



Shocking rise in online sexual exploitation and abuse of children across Africa

Nairobi, June 20, 2024 — New briefings jointly produced by ChildFund International (Africa Region) and the Africa Child Policy Forum (ACPF) have uncovered the shocking rise in the online sexual exploitation and abuse of children (OSEAC) across the continent.

Among the findings from the ACPF and ChildFund are that in some countries, around a fifth of children under 17 have received unsolicited online requests to talk about sex or sexual acts. In South Africa alone, a third of those went on to have a face-to-face meeting.

“The pervasive attitude that online crimes are not real crimes has created an atmosphere of virtual lawlessness,” said ACPF’s Executive Director Dr. Joan Nyanyuki. “Africa is witnessing a problem that is sharply on the rise, and the evidence shows that Africa may be the new frontier for online sexual predators.” Even more alarming is the extremely young age of many victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Although there are no studies showing the scale of online child sexual exploitation and abuse of children across the whole of Africa, one survey showed more than 60 percent of unidentified victims were young children, including infants and toddlers, and 65 percent were girls.

“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,” said Chege Ngugi, Africa Regional Director at ChildFund. “The key question for African countries is whether or not they are adequately prepared to provide greater protection and safeguarding for children online.”

Among the findings highlighted in three new OSEAC policy briefs from the two organizations are:

- Up to a third of children aged 12-17 in Ethiopia and Mozambique shared personal information with strangers online.
- 19 percent of children aged 9-17 in South Africa and 21 percent aged 15-17 in Uganda received unwanted online requests to talk about sex or sexual acts.
- Up to 13 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds in Kenya and Mozambique were threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities online.
- On average, seven percent of children shared sexualized images of themselves online.
- One-third of 9- to 17-year-olds in South Africa and over a quarter of 12- to 17-year-olds in Mozambique went onto a face-to-face meeting after an online contact.

“The impact of sexual abuse and exploitation of children — whether physical or online — is enormous,” said Dr. Nyanyuki. “Children are being severely damaged physically, psychologically and socially. Victims of

online child sexual exploitation and abuse often report experiencing feelings of anxiety, guilt and shame, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance and alcohol abuse and depression.”

The policy briefings also detail the multiple types of OSEAC perpetrator and the channels they use for their criminal activities. They identify five main types of criminals:

- **Traders** who collect and share child pornography, and in doing so fuel the market for yet more abuse.
- **Networkers** who set up and engage in social networks specifically for those with a sexual interest in children.
- **Groomers** engaging in inappropriate sexual communication with children.
- **Travellers** who locate children to abuse.
- **Traffickers** involved in recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving children across international boundaries.

“The factors that drive OSEAC in Africa are very similar to those in other parts of the world,” added Mr. Ngugi. “But Africa is the continent with the fast-growing number of internet users — a generally lawless space which encourages criminals to commit these crimes without fear of detection and prosecution. We urge technology companies to take decisive action in detecting, reporting, and swiftly removing child sexual abuse materials from their platforms.”

The two organizations identify multiple criminal pathways to OSEAC in Africa, including the production, distribution and possession of child pornography; online grooming of children; sexting; the sexual extortion of children (‘sextortion’); revenge pornography; commercial sexual exploitation; online child prostitution; and the live streaming of sexual abuse.

ACPF and ChildFund also agree that current legislation and policy are woefully inadequate. They note that as of 2021, 30 African countries had no laws or policies on cyber security — not even as a draft — and make several recommendations aimed at the African Union (including the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child), Regional Economic Communities, national governments, and civil society organizations:

- Raise awareness among policy makers, practitioners, children, families and the public.
- Adopt new laws and policies, and strengthen existing ones.
- Implement and enforce those laws and policies.
- Strengthen cross-sectoral, cross regional and cross-country collaboration.
- Build the capacities of professionals such as police officers, prosecutors, judges and magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff and social workers.
- Harness tech innovations and solutions to boost children’s online security and deter perpetrators.
- Invest in new research, data and evidence gathering.

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

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Copies of the three joint policy briefs can be downloaded [here](#).

About ACPF

African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) is an independent, not-for-profit Pan-African centre of policy research and advocacy centre on the African child. It was established in 2003 out of concern about the situation of the African child and the need for Africans to recognize their responsibility to collectively ensure the realization of all rights to all children. More information [here](#).

About ChildFund

ChildFund International works throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas to connect children with the people, resources and institutions they need to grow up healthy, educated, skilled and safe, wherever they are. We place a special emphasis on child protection throughout our approach because violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect can reverse developmental gains in an instant. Last year, we reached 21.1 million children and family members in 23 countries. More information [here](#).