

DISRUPTING HARM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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 report, *Disrupting Harm in North Macedonia*, is the first nationally representative study of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. The report draws on a household survey with 1,005 internet-using children (aged 12-17 years) and 1,005 of their parents or guardians, as well as interviews with young people (16-24 years-old) subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse before the age of 18, frontline workers, justice professionals and law enforcement. The findings reveal a stark reality: this abuse is widespread, mostly hidden, and deeply embedded in children's everyday lives and relationships.

By documenting these realities, the report provides crucial evidence to strengthen prevention, improve reporting and justice processes, hold technology platforms accountable, and expand access to survivor-centred services. It underscores the urgent need for coordinated action across government, civil society, tech companies, and families in North Macedonia to better protect children and uphold their rights in the digital age.

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 initiative has already generated critical insights in 13 countries. By the end of 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in 25 countries across six regions.

In North Macedonia, data was collected between 2024 and 2025, mapping how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs, identifying risk and protection factors, and providing an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are [already shaping stronger laws](#), prevention campaigns, and child protection systems in other countries where the research has been carried out.

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

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse describes any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse where technology is used – including in contacting children, grooming, coercion, image-sharing, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can occur 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 survey looked at the following examples:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex

- Requests for sexual content
- Fake sexual images created through AI
- Sharing of sexual images of the child without their permission or threats thereof
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity

4. How widespread is this issue in North Macedonia?

According to the household survey 1 in 10 children (10%) aged 12–17 who use the internet in North Macedonia, had been subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in just one year. This number is further likely to be an underestimate, given the stigma surrounding sexual violence (documented both by this study and many other studies on sexual abuse) and children's reluctance to disclose.

5. Who are children abused by?

Contrary to common assumptions, the study revealed that nearly 4 in 5 cases (78%) involved someone the child already knew – friends, former or current intimate partner or crush, acquaintances and even family members. Only 5% of cases involved strangers. In many instances (16%), children could not or did not want to identify the perpetrator(s).

6. Where and how does this abuse typically happen?

Children are exposed on the platforms they use every day. More than half (52%) of all instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involved social media. Almost a third (30%) took place via online games. The top apps where

children in North Macedonia were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were Instagram (76%), Snapchat (55%), TikTok (51%), WhatsApp (40%), Facebook (34%), YouTube (29%), followed by X (formerly Twitter) (21%).

The findings show that while digital platforms allow perpetrators to have easier access to children, technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is often connected to familiar physical spaces, including schools, homes, and peer networks. Interviews with professionals and young people subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as children in North Macedonia reveal that abuse can follow a continuum, from grooming and coercion to in-person abuse. Perpetrators may build trust, exploit emotional dependency or misuse positions of authority.

When sexual content is recorded or shared, the harm can continue long after the initial incident, with children re-exposed and harmed every time their images are reshared or used to threaten them.

7. Who is most affected?

The survey found that boys and girls in North Macedonia were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at similar rates, with no significant differences by urban or rural residence, digital skills or parental education.

However, despite extensive recruitment efforts, no boys or young men came forward to participate in the qualitative interviews, limiting insight into boys' experiences and support needs. Their absence may also reflect barriers to disclosure including stigma, harmful norms around masculinity, and fear of not being believed, which can discourage reporting and help-seeking.

8. What is the impact on children's lives?

The impacts of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse extend beyond the incident. These impacts can be enduring and continue to affect children in new environments or long after the exploitation or abuse.

Children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were 11x more likely to indicate that they had engaged in self-harm and 12x more likely to indicate they had experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviours than children who had not been subjected to these forms of violence. They also suffered from higher levels of anxiety. These findings underline the need for timely, trauma-informed and sustained mental health and psychosocial support.

Frontline workers and justice professionals described children affected by this abuse as experiencing shame, loss of control, sleep difficulties, stress and anxiety, particularly where sexual content remained online indefinitely. Many children blamed themselves, often because of internalized social norms and victim-blaming attitudes. Child protection professionals must clearly communicate that responsibility lies with perpetrators and the systems that enable the abuse - not with the child."

9. Do children report or tell anyone about this abuse?

According to the survey findings, over 8 in 10 children (88%) in North Macedonia who were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation in the previous year told someone about it. This is higher than in many other countries where this research has been carried out.

Yet, 9% of the children surveyed did not tell anyone. Professionals and young people described how shame, fear of judgment, discomfort and taboo

around discussing sex and sexuality, and past experiences of not being believed can make it harder to speak up about technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Children most often told their mothers or female caregivers (23%), friends (21%), or siblings (21%). Children should never be expected to bear responsibility for preventing or responding to exploitation or abuse. However, these findings highlight the importance of ensuring that children know how to respond when peers seek help and where to turn for support from trusted adults and services.

Despite 88% of children reporting that they disclosed to someone, only 1% of children made an official report to the police or a social worker. Shame and stigma around sexual violence, limited knowledge of reporting processes and a lack of trust in institutions were identified as key reasons why children and their families might be reluctant to make a formal report.

10. What happens when children and young people seek justice?

The legal framework in North Macedonia includes a range of safeguards to protect children throughout the justice process. Child victims of crime have the right to receive age-appropriate information, have their privacy protected, participate in child-sensitive procedures, receive legal advice and be supported by cross-sectoral child protection teams. The law also includes measures intended to protect children from further harm, such as limiting repeated questioning and allowing testimony to be given in child-friendly conditions.

Yet, the research found that these safeguards are not always implemented consistently in practice. Justice professionals described understaffing, heavy workloads and limited institutional resources as contributing to delays in proceedings

and making it more difficult to deliver child-centred justice.

The research also found that statutes of limitations for some offences may prevent survivors from seeking justice if they are only ready to disclose the abuse after the legal time limit has expired. Although victims can seek compensation through the courts and a State-funded compensation scheme is available, professionals noted that compensation is not always awarded in practice and the amounts available through the State scheme are relatively low given the long-term impact of these offences..

11. What support do survivors receive?

- 1. Children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse are entitled by law to services** supporting their physical and psychological recovery, rehabilitation and social reintegration. Children can access psychosocial support through Centres for Social Work, the public health system, schools, civil society organizations and private practitioners.
- 2. However, in practice access is uneven.** Limited human and financial resources, heavy workloads, long waiting times for specialist services and shortages of professionals trained to work with children affected by trauma, can delay access to services, particularly for those living outside Skopje.
- 3. Children and families also need a better-connected support system.** Interviews with professionals indicated that coordination between services is not always effective, which can lead to delays, gaps in support and challenges in ensuring continuity of care. At the same time, stigma, concerns about privacy and fear of community judgment can prevent families from seeking services or continuing support.

12. What needs to change?

Educating children about online safety is important, but it is not enough on its own. Responses that focus on children's behaviour risk shifting responsibility onto children and overlooking the wider social, institutional, legal factors, and technological conditions that enable abuse to occur. Protecting children requires coordinated action across families, schools, communities, social protection services, law enforcement, the justice system, government, and technology companies.

Some of the report's key recommendations include:

- 1. Strengthen prevention through education and awareness**
Children need age-appropriate education on healthy relationships, consent, personal boundaries and digital safety that reflects their everyday lives and experiences. Schools should embed this learning across the curriculum and ensure staff are trained to recognize and respond to abuse. Parents and caregivers should also be supported to be able to have open conversations with children about relationships, sexuality, online experiences and where to seek help. Sustained public awareness campaigns are also needed to challenge harmful gender norms, shame, stigma and victim-blaming that can enable abuse and discourage children from speaking out.
- 2. Support tech companies and hold them accountable for making their tools and platforms safer**
Technology companies have a responsibility to make online services safer for children. The report recommends strengthening legislation and regulation to require platforms to introduce safety-by-design measures, accessible child-friendly reporting tools, stronger safeguards against unwanted contact, and timely

detection, reporting and rapid removal of child sexual abuse material. Government, regulators, law enforcement and technology companies should also work together to address emerging online risks, including risk related to artificial intelligence and image-based abuse.

3. Make it easier for children and families to seek help

Children need trusted adults they can turn to at home, in schools and in their communities. The report recommends expanding child-friendly reporting pathways, raising awareness of available support services and ensuring children and families know what will happen when they report abuse. The report also calls for stronger coordination between services so that children receive timely, confidential and appropriate support regardless of where they first disclose abuse.

4. Invest in better support and recovery services

Children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse need timely, trauma-informed and survivor-centred support to support their recovery. The report recommends investing in specialized mental health and psychosocial support services, strengthening collaboration between health, education, social protection and child protection services, and improving access to support across the country, including outside major urban centres. It also highlights the need for stronger local services and better continuity of care so children can receive support as long as they require.

5. Strengthen justice and accountability

The report recommends closing legal gaps so that all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be effectively investigated and prosecuted. It also calls for greater investment in specialized training and adequate resources for police, prosecutors

and judges, stronger child-centred justice procedures, and reforms to improve children's access to legal remedies and compensation. These measures can help ensure children are better protected throughout the justice process and that perpetrators are held accountable.

See the full report for the complete set of recommendations for North Macedonia.

13. What can parents and caregivers do?

One of the most important things parents and caregivers can do is to create an environment where children feel safe talking about their experiences, relationships and any concerns, without fear of blame, judgment or punishment.

Parents can help children build an age-appropriate understanding of healthy relationships, consent, personal boundaries and digital safety. Open, calm and non-judgmental conversations about sexuality, on-line experiences and exploitation can help children recognize harmful behaviour, understand their rights and know where to seek help. The research also highlights the importance of challenging shame, stigma and victim-blaming attitudes, which can prevent children from disclosing or reporting abuse.

At the same time, protecting children cannot be the responsibility of parents alone. The research is clear that preventing this abuse requires a coordinated effort by families, schools, social workers, law enforcement, technology companies and governments. Parents should be supported with practical guidance on online safety, reporting channels and support services, and how to respond if a child discloses abuse. Schools and wider community awareness initiatives also have a key role to play in equipping both children and adults with the knowledge and confidence to prevent, recognize and respond to abuse.

14. What can parents and caregivers do?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Use survivor-centred, non-blaming language and protect children's identities.**

Reporting should never imply that a child is responsible for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid names, images, locations or other details that could reveal their identity, directly or indirectly.

- **Focus on perpetrators, systemic issues and protection gaps, not on the child's**

actions. Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."

- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.**

Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity. Trauma-informed language that does not minimize or normalize abuse is key.

- **Respect legal safeguards and investigations.**

Follow laws and ethical standards within media protecting child victims of crime and avoid

publishing information that could interfere with investigation or court proceedings.

- **Share information about support services.**

Where possible, include information about helplines and reporting channels and available services so children and families know where to seek help.

Helpful resources for children and families

- Nacionalna mreza protiv nasilstvo
 - <https://www.glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk>
 - Tel: 02 616 0016
- MEGASI
 - <http://www.childrensembassy.org.mk/home.nspx>
 - SOS helpline: 02 2465 316
 - Email: info@childrensembassy.org.mk or alobushavko@childrensembassy.org.mk
- #192: the Police

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