRUPTING HARM

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EVIDENCE-BASED ACTIONS TO END ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



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The internet is a way for children to access education and knowledge, to maintain social connections and to have a creative outlet. But these opportunities continue to be undermined by a serious risk of harm: data from 13 countries show that up to **20 per cent** of 12–17-year-olds had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in a period of just one year.¹ Scaled to the general population, this represents millions of children being sexually exploited or abused.

Disrupting Harm research suggests that most online sexual exploitation and abuse happens on social media platforms.²

In many countries, the perpetrator is most often someone the child already knows: a friend or acquaintance, a family member or even a romantic partner.³ Whether a stranger or someone known to the child, perpetrators use digital technologies to contact children, to groom and coerce them to engage in sexual acts, and to livestream their abuse.

Too often, **caregivers feel unprepared to help their children navigate these new online risks and harms,** especially older caregivers who do not always use the internet themselves.⁴

Online sexual exploitation and abuse has severe consequences for the mental health and well-being of victims. Children who experience online sexual exploitation and abuse are two to four times more likely to self-harm or to have suicidal thoughts, and experience higher rates of anxiety.⁵

In the midst of this crisis, our protection systems are failing children. One in every three children that experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse did not tell anyone about it. Those who did disclose were most likely to tell a friend or sibling, but only 3 per cent of victims reported this crime to the police or called a helpline.⁶

Our knowledge of online child sexual exploitation and abuse – where and how it happens, who is involved and what the consequences are for victims – continues to lag behind. Offenders operate with impunity, sometimes due to weak legislation and gaps in its implementation, at other times due to inadequately resourced law enforcement capacity or insufficient action from the technology sector.⁷



WE MUST ACT NOW TO CREATE A SAFER DIGITAL FUTURE FOR ALL CHILDREN.

WHAT ACTION IS NEEDED TO MAKE THE DIGITAL WORLD SAFE FOR CHILDREN?

With so much at stake, the global community needs to urgently **INVEST**, **ACT** and **EDUCATE** to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The response needs to be multi-sectoral, with shared responsibilities between governments, industry, civil society and communities. This brief provides **11 key recommendations for countries** to strengthen prevention and response to online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

INVEST

In the child protection system



CHALLENGE

Many countries **lack the required budgetary resources** to address online child sexual abuse, and violence against children more broadly. Public financing for child protection is often insufficient and supplemented through development partners and support from civil society organizations. This leads to fragmentation and accountability gaps, negatively impacting services for children, including in the social services, law enforcement and justice sectors.⁸

SOLUTION

Governments should increase public spending on child protection. Investment is necessary to support policy development, legal reform and analysis of implementation gaps; recurring training for the front-line and justice workforce on online violence; and education for children and parents about online risk and harms, including how to report these crimes and seek help.

In research and administrative data



CHALLENGE

In countries with limitations in record keeping – or with known legislative gaps in defining or criminalizing different forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse – **law enforcement data can be difficult to obtain or is limited** to in-person child sexual abuse offences. Helplines sometimes record information about online sexual abuse cases, but this varies depending on the capacity and resources of the helpline.

SOLUTION

Governments should invest in systematic recording and implement standardized classification of violence against children, including cases of violence that are facilitated by technology. This includes administrative data from law enforcement, helplines, and other service providers, as well as population-based surveys. Private sector companies (especially social media and gaming platforms, financial institutions and internet service providers) should also standardize the way they record cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse on their platforms and share anonymized information with law enforcement and the public. Governments and private companies alike should fund independent, high-quality research on children's experiences of online sexual exploitation and abuse, and gaps in the national response.



In child-friendly justice

CHALLENGE

In several countries, child victims involved in the formal justice process had to recount their abuse several times. This led to **feelings of stress and anxiety**, potentially resulting in re-traumatization. Language used in courts was at times too complicated and made it difficult for children to understand what was being said or decided about their cases. In some cases, children did not receive adequate legal aid or were not provided any financial support to participate in the justice process and court proceedings.⁹

SOLUTION

Streamline the justice process for children. Establish multi-sectoral services for child victims of violence to provide an effective and child-friendly setting for victims, eliminate the need for victims to recount their abuse multiple times, and facilitate collaboration and coordination between support services. Ensure that children can participate in court – with language support if needed – and support them financially and psychologically to do so.



In dedicated law enforcement capacity

CHALLENGE

Law enforcement units **do not always have the operational assistance, training, human resources and equipment** needed to proactively identify and handle cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. In several countries, law enforcement units were not connected to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database.

SOLUTION

Establish and equip dedicated police units to identify, record and handle cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and put systems in place to monitor the implementation of legislation related to online child sexual exploitation and abuse.¹⁰ Train law enforcement on child-friendly procedures and ensure they are followed. Connect to the ICSE database for better cooperation with the global police community on cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.



DISRUPTING HARM IS A MULTI-COUNTRY RESEARCH PROJECT FUNDED BY SAFE ONLINE FOR \$15 MILLION



IN 2021, SAFE ONLINE PROVIDED A TOTAL OF \$10 MILLION IN FUNDING TO NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS to leverage Disrupting Harm's data and recommendations to mobilize country-level action.

ACT



To strengthen national coordination

CHALLENGE

Coordination between government agencies involved in tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse is often insufficient, especially in countries without dedicated working groups for addressing violence against children generally or online child sexual exploitation and abuse specifically. This can lead to fragmented responses and a lack of accountability.

SOLUTION

Identify a lead government ministry or agency to coordinate national efforts to prevent and respond to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Assign responsibilities and allocate dedicated resources to increase collaboration amongst ministries/agencies and reduce duplication of work. Identify ways to involve civil society organizations, academia and industry where needed.

To streamline systems



CHALLENGE

Most children who are subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have also experienced sexual violence in person.¹¹ Yet, interviews with key stakeholders revealed that **online sexual exploitation and abuse is often seen as abuse that only happens in the digital environment, leading to inadequate prevention and response.**

SOLUTION

Embed responses to online child sexual exploitation and abuse within broader child protection and violence prevention systems. Use existing knowledge about violence prevention and response to inform interventions for online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Update professional guidance and standard operating procedures and policies that deal with child sexual exploitation and abuse to account for digital dimensions. Front-line social workers, legal professionals and police officers need adequate training and operative assistance to handle the unique aspects of online child sexual abuse cases that may require a specialized response.



1/3 CHILDREN THAT EXPERIENCED ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE DID NOT TELL ANYONE ABOUT IT



To adopt & implement better legislation

CHALLENGE

While countries generally outlaw possession and production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), many lack key legislation on online grooming of children for sexual purposes and livestreaming of sexual abuse that is in line with international standards.¹² There are gaps in legislative protections for victims and witnesses, and in procedures for the investigation, storage and preservation of electronic evidence. Even in countries with strong legislation, **weak implementation, monitoring and evaluation of existing laws and policies** remains a key challenge.

SOLUTION

To secure and streamline prosecution of cases, adopt and implement **updated and comprehensive legislation** on child sexual exploitation and abuse, including online. Align national legislation with international standards, including the criminalization of technology-facilitated crimes such as online grooming and livestreaming of child sexual abuse and the protection of child victims and witnesses.¹³ This will help ensure victim-centred investigations and prosecutions. Ensure adequate resources and budget are allocated to implement the new legislation and to evaluate the effectiveness of new laws.

To increase transparency and accountability of social media platforms



CHALLENGE

Over half of children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse reported that the most recent incident happened on social media. Meta-owned platforms (Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp) were by far the most common platforms where children were subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, in some countries accounting for over 90 per cent of cases. While this is likely a reflection of the relative popularity of these platforms, it highlights that social media companies – particularly those with a large user base – need to do more to protect children.

SOLUTION

Increase transparency and accountability of social media platforms for the content and experiences on their sites. All platforms should work towards strengthening their prevention measures, detection mechanisms and reporting of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Platforms should be mandated to act expeditiously in cooperation with key actors such as law enforcement officials. Social media companies should make formal reporting mechanisms within their platforms clear and accessible to children. These mechanisms should be developed in consultation with children and young people and should detail in age-appropriate and child-friendly terms what happens after children submit a report. Social media companies should also be required to conduct child-rights due diligence – in particular impact assessments – and report on the steps they are taking to protect children.

EDUCATE



Caregivers to support children's internet use

CHALLENGE

A substantial proportion of **caregivers feel ill-equipped to guide their children's internet use**. Results show that **31–61** per cent of caregivers across the countries where this research was conducted felt that they knew less about the internet than their children. This was especially true for older caregivers: 49 per cent of caregivers below the age of 40 used the internet every month, compared to only 12 per cent of caregivers aged 50 and above.

SOLUTION

Governments, NGOs, private sector companies and schools should **provide caregivers with trainings** on the digital environment, improve their digital skills and inform them about approaches to online safety, so they can better support their children's internet use. This is especially important for older caregivers.

Children about OCSEA



CHALLENGE

In almost all 13 countries, **perpetrators were more likely to be someone the child already knew**.¹⁴ The most common perpetrator was an older friend or acquaintance (aged 18+), followed by a friend under 18. While unknown people still present a considerable risk, especially for children in some countries, the danger is often closer to home.

SOLUTION

Develop evidence-based programmes that teach children to recognize online sexual exploitation and abuse and how to stay safe, integrating content about online dangers within general sexual violence prevention. Provide all children with age- and culturally appropriate information about sexual and reproductive health; consent; personal boundaries; predatory and harmful behaviours; risks and responsibilities when taking, sending and receiving sexual images; and how to say 'no' to others.¹⁵ Perpetrators take advantage of gaps in children's knowledge relating to sex, relationships and healthy boundaries.¹⁶

Children about where to seek help



CHALLENGE

In approximately **one in three** cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, the child **did not tell anyone about what happened**.¹⁷ Nearly half of those children said it was because they did not know where to go or who to tell. Police or helplines were only called in 3 per cent of cases.

SOLUTION

Raise awareness that existing helplines can be a source of information about how to support children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, and train law enforcement, front-line service providers and justice professionals to provide a child-friendly response. In the long term, **foster an environment where children are comfortable to ask questions and raise concerns** about sex, relationships or consent without embarrassment or shame.¹⁸ Children need to learn that it is never their fault if they are subjected to violence and abuse; their disclosures need to be met with understanding and handled with care and confidentiality in line with laws and protocols for child protection and safeguarding.

WHAT IS DISRUPTING HARM?

Disrupting Harm is a multi-country research project funded by Safe Online for \$15 million. The project is designed and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF, and generates evidence to assess the scope and nature of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The purpose is to understand children’s experiences and perspectives, as well as how national systems are responding to the issue. The project aims to use this evidence to provide tailored roadmaps for each country to build a more robust national response.

Between 2019 and 2022, data was collected in

13 COUNTRIES

ACROSS TWO REGIONS

(Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia).ⁱ



In this first iteration, the project engaged a variety of stakeholders, including over



Disrupting Harm evidence provides recommendations for government, civil society and parents, with a focus on creating change within child protection systems nationally and globally. This includes strengthening legislation and equipping law enforcement, the justice sector and the frontline service workforce to better respond to cases of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Additionally, the recommendations highlight the responsibilities of industry actors, especially social media providers, in making their platforms safe for children.

In 2022, a second iteration of this project was funded. The second wave of research includes 12 countries across Eastern Europe, Latin American and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia. Findings from these countries will be published in 2025 and 2026.

ⁱ National studies were conducted in: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda; and Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam.

This brief provides insights based on research conducted by Disrupting Harm between 2019 and 2021. The recommendations are limited to areas involved in the study and do not provide the full scope of action required to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse. For more information on building a comprehensive national response, see the [WeProtect Global Alliance's Model National Response](#).

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