

Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA)

VULNERABILITY FACTORS, CURRENT
EFFORTS AND WAY FORWARD

**POLICY
BRIEF**



This Policy Brief, prepared by ACPF, in collaboration with ChildFund International, is a succinct summary of two extended policy briefs on the **Scale, Drivers and Impact of OSEAC** and **Programmatic, Policy Efforts and Gaps**, respectively.

Introduction:

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. Children are no exception. 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.

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, sexting, online solicitation of children for sexual purposes (online grooming), use of children in sexual performances and activities, live streaming of child sexual abuse, sexual extortion of children, child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), among others.¹

Scale of the Problem:

No continent-wide empirical studies on the scale and magnitude of online child sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Africa are available. There are, however, a few studies that attempted to show scale of the problem at sub-regional and national levels. Noteworthy among these are the *Disrupting Harm*² studies. 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.

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. A joint ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF International report which was carried out based on videos and images in the International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database³ 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.⁴



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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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ In terms of gender, there is a mixed picture. In Ethiopia, for instance, eight time more girls surveyed than boys are victims of online sexual exploitation, while in other countries, no or minor association or pattern in gender differences were observed.⁸ However, boys constitute a group that is often forgotten in the discussion around OSCEA because of the widespread misconception that boys are perpetrators instead of victims.

Existing efforts:

A number of global and regional instruments exist that provide protection for children from online sexual abuse and exploitation. The UNCRC, under article 34 and 36 require States to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. The Committee on the Rights of the Child also adopted a General Comment 25 on Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment, which acknowledges the importance of child rights in the digital environment and places obligations on states and businesses to take the necessary action.⁹

At Pan-African level, Africa's Agenda for Children 2040, under aspiration 7, stipulates that no form of violence against a child is justifiable and that children have a right to be protected from violence.¹⁰ Besides, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), under Article 27, requires States Parties to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, including the inducement, coercion or encouragement of a child to engage "pornographic" activities, performances and materials. In addition, the AU Commission has adopted the AU Convention on Cyber-security and Personal Data Protection, the Continental Cybersecurity Strategy, the Continental Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy, and AU's Strategy and Plan of Action on Strengthening Regional and National Capacity and Action against Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Africa (2020 - 2025). The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) has, on its part, issued a General Comment on Sexual Exploitation that extends the interpretation of article 27 of the ACRWC to the online environment.¹¹

At sub-regional level, the EAC has put in place a Framework for Cyber laws (2008), while SADC has introduced a Model Law on Computer Crime and Cybercrime. ECOWAS's Directive on Fighting Cyber Crime (2011) is also another REC's level policy worth mentioning.

At the national level, very few countries have legislative frameworks specifically designed to comprehensively address the various manifestations of OCSEA.¹² As the ACERWC noted in 2021, 30 African countries have no law or policy on cyber security, not even a draft. In terms of enforcement and implementation structures, many countries in Africa have a dedicated government structure/ministry responsible for child protection broadly.¹³



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African countries have no law or policy on cyber security, not even a draft, as the ACERWC noted in 2021.

Some others establish multi-sectoral committees dealing with child protection issues, broadly, but not specifically dedicated to and specialised in OSCEA. In terms of programmes and services, 35 African countries do not have national education programmes for raising awareness, services for providing offender

management supports, for empowerment of children to protect themselves or for supporting parents, carers, teachers and childcare professionals to keep children safe. Besides, 27 African countries had no capability to provide special victim support services and to investigate and prosecute online sex crimes.

Conclusion:

Online sexual abuse and exploitation of children is a crime against children that is rising rapidly and evolving fast both in terms of the sophistication of its methods and its ability to outpace law enforcement efforts. It is, thus, important to take this scourge very seriously before it destructs the lives of millions of children. This policy brief, by distilling the available evidence on the issue, seeks to call upon all relevant stakeholders to appreciate the urgency, gravity and ubiquity of the problem and take the necessary action at various levels.

Recommendations:

Given the alarming rate at which OSCEA is growing and evolving, multi-sectoral, cross-country and cross-regional efforts are required at policy and programmatic levels, including in the following areas:

1. **Raising public awareness** about the drivers of online child sexual exploitation, including the underlying structural factors as well as on the available educational programmes and services, the consequences for violations, and the support systems that are available.
2. **Adopting/Strengthening laws and policies** that explicitly prohibit online child sexual exploitation and abuse in its varied manifestations (ratifying international and regional treaties but also harmonising them with local laws and developing OCSEA specific legislations).
3. **Implementing and enforcing laws and policies on OCSEA**, including by building the capacity of police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, social workers, educators and frontline health workers by equipping them with adequate knowledge and technical capacity to identify, investigate and prosecute perpetrators, as well as provide child-friendly support to victims.
4. **Strengthening cross-sectoral, cross-regional, and cross-country collaboration** to be able to facilitate collaboration among sectors within a country and among countries and regions.
5. **Harnessing technological innovations and solutions** that include safety by design and similar other initiatives that make it harder for offenders to exploit online services are required. It is more than deterrence of potential offenders. Prevention is all of this, and more.
6. **Generating data and evidence** systematically and regularly on the scale, magnitude and impact of the problem but also on good practices that can be adopted and implemented at a scale.

Endnotes

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