DATA INSIGHT NO 11

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN 21 COUNTRIES



DISRUPTING HARM

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At a glance

Disrupting Harm data show that across 21 countries,[1]

Between

5 and 43 per cent

of children were subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year.



Generally,

girls and boys

were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in

equal proportions



In only two countries (Colombia and Serbia) did we observe statistically significant differences. Older children (aged 15–17) were more likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in almost all of the countries included here.

Scaled to the population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children, we estimate that

more than 20 million children

across these 21 countries were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to be surveyed.



DEFINING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term "technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse" to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as "online" child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term "technology-facilitated" is now preferred, to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

As the digital transformation of society continues, sexual violence against children in schools, homes and communities is increasingly being facilitated by digital technologies.

Perpetrators seeking to sexually exploit and abuse children today use technology to contact, groom or abuse them directly via online platforms, or to facilitate in-person sexual abuse. 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 urgency to better understand and address sexual exploitation and abuse of children, including abuse that occurs online or is facilitated by digital technologies. Yet the extent to which children in different countries are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse remains unclear. Reliable data based on children's own experiences are scarce, partly because of the ethical and methodological challenges involved in measuring such a personal and sensitive issue, but also because of inconsistent and often unclear understandings of how child sexual exploitation and abuse manifests in digital environments.

This brief draws on six years of household survey research conducted through the Disrupting Harm project. It estimates the prevalence of specific forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among 21,000 internet-using children aged 12–17 across 21 countries in six major world regions.

More details on the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

1 South Africa and Jordan are not included in this analysis due to differences in the final survey questionnaire, while Tunisia and Morocco are not included as data were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

How our understanding of tech-facilitated sexual violence against children has evolved

As digital technologies continue to evolve, so too does our understanding of the harms they can facilitate and how those harms should be measured. The first round of Disrupting Harm research was conducted in 2020, and the estimates produced from the survey data were based on seven measures capturing different forms of tech-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation.

By the time the second round of research was conducted, our understanding of how digital technologies shape children's experiences of abuse had deepened considerably. This evolution highlights the value of sustained, in-depth research on a rapidly changing phenomenon. To reflect these insights, two additional survey questions were introduced for the data collection starting in 2024, and the methodology used to estimate children's exposure to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse was refined.

TABLE 1. SURVEY QUESTIONS USED TO CALCULATE AN ESTIMATE OF TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

DISRUPTING HARM 2020-2021		DISRUPTING HARM 2024-2025
Someone sent me sexual images I did not want		Someone sent me sexual images or videos I did not want
I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to		I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to
I have been asked for a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to		I have been asked to share a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to
Someone shared sexual images of me without my consent		Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission
Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself		Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself
Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual		Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual
Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities		Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities
-		Someone used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of me
-		Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me

If a child responded "yes" to any one of these questions included in Table 1, the respondent was counted as having been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed.[2] Aggregated results for the 21 countries are presented in Table 2.

TECH-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE AGAINST CHILDREN IN 21 COUNTRIES

The survey measured several forms of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated against children through digital technologies. These ranged from exposure to sexual content and sexual solicitation to sexual extortion (see Table 1).

Digital technologies can, however, facilitate many other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse that were not captured in this study. While these findings provide important estimates of the minimum scale of the issue, the full extent is most likely higher.

TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12–17 WHO WERE SUBJECTED TO AT LEAST ONE FORM OF TECH-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE WITHIN THE YEAR PRIOR TO BEING SURVEYED. DATA FROM THE FIRST 12 COUNTRIES WAS COLLECTED IN 2020/21, WHILE DATA FROM THE NEXT 9 COUNTRIES WAS COLLECTED BETWEEN 2024/25.

		Total	Boys	Girls	12–14 y	15–17 y
2020-2021	Ethiopia	26%	28%	24%	26%	26%
	Kenya	29%	28%	30%	17%	32%
	Mozambique	9%	11%	7%	6%	11%
	Namibia	27%	28%	25%	20%	33%
	Tanzania	12%	13%	11%	10%	15%
	Uganda	36%	36%	36%	31%	38%
	Cambodia	22%	20%	24%	17%	26%
	Indonesia	43%	46%	40%	34%	51%
	Malaysia	20%	22%	19%	21%	20%
	Philippines	39%	37%	41%	21%	46%
	Thailand	9%	9%	9%	8%	10%
	Viet Nam	6%	5%	7%	5%	7%
2024-2025	Armenia	5%	5%	5%	3%	7%
	Brazil	19%	17%	22%	15%	23%
	Colombia	21%	17%	25%	16%	25%
	Dominican Republic	23%	25%	21%	18%	28%
	Mexico	13%	13%	14%	7%	19%
	Montenegro	11%	8%	13%	5%	17%
	North Macedonia	10%	11%	9%	8%	13%
	Pakistan	6%	6%	7%	6%	7%
	Serbia	10%	7%	13%	4%	15%

Children's exposure to the forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the Disrupting Harm survey ranged from 5 to 43 per cent. The average exposure across all 21 countries was 19 per cent, with significant variability between countries.

This variation in estimates may be attributed to several factors. Willingness to discuss issues related to sex and sexual violence can vary considerably across countries, depending on social norms, children's willingness to disclose sensitive experiences, levels of stigma attached to it, and public awareness of what sexual abuse is. In addition, as noted above, the survey measured only certain forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Other forms of abuse that were not captured in the survey may be more prevalent in some countries, contributing to differences in the estimates. This suggests that the average estimate across all countries may not be a precise indicator for understanding country-level exposure.

It is important to note that **unwanted exposure to sexual content** makes up a large proportion of the estimates presented above (see annex 1). That is, children who said that "Someone sent me sexual images or videos I did not want" in the year prior to being surveyed. In every country included in the Disrupting Harm research, this was the most common abusive behaviour that children surveyed were subjected to. Qualitative research conducted under Disrupting Harm with more than 100 young people who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood, highlighted how unwanted exposure to sexual content was often a precursor to further sexual exploitation and abuse; a way to desensitize children to sexual content or talk; and sometimes part of a deliberate and sustained pattern of abuse that persisted over long periods of time.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the different questions that make up the estimate represent qualitatively different experiences. While we consider all of them to constitute tech-facilitated sexual abuse of children, each form of sexual exploitation and abuse includes unique dynamics that need to be better understood. Not only in terms of exposure, but also in terms of who is more likely to be affected, perpetrator tactics, and challenges around disclosure, reporting and seeking justice, as well as mental health impacts.

Gender

Looking across the data from the 21 countries, there are no clear patterns in terms of gender differences for the forms of tech-facilitated sexual abuse measured in the Disrupting Harm survey. More boys were subjected to these forms of sexual exploitation and abuse in some countries, and more girls in others. However, these differences are generally minor and not statistically significant, suggesting that **girls and boys are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in fairly equal proportions.**

At the same time, interviews with young people who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood suggest that, although boys and girls may face similar levels of exposure to the forms of sexual abuse measured here, their experiences and impacts can differ in important ways. **Clear gender differences emerge in perpetrators' tactics, societal responses following disclosure, and the stigma, shame and self-blame experienced by survivors,** all of which can increase harm and complicate recovery. Taken together, findings from Disrupting Harm suggest that while interventions are needed for all children, gender-sensitive approaches may improve effectiveness in addressing risks, supporting disclosure and promoting recovery.

Age

In terms of age, Disrupting Harm data for 19 out of 21 countries show that proportionately, a higher proportion of 15–17-year-old children were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse compared with children aged 12–14 years. Yet despite these findings, some legal frameworks continue to limit protections from some forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to children below the age of sexual consent or otherwise exclude older children. This disconnect between legislation and actual patterns of harm risks leaving adolescents inadequately protected despite their heightened exposure to harm.[2] Alongside legal reforms to ensure that all children are protected regardless of age, these 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 effective.

2 ECPAT International, 'Legislation Addressing Technology-facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse', Disrupting Harm Data Insight no. 4, Safe Online, New York, 2022 https://safeonline.global/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Disrupting-Harm-Data-Insight-4-Legislation-addressing-OCSEA.pdf.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this data and analysis that are important to consider. First, the survey only included children aged 12-17 who use the internet and who live in family care. Children younger than 12, those without internet connection, and children living in more vulnerable situations – for example, those living in institutional care or children in street situations, among others – are not included. The extent to which children living in these conditions are exposed to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse is not reflected in the data.

In addition, as noted above, willingness to discuss issues related to sex and sexual violence can vary significantly across countries, shaped by social norms, levels of stigma and public awareness of sexual violence. While every effort was made to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality when responding to these questions, including through use of self-report tool where responses were hidden from the enumerator, the variability in the estimate suggests that surveying children on this topic may not be equally viable in all countries, due to cultural and normative factors. This makes direct cross-country comparisons of exposure particularly challenging. Rather than comparing countries based on these estimates, the findings should be understood as clear evidence that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children occurs in every country studied and is an increasingly common global issue.

As also noted above, the survey measured only certain forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The estimates therefore provide only a partial picture of the phenomenon. They should be interpreted as indicating the minimum scale of the problem, since the true extent is difficult to measure, due to both underreporting and the wide range of ways in which these crimes can occur.

CONCLUSIONS

The Disrupting Harm data presented in this brief highlight that a significant proportion of children across these 21 countries were exposed to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in the year prior to being surveyed. The estimates presented here are based on representative random samples of 12–17-year-old internet users, meaning that results are generalizable to national populations of this group of children and can be scaled up by applying the survey proportions to census data.

Scaled estimates produced by Disrupting Harm **show that across these 21 countries alone, over 20 million children were subjected to at least one form of tech-facilitated sexual abuse** in the year prior to being surveyed.

Despite this challenging situation, pathways to action are evident. Governments in many of the countries where the Disrupting Harm research was conducted are already progressing in their national prevention and responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Significant progress has been made in the countries involved in the first round, including positive examples of legislative and policy change.

The Disrupting Harm project highlights three critical challenges and recommendations for all countries involved, which may also extend to other countries where this research has not yet been done:



1 **Awareness around tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is still low, but it has received substantially more attention since the first round of studies in 2020.** Continue to invest in campaigns that increase awareness of what tech-facilitated sexual abuse is, how to recognize 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. Disrupting Harm national reports provide tailored recommendations for each country context on how to design these campaigns based on evidence.



2 **Children rarely report their experiences of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and/or abuse 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 subjected to 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 the abuse.



3 **Front-line workers, law enforcement and justice professionals often lack capacity, knowledge and resources to provide comprehensive and child-centred support.** Invest in the knowledge of police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, statutory social workers and front-line social workers on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Regularly occurring, skill-based trainings should be mandatory, evaluated and continuously updated in line with emerging evidence on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, digital development and patterns of offending.

Finally, it is worth noting that although Disrupting Harm research offers insights about tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse from a diverse group of 21 countries in six regions, it is an issue in all parts of the world. There is much we do not know about how **children's experiences differ by country, as well as the differences in each country's capacity and readiness to prevent and respond effectively.**

This reinforces the **need for continued investment in high-quality, comprehensive, national research** to determine the extent to which children are exposed to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in any given country, and how prevention and response capabilities can be improved at a systems-level. In the meantime, we hope that the Disrupting Harm findings offer valuable insights into these evolving forms of violence against children.

Based on our experience conducting survey research on this issue across many countries, we find that survey methods can provide significant value, but also face important limitations in some contexts. Cultural and normative factors may make it difficult for children to speak about sexual exploitation and abuse, even in private research settings and under conditions of full confidentiality. While these challenges should not discourage efforts to improve how children are surveyed on complex and sensitive topics, these limitations call for more mixed-methods research on this topic, with a stronger emphasis on qualitative research with children and young people who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse.

Such qualitative research is itself ethically complex, and recruiting participants can be extremely challenging. However, when conducted safely and responsibly, it can generate uniquely rich insights into children's lived experiences, deepening understanding of both prevention and response. Findings from other Disrupting Harm reports demonstrate the important value that this type of research can bring.[3]

It is also important to recognize that conducting research on techy-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be especially difficult in societies where these issues are not yet widely acknowledged or openly discussed. While these challenges should not deter continued efforts to undertake rigorous research in pursuit of children's protection and best interests, it highlights the need to carefully consider the context in which this research is carried out, to ensure it is adapted in consultation with national researchers and actors, is culturally sensitive, and that appropriate safeguards are put in place for all participants.

3 For all published Disrupting Harm national reports, see https://safeonline.global/disrupting-harm-2.

ABOUT THE *DATA INSIGHTS* SERIES FROM DISRUPTING HARM

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online since 2019. The project and its research methodology is designed and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti). This research generates national evidence on tech-facilitated 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. Evidence about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was collected in 13 countries between 2020 and 2021: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam).

In 2024 and 2025, data was collected in an additional 12 countries: Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Serbia and Tunisia.

Since 2019, the Disrupting Harm project, together with national partners and researchers, have conducted surveys and interviews with more than 25,000 children and young people, including those who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, over 25,000 caregivers were surveyed, and 540 professionals with child protection mandates interviewed. More detailed information about the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti since 2019 are used as the basis for the Disrupting Harm Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organization(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 organizations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

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