

Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)

SCALE, DRIVERS AND IMPACT

**POLICY
BRIEF**





Across Africa, different policy measures have been designed and implemented to strengthen existing child protection systems and better protect children online. However, progress is still hampered by limited evidence and understanding of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children, lack of effective regulations as well as limited technological capabilities.

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This policy brief, prepared by ACPF, in collaboration with ChildFund International, is the first in a series of two Policy Briefs. This series focuses on the nature, scale and impact of the growing problem of technology-facilitated sexual abuse and exploitation of children in Africa.

1. Background

Rapid advances in information and communication technologies have come with explosive growth in access to the internet, computers and wireless devices such as mobile phones which have all brought tremendous opportunities for people to access a wealth of knowledge and information.

Africa has some of the fastest growing internet access rates in the world. Out of its total population of about 1.4 billion people, Africa counts 570 million internet users in 2022, more than double the figure in 2015.¹ There has also been a sharp rise in mobile phone ownership with an estimated 650 million mobile users in Africa.

From cell phones to smartphones, from emails to social media, or from satellite systems to artificial intelligence, there is little doubt that technology has radically transformed our societies and our daily lives.

The internet has presented children with vast opportunities for education, entertainment, and communication. Yet, as a largely uncensored and only partially regulated environment, it has also created a new context wherein children's exposure to different forms of violence, harm, and abuse has been made easier. It has equally opened up a de-territorialized space where sexual predators can commit abusive acts with a very high likelihood of eluding easy identification or detection and prosecution.

Online and networked technologies have introduced new capabilities that allow digital information to be easily copied (replicability), easily shared with large audiences (scalability), easily recorded and archived (persistence), and easily accessed by others

and found in the future (searchability).² These capabilities have not only made cybercrimes such as online child sexual exploitation and abuse easier to commit but also harder to detect and prosecute.

The social media, gaming platforms, digital messaging apps and other digital technology tools are being used by sexual predators to identify, contact and sexually abuse and exploit children. INTERPOL's Child Sexual Exploitation database, for example, holds more than 4.3 million images and videos of children which has helped identify more than 32,000 victims worldwide.³ Given the sheer size of the internet, the number of online platforms and apps and the volume of the data available online, holding perpetrators accountable is not an easy task. That is why sex crimes online are rightly dubbed as being 'placeless' and yet 'everywhere'.⁴

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) involves the use of information and communication technology as a means to sexually abuse and/or exploit children, and can take different forms such as, sexting⁵, online solicitation of children for sexual purposes (online grooming)⁶, use of children in sexual performances and activities⁷, live streaming of child sexual abuse, sexual extortion of children, child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), among others.⁸ Children, as targets of these violations, could be threatened, made fun of (embarrassed), receive sexual comments that make them feel uncomfortable or abused sexually.⁹ Online sexual exploitation of children is not limited to the internet (e.g., online pornography); it often also involves contact offenses including rape, kidnapping, trafficking, and murder.

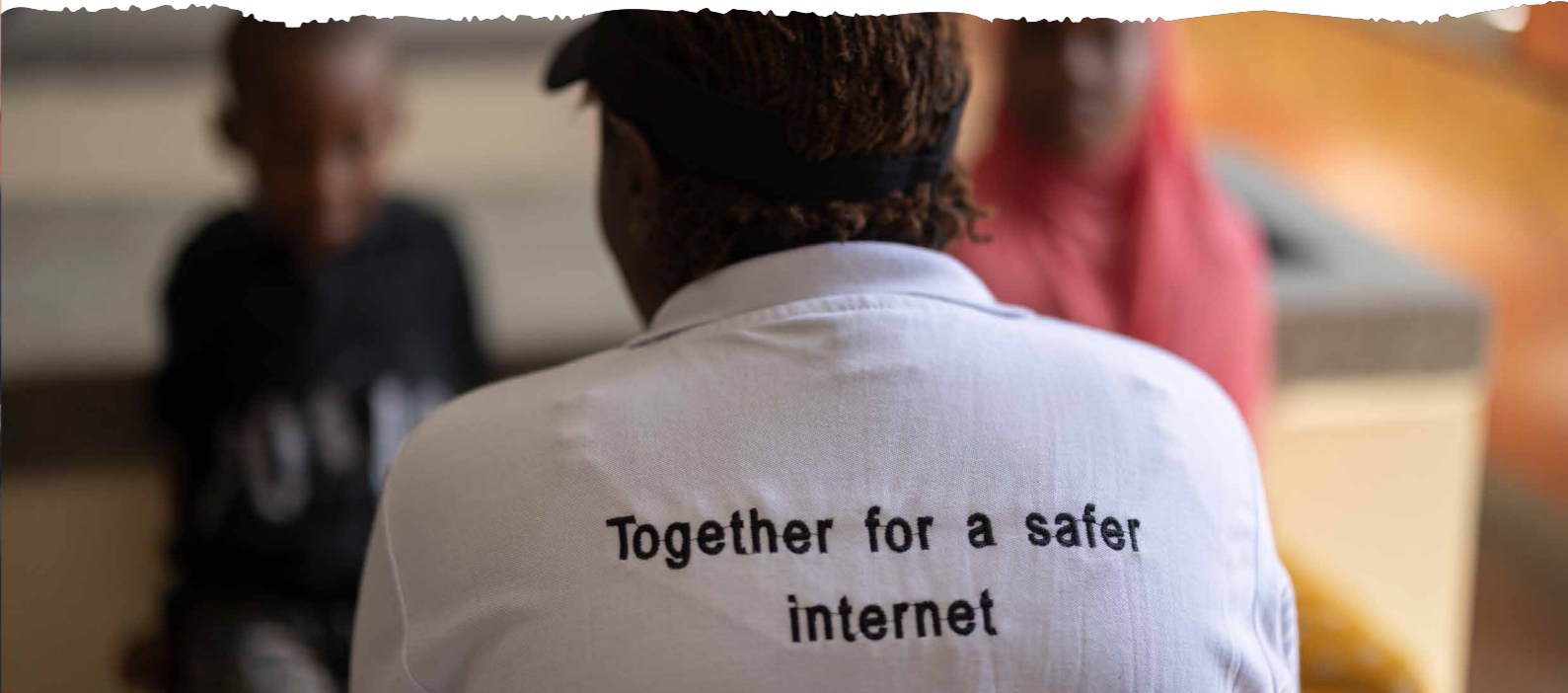
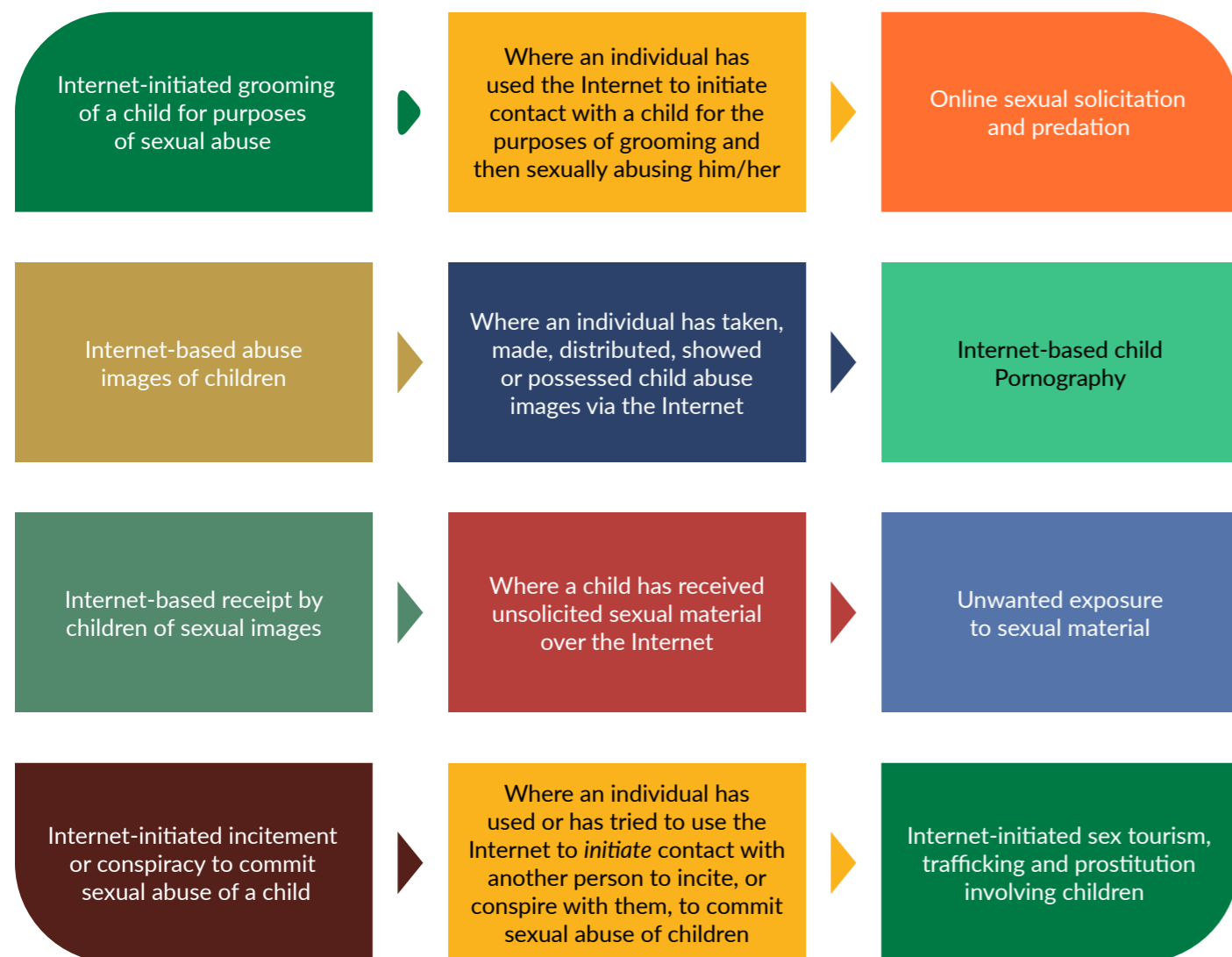


Figure 1.1: Manifestations of online sexual exploitation and abuse of children



Source: Gallagher et al. 2006⁵⁷

Given that children at present have better access and knowledge of the internet, social media, computers, and smart phones than their parents and/or guardians,¹⁰ it is important for States to bear greater responsibility in protecting children in the digital sphere.¹¹ States cannot leave the bulk of the responsibility to parents when it comes to protecting children from risks and dangers of the online environment. They need to ensure parents are empowered on their digital skills and the online environment remains safe for its young users.¹² Having confronted with this reality, the key question for African countries is whether or not they are adequately prepared to provide greater protection and safeguarding for children online.



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2. Scale of the problem

There are no continent-wide empirical studies that show the scale and magnitude of online child sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Africa. There are, however, a few studies that attempted to show scale of the problem at sub-regional and national levels. The *Disrupting Harm*¹³ studies are one of the primary sources of evidence on the scale, nature and context of online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Africa and other regions. According to these studies, in the six countries from the Eastern and Southern Africa region (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda) where the studies were carried out, on average, 3 in 10 internet-using children had been exposed to violent content online while 2 in 10 had been exposed to hate messages in one year alone. Besides, 9 per cent of internet-using children in the six countries reported to have used the internet to harass or embarrass someone, and 15 percent had made rude or nasty comments to someone online.

A joint ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF International report which was carried out based on videos and images in the International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database¹⁴ also revealed, among others, that more than 60% of unidentified victims in child sexual abuse materials were young children, including infants and toddlers, and 65% were girls.¹⁵

At national level, the following figures on a few countries for which data is available, gives us a snapshot of the scale of the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse:

In Ethiopia:

- 10% of children (aged 12–17) were victims of grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse (blackmailing children to engage in sexual activities, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual

- activities through promises of money or gifts).
- One in five internet-using children in Ethiopia (19%) surveyed reported having received sexual comments online that made them feel uncomfortable¹⁶

In Mozambique

- 13% of children (aged 12–17) in Mozambique were subjected to clear examples of online sexual exploitation and abuse that included blackmailing children to engage in sexual activities, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts.¹⁷

In South Africa:¹⁸

- 9% of children said that they had been offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos,
- 9% said they were asked to meet in person to do something sexual,
- 7% said that their sexual images had been shared without their permission,
- 7% of the internet-using children surveyed said they had been threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities

In Uganda

- 10% percent of children (aged 15–17-year-old) said that they had accepted money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos.¹⁹

In terms of specific forms, online sexual abuse through offering money or gifts in return for sexual images and videos and sharing of sexual images without consent are the most widespread forms of abuse and exploitation of children.²⁰



Table 2.1: Extent of OSEAC by type and pathway of abuse

	Shared sexualized images	Sent their personal information to strangers	Met a person face-to-face after an online encounter	Received unwanted requests to talk about sex or sexual acts within the past year	Were threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities
Ethiopia	6%	33%	14%	8%	10%
Kenya	7%	25%	14%	10%	5%- 13%
Mozambique	12%	33%	28%	11%	13%
Namibia	9%	31%	17%	5%-9%	9%
South Africa	8%	32%	33%	19%	7%
Tanzania	3%	15%	5%	3%	4%
Uganda	7%	31%	15%	8%-21%	8%

Source: Collated from country case studies conducted by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF 2021, on OCSEA

3. Pathways, risk and vulnerability factors

Pathways:

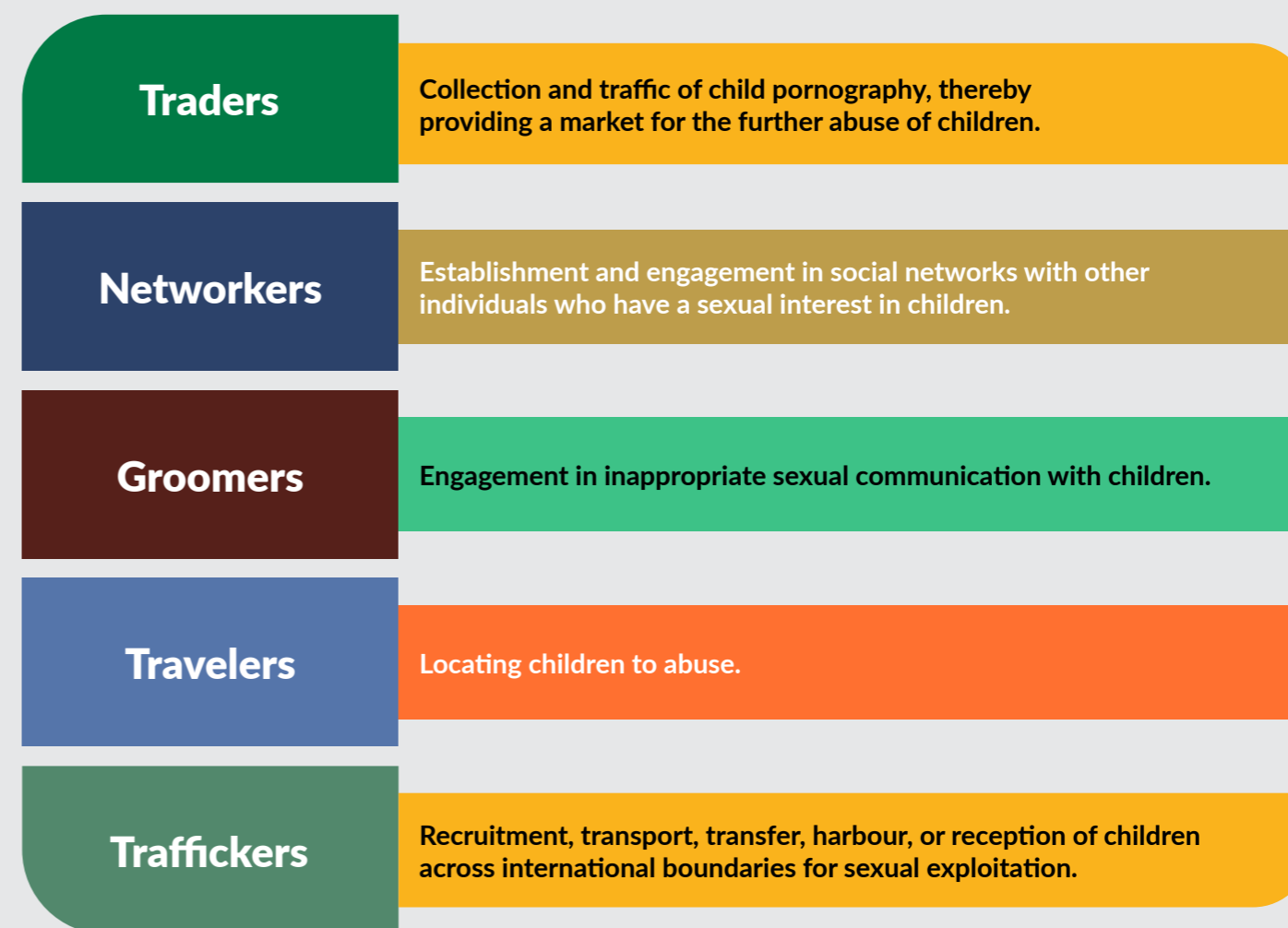
Online sex offenders apply various pathways which eventually lead to the act of sexual abuse of a child online or offline. From collection and trading in child sexual abuse material, to networking with other sex predators online, from engaging in inappropriate sexual communication with children to using online interactions for physically locating children to abuse and trafficking them for sexual purposes, the pathways come in many different forms. Online sex offenders use the Internet to produce, download, and/or distribute audio, visual, or written materials that depict children in situations of sexual abuse or emphasize images of children's sexual organs.²¹ There are also instances where ordinary pictures of children are digitally transformed (or "morphed") into pornographic material and distributed across the Internet without the children's knowledge.²²

Offenders can also entice or solicit children for sexual purposes through a practice called grooming. Through grooming, adults actively engage and interact with the child and slowly and gradually desensitize the child's inhibitions. Often involving enticements through giving profuse attention and friendship, the grooming process includes the sharing of gifts and pictures, which will lead to the adult gaining power and control over the child, which will eventually create a close bond between child and adult, which facilitates compliance with the adult's sexual advances.

Perpetrator profile and characteristics:

Although studies on perpetrator characteristics are rare in Africa, studies conducted elsewhere give us an insight into such characteristics. Generally, online sex offenders are often family members or acquaintances rather than strangers.²³ Online sex offences – much like offline sex offences – take place when individuals abuse their positions of power, authority, control and trust vis-a-vis the child.²⁴ For instance, 65% of children surveyed in Mozambique and 39% of children surveyed in South Africa reported that the offender was someone they know such as adult friends, peers, family members or a romantic partner. There are, however, instances where children could be offenders. About 15 percent of the children interviewed in the six countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa covered by the joint ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF study admitted they harassed or embarrassed someone online.

In terms of characteristics of perpetrators, although related studies in Africa are not available, a study conducted in the USA reported that only 5% of online molesters represented themselves as peers of victims by claiming they were age 17 or younger. The implication is that sexual offences committed via the Internet should fall under the category of statutory rape whereby adult offenders meet, develop relationships, and openly seduce minors than in the category of forcible sexual assault.²⁵

Figure 3.1: Perpetrator categories

Source: Institute of Health Economics 2010. *Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth Over the Internet: A Rapid Review of the Scientific Literature*

In addition to individuals directly involved in the act of online child sexual exploitation, there are other category of perpetrators who catalyze or facilitate online sexual exploitation of children. These include individuals involved in the collection and trading of child sexual abuse material, hence principally having a commercial interest; and those involved in the recruitment, transfer, sale, harbouring of children for sexual exploitation purposes, mediated through the internet.²⁶ Websites exist that are used to catalyze networking for criminal ends including by advertising products and illicit services such as sex-for-hire services with minors, escort and prostitution services provided by minors, and child sex tour packages.²⁷

Vulnerability factors:

Although all children and young people are vulnerable to online sexual exploitation, older adolescents are a greater risk than younger children, due to their greater mobility, sexual curiosity, and autonomy.²⁸ Evidence from the 'Disrupting Harm' studies also

confirm that online child sexual abuse and exploitation is strongly correlated with age: children aged 15-17 have experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse more so than those aged 12-14.²⁹ The age differences appear to be linked with differences in internet access between these groups. In all 12 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia covered by the 'Disrupting Harm' studies, children aged 16-17 were much more likely to go online than younger children.³⁰

Other developmental factors that define adolescence such as intense interest in expanding social networks, taking risks, forming emotional bonds with others, and acquiring knowledge about sex make adolescents vulnerable to online sexual advances by adults.³¹ Children in this age group are more likely to share personal information over the Internet, interact with strangers online via instant messaging or chat rooms, email or post photos online, visit adult-content websites and chat rooms, and agree to meet with someone in person whom they met online.³²

3.1: Boys: Forgotten victims of OSCEA

Understanding the scale of CSEC among boys has remained a formidable challenge in Africa because of underreporting, misconceptions about abuse and exploitation of boys and social stigma. Sexual abuse and exploitation of boys has, in general, been a neglected area in Africa because of the widespread misconception that boys are perpetrators instead of victims. This is partly the reason why boys are excluded from sexual exploitation victimization studies. For instance, in the Demographic and Health Surveys (2008 and 2013) of Ghana, the question asked to male respondents about sexual exploitation inquired if they “have ever paid anyone in exchange for sex”, leaving out the possibility of them receiving something from anyone in exchange for sex.

Other studies have shown that boys are less likely to seek help, in particular from formal services, when they experience sexual violence. Feelings of shame, uncertainty and confusion on the part of the boys themselves and homophobic attitudes on the part of parents, service providers and justice/police officials often stand in the way of reporting or seeking help. There is also victims' concerns about their masculinity; their sexuality; and the opinions of other people. These factors have together have conspired to lead to the exclusion of boys from child or legal protection services and for their continued victimization.

Sources: Adjei, J.K. & Saewyc, E.M. 2017. Boys are not exempt: Sexual exploitation of adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa

March 2017, *Child Abuse & Neglect* 65:14-23; ACPF 2020. *Sexual Exploitation of Children in Africa: A Silent Emergency*

For instance, 28% of children surveyed in Mozambique and 33% surveyed in South Africa and 18% in Ethiopia, reported having met strangers following an online encounter. Adolescents also frequent online gaming where they may meet strangers online to play games and may be solicited through this route. 4 in 10 children in the above studies reported they encountered sexual content unexpectedly while using social media or through adverts and pop-ups.³³

Gender - being female- was also a factor in victimization through online sexual exploitation. In Ethiopia, for instance, eight times more girls surveyed than boys are victims of online sexual exploitation. In other countries, no or minor association or pattern in gender differences were observed, indicating that almost equal proportion of girls and boys experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse.³⁴

Disability is another factor. Children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups of children to OSCEA.³⁵ Children with mental health problems such as depressive symptoms and other behavioural problems were also linked to higher risks of exposure to online sexual solicitation.

Children with sensory impairments were also reported to be disproportionately affected by online sexual exploitation due to the fact that they are more likely to spend a lot of time online, often unsupervised, especially because of the lack of opportunities to play and socialise. Besides, some of these children, especially those who need continued parental attention, are left with phones and other tech gadgets as parents seek to preoccupy their children with the gadgets in order to avoid provision of care.³⁶

Studies elsewhere have shown other factors that increase the risk of being exposed to online sexual solicitation-engaging in high-risk behaviours online such as sending out personal information to strangers or talking online to strangers about sex, frequent and high use of the internet and notably chat rooms and social media platforms.³⁷ Studies have shown that the use of social networking sites may be associated with increasing risk of online harm to children.³⁸ This is particularly concerning because there is a significant online activity among children in Africa. For instance, 84% of children surveyed in South Africa, 63% in Mozambique, 57% in Kenya, and 50% in Uganda were using social media. 57% of children surveyed in Kenya and 52% in Uganda watch videos as

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Only **8%** of caregivers over 50 years of age and 26% of those in the 40-41 age group surveyed in Ethiopia reported having more knowledge of the internet than their children.

part of their online activities.³⁹ In Ethiopia, among those children who reported having accidentally watched sexual material, 35% of them said that they came across this content on social media, 17% were sent it via direct messages, 18% saw them in online advertisements, and 13% encountered it when conducting online searches.

This is further compounded by the behaviour of some children and young people who routinely violate the terms and conditions of social networks, including by lying about their age to gain access and creating online profiles despite age-appropriate notifications.

Physical and /or sexual abuse experiences offline such as offline interpersonal victimization and history of physical or sexual abuse were also reported to predict risks of online sexual solicitation. The lack of communication between parents and children and parental conflicts were also associated with a higher risk of online sexual solicitation. In the absence of trust between children and their parents, children are less likely to report incidents on online sexual abuse. In Ethiopia, only 3% of children who were coerced to talk about sex reported that to a caregiver for fear of getting ‘embarrassed’.

The above risks are often reinforced by parental behaviour online including practices of sharing imagery of their children through social media networks and their lack of digital parenting skills including their low level of awareness about the uncontrollable risks associated with image distribution and data permanence online.

Pictures of children shared by parents – mostly without the children’s consent- can easily be downloaded, sexualized and recirculated as online pornography. Such parental practices (and lack of awareness about online risks) have also the tendency to desensitize children about online privacy, which makes children more vulnerable to future victimization. The pictures posted online may also contain location-sensitive information, which can easily give away children’s physical address for potential sex offenders.⁴⁰ For instance, only 8% of caregivers over 50 years of age and 26% of those in the 40-41 age group surveyed in Ethiopia reported having more knowledge of the internet than their children. This may be worrying in light of the difficulty of these caregivers to provide the necessary digital prenatal support and care.⁴¹ There are, however, countries where a high level of parental awareness about online safety of their children was reported such as in South Africa. Over two-thirds (63%) of caregivers in the country said that they get worried that a stranger would contact their child online, while 68% were concerned that their child would reveal personal information online.

Additional risk factors that have been identified to have exacerbated children’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse online include: exposure to prior maltreatment experiences, parental neglect or having witnessed the assault of a family member; emotional immaturity; depressive symptoms; introversion; social or learning difficulties; love or attention deprivation; strong respect for adults; and low self-esteem.⁴²

According to a study in the US, parents of children with disabilities reported 75% more sexually explicit requests received by their children than parents of children without disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities reported 35% more exposure of their children to sexual content online, and parents of children with mental, emotional, or social special needs reported 32% more exposure of their children to sexual content online compared to parents of children without disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities reported that their children shared sexual images of themselves at double the rate of children without disabilities, and for parents of children with mental, emotional, or social special needs, the corresponding rate was three times higher.

Source: Parents Together 2023. *Afraid, Uncertain, and Overwhelmed: A Survey of Parents on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children.*

4. Impact

There is a prevailing misperception that online forms of sexual abuse and exploitation are less impactful than offline forms. A study that explored how online and offline child sexual abuse impact young people found no evidence that online child sexual abuse and exploitation are less impactful than offline forms of abuse and exploitation.⁴³ The study found out that technology makes it easier by providing more avenues for offenders to recruit and abuse children while adding further complications (such as permanence of images online, increased chances for self-blame as well as blackmailing) to the existing impact. Besides, given that in most cases there might be a certain degree of communication/interaction between victims and perpetrators before the abuse takes place, many people, including professionals consider victim children as 'participants' and hence refuse to see online forms as actual abuse.⁴⁴

The impact of sexual abuse and exploitation of children- be it in the physical or digital world- is enormous. Children can be hurt severely physically, psychologically and socially. Research has shown the digital dimension and dynamics of technologically-facilitated abuse and exploitation further adds to children's feeling of shame, self-blame and sense of betrayal.⁴⁵ Victims of online child sexual exploitation abuse often report experiencing feelings of anxiety, guilt and shame, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance and alcohol abuse, and depression, among others.⁴⁶

Impact of online forms of abuse and exploitation on children can worsen or may result in long-term trauma for different reasons. For one thing, there are possibilities of increased harm and re-victimisation because of multiple incidents of abuse and exploitation. For example, every time images and videos of child abuse and exploitation are produced and shared widely online, children are victimised and re-victimised by the person committing the sexual abuse, but also by those who view it.⁴⁷ Besides, the impact can be aggravated when children are not fully heard and understood by family members following disclosure of sexual abuse.⁴⁸ When disclosure leads to invalidation of victims' accounts by family members or if victims are perceived their revelations of their experience would be invalidated, it will result in increased impact of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.⁴⁹ The impact will be more severe because parents will be unable to

support their children when they perceive the children as participants than victims.⁵⁰ Such tendencies of blaming victims would not only make disclosure and reporting almost impossible but would also contribute to the exculpation of perpetrators. For instance, in Kenya, out of 31% of children surveyed who did not report incidents of being coerced to send sexualized materials, 32% of them did not do so because of fear of 'getting into trouble'.

There is also a gender dimension to impact. Among sexually exploited boys, a number of health-compromising behaviors have been observed including a very high rate of substance use including alcohol, amphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and heroin.⁵¹ Feelings of shame or self-blame, feeling isolated, stigmatized and difficulties in expressing emotions and developing safe relationships with others were also reported.⁵² The impact of sexual abuse, online or offline, is likely to be severe among boys because of the reluctance to seek help and protection because of cultural constrains and gender norms and expectations. The perception among service providers about the vulnerability of boys to sexual exploitation has also contributed to that neglect, coupled with service providers' being ill-equipped to address the needs of 'boy' victims.⁵³

The issue of permanence and reach, particularly as it relates the production and sharing of sexual images online, is the most difficult aspect of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.⁵⁴ Knowing that their images or videos available online can neither be fully deleted even after reporting, victims will be exposed to continued feelings of frustration, helplessness, guilt and traumatisation. A study that explored young people's experiences and views of professionals following sexual abuse found out that the digital dimensions of online child sexual abuse and exploitation such as the permanence and reach of images, for example, decreased reporting of abuse and heightened feelings of self-blame, shame, betrayal and fear.⁵⁵ These findings were further confirmed by a recent research conducted by WeProtect Global Alliance and Praesidio Safeguarding which showed that feelings of shame, isolation and bullying children experience will lead to further bullying and mental health problems.⁵⁶ As a result of these, children reported wanting to self-harm and commit suicide as a consequence of the impact.



Feelings of shame, isolation and bullying children experience, lead to further bullying and mental health problems. As a result, children reported wanting to self-harm and commit suicide as a consequence of the impact.

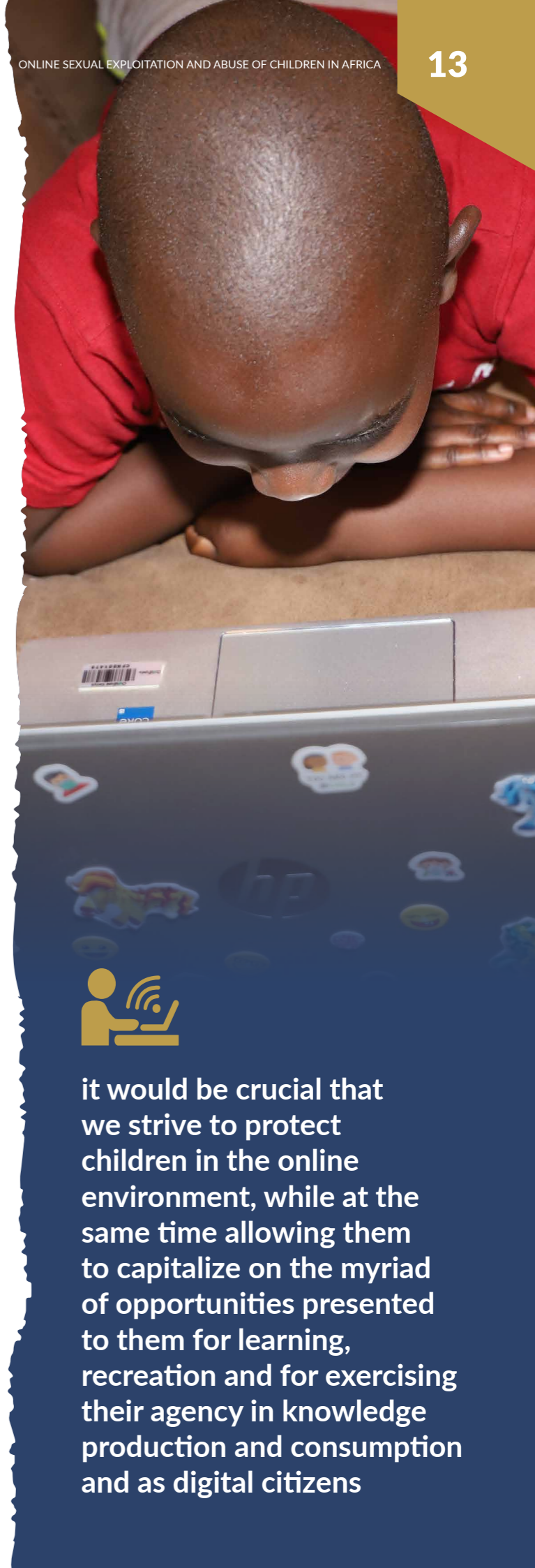
5. Concluding words

Online sexual exploitation and abuse of children is a contemporary plague that is affecting millions of children across the world. Africa is no exception. Studies have identified the following as the major pathways or manifestations of OSEAC in Africa: the production, distribution and possession of child sexual abuse materials or child pornography; online grooming of children for sexual purposes; 'sexting'; sexual extortion of children ('sextortion'); revenge pornography; commercial sexual exploitation of children; exploitation of children through online prostitution, and live streaming of sexual abuse. The factors that drive OCSEA in Africa are more or less similar to those operating in other parts of the world and include, among others, age and gender of the child, high-risk behaviour in the online environment and ill-advised parental conduct evident in sharing children's images online.

At one extreme, the lack of awareness of what constitutes a criminal conduct online and the lingering attitude that online crimes are not real crimes have created an atmosphere of virtual lawlessness. At the other extreme, inadequate laws and services, including fledgling technology-based surveillance systems and severely underdeveloped digital forensics capacity have created an opportunity and a fertile ground for potential sex criminals.

Africa, being the continent with the fast growing number of internet users, is witnessing a problem that is sharply on the rise. Existing evidence shows that Africa may be the new frontier for online sexual predators. As experts rightly argued, a lawless space is an incentive for individuals with criminally-titled minds to commit crimes without fear of detection and prosecution. The internet does not just provide the virtual locus for online crimes, but it also catalyses existing sex crimes committed offline, by facilitating contact and eventual encounter with potential victims. The degree of anonymity and accessibility afforded by the internet have helped in laying bare hitherto hidden, but distorted sexual motives and fantasies of many individuals, including child sexual abuse.

Given the dizzying pace at which these cybercrimes are pervading our space and evolving, the African child protection and criminal justice landscapes have to do more to catch up. Policy brief 2 in this series delves in-depth into the policy, legislative and programmatic efforts being made to and need to be made to deter, prevent and respond to this formidable scourge that requires a very huge amount of human and financial resources. In the final analysis, it would be crucial that we strive to protect children in the online environment, while at the same time allowing them to capitalize on the myriad of opportunities presented to them for learning, recreation and for exercising their agency in knowledge production and consumption and as digital citizens.



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Endnotes

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- 6 Online grooming is defined as the practice by means of which an adult “befriends” a child (often online, but offline grooming also exists and should not be neglected) with the intention of sexually abusing her/him.
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