

DISRUPTING HARM IN ARMENIA

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

1. What is this report about and what is its significance?

This is Armenia's first national study on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Drawing on the voices of children, caregivers, frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement, it uncovers a stark reality: this form of abuse is happening across the country, and most of it remains hidden.

The study highlights how stigma and victim-blaming lie at the heart of this issue. Children are often blamed or shamed for the abuse or exploitation they were subjected to, leaving them isolated, unsupported and silenced. This silence protects perpetrators and allows abuse to continue unchecked. Breaking this silence is critical. The report calls for nationwide action to challenge harmful norms, strengthen laws, and create systems that protect – not punish – children who experience technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

2. What is Disrupting Harm?

Disrupting Harm is a pioneering global initiative launched in 2019 to uncover how digital technologies are used to exploit and abuse children – and to equip countries with the evidence needed to stop this violence. Funded by Safe Online and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Innocenti, the project has already generated critical insights in 13 countries. By 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in **25 countries** across six regions.

In each country, *Disrupting Harm* maps how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happens, identifies risk and protection factors, and provides an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are already shaping stronger laws, prevention campaigns, and child protection systems around the world.

3. What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – such as grooming, image-sharing, sexual extortion, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can happen entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, abuse occurs entirely in-person but is recorded and shared digitally.

The Disrupting Harm survey looked at the following examples:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content
- Use of fake, AI-generated sexual images
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity
- Livestreamed sexual abuse or exploitation

4. How widespread is this issue in Armenia?

According to the household survey, **5% of children aged 12–17 in Armenia had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year**. Scaled up to the overall population of 12-17-year-old internet-using children in Armenia, **this represents around 9,000 children**. In **71%** of cases, the exploitation and abuse occurred entirely online (e.g. via social media or online games). Yet, these numbers likely underestimate the issue, as shame and fear often prevent disclosure, and only a limited set of behaviours were surveyed (listed above).

The findings underline the urgent need for:

- **Building on the “Healthy Lifestyle” courses at schools to include comprehensive relationship and sexuality education** that helps children recognize and report unsafe situations. By updating these to include evidence-informed and age-appropriate approaches for how to build positive and healthy relationships, bodily autonomy and integrity, and consent; and how to apply these to online interactions.
- **Establishing safe national reporting mechanisms** that children trust and can use confidentially.
- **Developing educational campaigns** to raise awareness and tackle stigma and victim-blaming within communities across Armenia.

5. Who carries out this abuse? Are strangers the main threat?

Contrary to common belief, in most cases – **57% – children were exploited and abused by someone they already knew**: peers, acquaintances, or even family members. A quarter of cases (25%) involved another child who displayed harmful sexual behaviors. This shows the importance of prevention and education – not just fear of strangers online.

Perpetrators also often exploit **social stigma** or fear to coerce victims, for example using shared interests or emotional connection to build trust. This manipulation can make it hard for children to recognise the abuse for what it is. Relationship and consent education, both in-person and online, must be part of school curricula to help children understand boundaries and recognize abuse.

6. Where does this abuse typically happen?

Most cases of abuse began on popular social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Snapchat, followed by TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram. In many cases, perpetrators shifted interactions across platforms – starting a conversation on one app and continuing the abuse on another one for private communication with the child – making it more difficult for children to report the abuse. Despite the role social media plays, **Armenia’s laws currently do not require internet providers or platforms to detect, block, or report child sexual abuse material, nor to retain data for investigations** – making it harder to prosecute offenders.

To address these gaps, the report calls for:

- **Legal obligations for platforms** to report and remove child sexual abuse material.
- **Data retention frameworks** (with strong privacy safeguards) to preserve critical evidence.
- **Accountability mechanisms** for online companies to ensure child safety.

7. Why don’t children disclose or report their abuse?

Over half (53%) of children who were subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse **did not tell anyone** about it. None of the children surveyed reported the abuse to police, and few even told a caregiver. **Shame or embarrassment (35%)**

and not knowing where to report or who to tell (22%) were common reasons children shared for not disclosing. Alarming, 90% of parents surveyed believed that if a child shares a sexual image, it is their own fault if it is shared with others. This **victim-blaming** and the **fear of stigma and negative reactions by parents and their communities**, stops children from coming forward and **keeps abuse hidden**.

The report recommends national campaigns to tackle harmful norms and attitudes and to train parents, teachers, frontline workers and justice professionals on how to respond supportively and without judgment.

8. What are the impacts of this abuse on children?

The effects of this abuse are serious and long-lasting. Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were **twelve times more likely to attempt suicide or experience suicidal thoughts**. Many suffered anxiety, isolation, and ongoing fear that images will resurface online. Survivors often faced blame and exclusion from schools, communities, and even their own families. Breaking stigma and providing **trauma-informed care** are essential. The report urges the establishment of a **nationwide network of trauma-informed child psychologists** and establishing stable funding and career **incentives to retain professionals in public services**.

9. How do the findings from Armenia compare with other countries in the region / globally?

These findings are consistent with trends seen in the other three countries in the region involved in the study (Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), as well as with data emerging from Disrupting Harm research across 25 countries globally.

At least one in ten children have been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and – both in Armenia and globally – **the perpetrator is most often someone the child already knows**, such as friends, romantic partners, acquaintances or family members, rather than strangers. **Across the region, almost half of affected children did not tell anyone what happened to them, and in Armenia this silence is heightened by particularly severe stigma, shame and victim-blaming within communities**, which further isolates children and their families. These patterns highlight the urgent need for child-centric reporting channels and supportive social norms that empower, rather than punish, those who experience this form of abuse. As in other countries within the study, **most cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse took place via Meta platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram)**, underscoring the responsibility of major technology companies to strengthen safeguards and reporting mechanisms for children.

10. How can parents, caregivers and the wider community help?

Children need empathy and support – not blame or punishment. Framing children's online actions as risk-seeking or a result of hypersexuality, rather than signs of vulnerability or adolescent sexual development, shift accountability away from perpetrators and deepen children's self-blame, reinforcing the stigma that keeps children silent. In many communities, concerns about honour and reputation mean abuse is treated as a family disgrace rather than harm to a child. This led to children and their families being isolated, blamed, or even forced to relocate. **Parents and caregivers can break this cycle by creating safe, judgment-free spaces where children feel able to speak openly**. Listening, believing, and seeking professional support when needed are vital first steps. Communities must challenge harmful norms and stand with children – not against them.

11. How can Armenian law be strengthened to address this issue?

While Armenian law has made progress, significant legal gaps remain.

The report calls for amendments to align with international standards by:

- **Expanding the definition of online grooming** to all children under 18, and to include cases with no in-person meeting proposed or planned.
- **Criminalizing livestreaming** of child sexual abuse, including accessing or viewing it.
- **Explicitly criminalizing technology-facilitated sexual extortion.**
- **Updating definitions** of child sexual abuse material to include digitally generated (including AI-generated) and non-visual content.

In addition, the report urges reforms to **protect child victims in justice processes**, such as by amending the **Code of Criminal Procedure** to:

- Prevent direct contact between victims and perpetrators.
- Introduce child-centric intermediation systems where psychologists or lawyers filter questions to reduce re-traumatizing the child.

12. What changes are needed in the justice system?

Justice professionals often lack specialized tools and training to handle digital evidence or child-sensitive cases.

The study recommends:

- Connecting Armenia to **INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) Database.**
- Providing **specialized, ongoing training** for police, prosecutors, and judges on handling digital evidence and child protection.
- Ensuring **equal access to training and tools** outside urban centers.

These measures will help bring perpetrators to justice while safeguarding victims' rights and wellbeing.

13. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children. By reporting responsibly, media can help shift public attitudes and raise awareness while protecting victims' privacy.

The study calls for:

- The Commission on Television and Radio, Media Ethics Observatory and policymakers to develop **ethical media reporting guidelines** and training for journalists.
- Journalists and the media to avoid victim-blaming language and protect children's identities.
- Reporting on child sexual abuse and exploitation to highlight the systemic issues – not the individual "shame".

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