

Research report

Forum: UNICEF

Issue: Implementing Public Health Interventions and
Protection Frameworks for Child Victims of
Online Exploitation Networks

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Introduction

According to UNICEF's report on ending child sexual exploitation and abuse, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys have been sexually exploited or abused prior to the age of 18. Nowadays, as online social networks become more common, these spaces allow offenders to maintain secrecy and remain relatively anonymous, popularizing the use of these online networks in cases of child sexual exploitation. Technology also allows for the distribution of child sexual abuse imagery. These networks target vulnerable individuals, and manipulate them into abuse, self-harm, or illegal acts. While past UNICEF action against this issue has been successful to a degree, these online exploitation networks continue to outpace global security measures.

This issue affects children all around the globe, but targets those that are especially vulnerable. This includes children living under poverty, experiencing social isolation, dealing with mental health struggles, or those without access to support systems. It is important to consider that child internet access is more common in high income countries, as opposed to most low and middle income countries.

Besides the criminal persecution aspect, this issue is becoming an increasing public health concern. Victims of this exploitation often face long term mental and physical repercussions like anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and self harm (among others). This requires coordinated efforts from healthcare systems, social services, and law enforcement in order to achieve an effective solution. Policies must strike a balance between fostering opportunities for young people through the digital world, whilst protecting them from harm.

Definitions of key terms

Child sexual abuse (CSA)

The act of coercing a child into sexual activity, whether the child is aware of it or not. This may include the following: involving a child in the creation or observation of sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse.

Child sexual exploitation (CSE)

A type of CSA. This involves a group or an individual taking advantage of a power imbalance in order to coerce or manipulate a child into sexual activity. This can be done in exchange for something the victim wants, or in order to obtain money, power, or status from the perpetrator. The victim may have been exploited even if they appear to give consent.

Online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA)

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The use of online platforms and networks to facilitate the production and distribution of child sexual content, which can take a number of different forms (see the following 3 key words)

Online Grooming

Developing a relationship with a child in order to facilitate their involvement in sexual acts both online and offline. Various social media, live streaming, and messaging platforms can be used to facilitate this offending. There are a variety of social media platforms and communications apps that allow perpetrators to find their victims. Perpetrators usually feign having common interests or hobbies in order to gain the victim's trust. The perpetrator's main objective is to escalate from a friendship to a relationship, where they can then coerce the child into engaging in sexual acts.

Online Coercion and Blackmail

The coercion or blackmail of a child by means of online platforms, which uses sexual images / videos of that child for personal, sexual, or financial gain.

Live streaming

Live streaming child sexual abuse involves the real time broadcasting of child sexual abuse to viewers. This often involves transmissions across borders, though some countries have reported cases of domestic streaming. This streaming can be conducted through various social media platforms, chat rooms, and communication apps. Viewers can remain passive (pay to watch) or become active (requesting certain physical acts to be performed)

Online exploitation networks

Online groups that target and manipulate vulnerable children and young people by means of various online platforms. Through these online platforms, members of the groups employ various predatory techniques to target, victimize, and recruit young people.

General overview

As internet access becomes widespread, more children have access to social media platforms, and other forms of online networks. As digital platforms become seamlessly tangled with everyday life, they are used for forming relationships, education, leisure, and more. However, these technologies expose youth to many threats. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that the population of internet users is becoming increasingly younger, with 41% being below 15 years of age and 90% aged 15-24. This newfound connectivity has facilitated online child exploitation in many ways, outpacing attempts to solve the issue. The sale and

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distribution of child sexual images has in many ways been made easier by the use of online platforms and networks.

For example, the creation of websites whose purpose is the sale and sexual exploitation of children, which increases accessibility to possible perpetrators. Also, technological advancements have allowed for new forms of abuse and exploitation. An example of this is live streaming child sexual abuse, which not only provides content for perpetrators, but also allows the content to spread beyond the scope of offline exploitation, since these livestreams move the issue beyond national borders. This live streaming can also be hard to trace, given that it occurs in real time and can leave little to no image or video evidence. Another way in which online platforms enable abuse and exploitation is the sharing of images, by which perpetrators are able to use encrypted communication channels, VPNs, or the dark web, to cover their tracks and remain anonymous. Overall, the use of technology has made it easier for perpetrators to remain anonymous, and has also allowed the scope of this issue to extend beyond national borders.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is considered to be a worldwide public health crisis, with 12.5% of children worldwide estimated to be affected by online CSEA. According to research conducted by Childlight, the global child safety institute hosted by the University of Edinburgh and the University of New South Wales, shows this issue to be more prevalent than many other child public health problems, including asthma and childhood obesity. CSEA has considerable lifelong mental and physical impacts on its victims. Furthermore, this issue presents a considerable economic and social cost to society. In 2021, the UK home office estimated that the cost of unprevented contact child sexual abuse was around £10.1 billion. Because of the sheer scale of the issue (over 300 million children affected worldwide) this crisis demands cross-sector, international collaboration.

In terms of managing the issue, governments and international institutions struggle for many reasons. Surveys made by UNICEF estimate that around 90% of countries studied suffer from major gaps in legislative frameworks when it comes to tackling online CSEA. Countries face significant challenges in the functioning of government mechanisms, limited data collection, and limited use of data collected to inform decisions on policy making. An analysis conducted by the Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University reports that despite the growing international action and legislation to tackle the issue and improve detection and removal of harmful content, technological and societal shifts have increased the risk to children since 2023.

Major parties involved

UNICEF

Since this is the committee we are discussing this issue in, UNICEF is a global leader when it comes to tackling online CSEA and its consequences. In the past, UNICEF has pushed for stronger legislative action on tackling online CSEA, supported national response frameworks, and raised alarm over threats like AI deepfake abuse. In its database UNICEF also holds many reports that delegates may find useful in their research.

INTERPOL

The INTERPOL coordinates international law enforcement efforts and supports police investigations in multiple countries. This makes it key in coordinating international action against this issue. The INTERPOL also holds the International Child Sexual Exploitation database, which could be helpful to delegates throughout their research.

WeProtect Global Alliance

WeProtect bridges the gap between governments, private sector, international organizations, and civil society in order to tackle CSEA. It brings together over 350 members including governments, NGOs, and companies. It developed the Model National Response, a framework detailing how countries should implement and improve child protective services. I recommend delegates read through it, as it can give a good starting point on writing resolutions on the issue.

Internet Watch Foundation (IWF)

The IWF is an NGO (Non government organisation) which helps victims of sexual abuse by removing online records of the abuse. They work to stop the circulation of online CSEA images, and work closely with internet providers and governments. They also publish annual reports on online abuse trends, which I recommend checking out.

Timeline of Key Events

1989	The convention of the rights of child (CRC) is adopted by the UN General Assembly.
2000	The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (OPSC) expands states' obligations and criminalises the sale of children, child prostitution, and child sexual abuse material.
2001	Budapest Convention of Cybercrime takes place. Establishes a shared framework to criminalise cyber offenses and foster international cooperation.
2007	Launch of the Global Initiative to Fight Child Trafficking (UN.GIFT) Made to promote the global fight against human trafficking on the basis of international agreements made by the UN.
2015	The adoption of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) SDG 16 calls for the end of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking of children.
2016	The WeProtect Global Alliance is formed.
2020	The introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic increases risks of online exploitation of children due to a higher exposure and reliance of online networks and social media platforms.
2023	Cooperation agreement between UNICEF and INTERPOL to strengthen international effort against child abuse and exploitation.
2025	The WeProtect Global Alliance releases their annual global threat assessment. This report identifies emerging threats like AI deepfake sexual abuse, and should be considered in conversations about the future of this issue.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

The Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) of 1989 was one of the first attempts to establish an international legal framework whose primary goal was to protect children. While this came at a time before the technological involvement we see today, it provided a solid foundation which protected children from many types of abuse and exploitation. While it was certainly successful

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for its time, it predated widespread internet use, and therefore many of the forms of abuse and exploitation seen today through online networks are unaccounted for. UNICEF has noted that one of the biggest struggles that legal frameworks that try to tackle this issue face are rapid technological advances.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography was adopted in 2000. This resolution expanded on the CRC, criminalizing forms of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and distribution of sexual abuse material, as well as encouraging international cooperation. Once again, this solution comes before our current technological landscape, meaning since it was adopted many other forms of exploitation have appeared. This means that the existing legal frameworks have to be adapted to better fit the rapid development of technology.

Another notable attempt at tackling this issue is the Model National Response established by the WeProtect Global Alliance. WeProtect focused its efforts in developing a framework that helped countries combat child exploitation and abuse. This framework covers areas like legislation, criminal justice, supporting victims, prevention, etc. Providing governments with a common framework was extremely useful, since international cooperation is crucial in dealing with this issue. Despite this, implementing the framework everywhere has proved particularly difficult, especially in low and middle income countries.

In 2023 INTERPOL and UNICEF signed a cooperation agreement to end child sexual exploitation and abuse. INTERPOL's involvement is very important, as online child sexual exploitation and abuse often goes beyond national borders and requires the intervention of international bodies like INTERPOL. This agreement included sharing expertise, strengthening national capacities, supporting investigations, identifying and protecting victims, and improving international cooperation. This agreement is relatively recent, so rather than a past solution it can be considered more of an ongoing effort. However, it still demonstrates how international cooperation is crucial in solving the issue.

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Possible solutions

Many countries lack the proper child protection frameworks to properly tackle the issue, and the legislation that they do have is burdened by limited resources and weak reporting mechanisms. It is important that delegates consider how to strengthen national protection frameworks in a way that allows countries to remain adaptable to new online threats.

A factor that also plays a huge role in the issue is international cooperation. Online exploitation cases often cross domestic borders, causing issues between nations with different legal systems. Delegates should find a way to encourage legal cooperation and information sharing between countries.

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