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Through Children's Eyes

How digital technologies enable child sexual abuse

A note on this report: This report reflects the real, lived experiences of children subjected to sexual abuse, told in their own words, alongside one of the largest bodies of survey data assembled on this subject. Some of it is confronting and includes first-hand descriptions of abuse; some may find it difficult to read. In recognition that the report may reach younger readers, we have partially masked the most explicit words, without altering their meaning.

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Executive summary

The evidence

Across 21 countries, an estimated 20 million children aged 12 to 17 – about 1 in 5 of the internet-using children in these countries – were sexually exploited or abused through digital technologies in a single year. They were targeted on digital platforms they used every day, sometimes by someone they already knew, and sometimes by someone they first met online. Many of these children did not seek help: less than 1 per cent of cases were reported to the police, a social worker or a helpline, and more than 4 in 10 cases were disclosed to no one at all.

Children subjected to these forms of abuse were four times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and behaviours, four times more likely to self-harm and reported anxiety levels around 11 percentage points higher than their peers. The associations are deeply concerning, and these profound impacts can extend well beyond the immediate incident, affecting children's schooling, relationships and everyday lives.

This report deals with 'technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse' which covers the ways digital tools and platforms are used to expose, solicit, coerce, extort, or share sexual content involving children, or to amplify and enable the sexual abuse and exploitation of children in both online and in-person settings. This is not a marginal risk; it runs through mainstream, everyday platforms.

The Disrupting Harm research project is one of the largest studies of its kind: conducted jointly by UNICEF, ECPAT International and INTERPOL, the project implemented nationally representative surveys of around 21,000 internet-using children aged 12 to 17 across 21 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe, alongside in-depth interviews with more than 100 young people subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse during childhood, over 500 frontline professionals and law enforcement personnel working directly with cases of abuse, and reviews of national policies and legislation.

This report centres the data and evidence provided directly by children. For the first time at this scale, it lets us see the problem through children's own eyes. Yet even this can show only part of a much larger picture; the estimated 20 million internet-using children affected represent a fraction of the world's roughly one billion adolescents. With risks present wherever children are, the true global number of children subjected to this abuse is certain to run into many tens of millions.

Listening to what children tell us, however uncomfortable, is central to protecting them: looking away serves no one but those who cause or facilitate harm. What follows is faithful to children's own accounts, because the world cannot act on what it refuses to hear.

Three things we cannot ignore

First, the harm is widespread, and it happens through mainstream platforms. In a single year and in only 21 countries, an estimated 15 million children were exposed to unwanted sexual content, 9 million were asked to engage in sexual conversations or to share sexual images against their will and 4 million had sexual images of them shared without permission. Almost 60 per cent of this abuse happened on social media and 14 per cent transpired in games; the five social media platforms where most of this abuse occurred were Facebook (50 per cent), WhatsApp (29 per cent), Instagram (24 per cent), Snapchat (13 per cent) and TikTok (12 per cent).

Second, platform features, functions and design enable trust to be exploited. Much of the harm comes from people children know: across the 21 countries, 57 per cent of cases involved a perpetrator already known to the child, and in nine of the countries, children were exploited and abused by another child in more than 1 in 4 cases. But this does not make it a private problem. The features and functions of digital platforms are being used to exploit trust: the unsolicited message request to a child account, the migration to a closed chat, the reshare, the fake profile, the ability to return after being blocked. The abuse is digital platform-enabled and carried out through features that could be built differently. Meanwhile, in 38 per cent of cases, children first met the perpetrator online.

Abuse is also shaped by gender. Perpetrators weaponize the stigma and blame that follows disclosure to keep girls silent. Boys are harmed too and targeted differently, their abuse is more often minimized, with perpetrators exploiting the expectation that boys should cope alone and sometimes threatening to reveal or falsely imply a boy's sexual orientation as a means of extortion. Gender norms for girls and boys are often used against them.

Third, when children need help, the system is not fully able to support them. Even when they exist, mechanisms to report, complain, or seek help are not seen as viable options for children when they need them most. More than 4 in 10 cases were disclosed to no one at all. Where children did tell someone, it was most likely a friend (23 per cent), then a sibling or mother. Fewer than 1 per cent reported their experience to the police, a social worker or a helpline. The most common reason for silence was simply not knowing where to go or who to tell (25 per cent). This is a failure of the system. Notably, some children interviewed said they stayed silent for fear of losing access to their devices or platforms, a reminder that simply cutting children off can deepen the very silence that leaves them unprotected.

What must change

Taken together, these findings tell a clear story. The harm is widespread and it reaches children through everyday platforms; children's trust is exploited and harm is enabled by platform design choices; and when children seek help, the systems built to protect them are not seen as viable options. Children often respond with remarkable resourcefulness – blocking perpetrators, avoiding certain online spaces and protecting each other – but their resilience is not a substitute for effective protection. That they must cope so much alone is itself evidence of societies and systems failing them. Children should not have to fight so hard to be safe and supported.

The current situation is failing children very badly. The answer is not in simply restricting access to certain sites, displacing children and abusers to other parts of the internet or creating more reasons to hide problems. The evidence points to clear, achievable action by those with the power to act. The answer lies in addressing how platforms are designed by companies, how online spaces are regulated by governments and the creation of societies and systems that make it much easier for children to recognize and speak up about abuse, reach out for help and get protection and redress, so no child has to face this alone.

Technology companies must design for safety, not maximum engagement. Platforms should establish privacy-by-default protocols for children, restrict unsolicited contact from adults, ensure recommender systems neither surface children to potential perpetrators nor promote sexualizing content and proactively detect abuse material, including AI-generated content.

Governments and regulators must make safety enforceable. Governments should regulate for safety-by-design, equip regulators with the technical expertise, resources and powers to hold industry to account, and update laws to cover grooming, sexual extortion and AI-generated abuse material.

Sectors must work together to build reporting pathways children can actually reach. This includes effective reporting mechanisms about what's happening on platforms, and funding the social service, health and justice responses that children need to stop harm.

Societies, schools and families must shift the burden of protection off children. Adults around the child should reinforce that abuse is never the child's fault, respond to disclosure with care rather than blame or restriction, and address the economic vulnerabilities and harmful norms that perpetrators exploit.

The stakes

The norms and values that enable abuse can change. The technology through which this harm reaches children can be redesigned. The rules and regulations around it can be rewritten. If they are, millions of children can benefit from the digital world without it being turned against them. If they are not, the silence, and the cycle of harm, trauma and mental health impacts will continue. Children have shared their experiences with honesty and courage. Their voices must now lead to change.

Introduction

It often begins without warning.

For many children, sexual content isn't something they anticipate. It just shows up – appearing uninvited in messages, chats, or calls – sometimes from strangers, but frequently from people they know. A girl in Colombia describes receiving unsolicited sexual content when she was 15–16 years old:

> **"You start chatting on Facebook with your friends and, all of a sudden, a message request arrives with a photo of an intimate part of who knows who and inviting you to do racy things. And it wasn't just once, but several times. And you [think]: 'But well, what's happening at this moment? I'm not talking to you, I don't know who you are'"**

Across 21 countries, 20 million children aged 12–17 were subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a single year.

That is about 1 in 5 internet-using children, on average.

It doesn't always stop at exposure.

What begins as an unsolicited message can quickly shift into something more direct – a request, a demand, or repeated pressure disguised as normal conversation. A girl from Mexico recalls being asked for sexual images by adult men who were friends with her older sister, when she was 14 years old:

> **"He would be like 'send me a picture of you with your uniform and lift up your skirt' and I would tell him like 'hey I feel very bad, and I feel very alone' and it was like out of nowhere: 'why haven't I seen you naked?'"**

Conversation becomes coercion, and coercion becomes entrapment.

A common thread across these experiences is the fear that something personal will be shared without permission. Shame, humiliation and the threat of consequences for family, relationships, or reputation are weaponized to silence children and continue the abuse.

A young woman from Brazil describes how previous messages between her and the perpetrator were used as leverage to get her to comply with further demands:

> **"He said 'Here's the deal, if you don't send me a photo, I'll go after your parents, I'll go into your profile, I'll look for your mother and I'll send her screenshots of everything you say to me. Do you want that?' And then I said 'No, don't do that, for God's sake. Don't do that because if my parents see this, my mother will be much angrier with me, and I'll be much worse off.'"**

Too often, children tell no one at all.

What may appear as outward silence often masks complex inner turmoil; it can be shaped by uncertainty, normalization of harm and deep anxiety over what might happen if they speak up. A young man from Montenegro, identifying as gay, explains why he chose not to tell anyone about receiving unwanted sexual content from older men:

> **"I didn't share that with anyone. I felt uncomfortable to share it, I was ashamed to share it. Now I'm not, now I can talk about it. But I think when you're 15, and you're still so insecure, you are ashamed, like, if I say that, what will people think of me? What will happen?"**

What can make a difference is recognizing these issues early and for adults and children to respond together. Children need adults and institutions that show themselves to be trustworthy, so that when something feels wrong, children are listened to, believed and supported. Adults and institutions, in turn, need support to respond with care, not blame or panic.

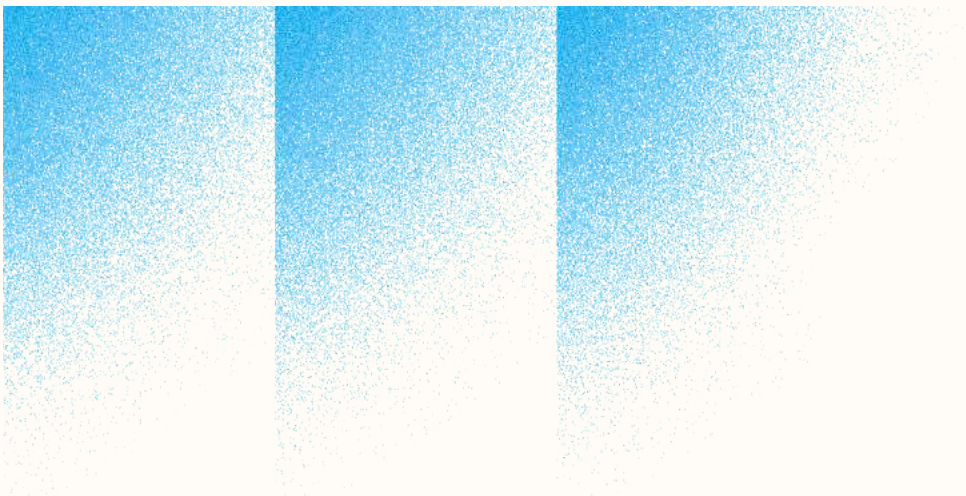
But even the most supportive adults cannot shoulder this responsibility alone. Digital service providers have a critical role to play. Every interaction between a child and an online platform reflects countless design decisions. Those decisions can either make it easier for perpetrators to find and target children, or they can create barriers that stop abuse before it starts.

The chapters that follow bring these realities into focus through the voices and experiences of children themselves, drawing on years of large-scale surveys and in-depth interviews with children and young people subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation.

This report reveals how the abuse takes many forms, who is behind it, where it begins and how it moves between online and in-person spaces. It explores the difficult journey of disclosure, the profound and lasting impact abuse can have, and the agency and resilience some children show in the face of adversity.

Together, these insights lead to a clear conclusion: children should not have to carry this burden alone. The report concludes with recommendations for the actions needed across society to better prevent abuse, support those affected and create a safer world for every child.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix



Methodology

This report draws on data collected in 21 countries through two rounds of the Disrupting Harm research project, including surveys and in-depth interviews.

Most statistics presented in this report are based on nationally representative survey data collected between 2020 and 2025 from approximately 21,000 internet-using children aged 12–17, living in these 21 countries.

The countries included are: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Uganda (Eastern and Southern Africa); Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam (Southeast Asia), Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico (Latin America and the Caribbean); Armenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Eastern Europe and Central Asia); and Pakistan (South Asia).

Some analyses draw on new questions that were only asked in nine countries in the second round of the Disrupting Harm project, which included around 9,000 children living in Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, North Macedonia, Mexico, Montenegro, Pakistan and Serbia. These analyses are indicated by an obelus (†).

The statistical estimates are based on a comparable seven-indicator measure of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse used across both rounds of research, providing insights into patterns observed across countries over the past five years, but during different time periods. For more information on the statistical analysis see the Appendix.

The quotes presented are direct testimonies from in-depth interviews with over 100 children or young people who were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood (90 women/girls and 10 men/boys, aged 16-24, living in Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, North Macedonia, Mexico, Montenegro and Serbia). Interviews were conducted between 2024–2025.

The narrative and insights present a synthesis of all these data.

How does digital technology enable sexual exploitation and abuse?

Unwanted exposure to sexual content

For some children, it happens just once. For others, it keeps happening. Over time, repeated unwanted exposure to sexual content can start to feel normal, even though it isn't.

It can occur at random, appearing unexpectedly, through unsolicited messages or calls on social media platforms. A young woman from Brazil shared how she received a call from an unknown number when she was 16 years old:

An estimated 15 million children were exposed to sexual content they did not want to see in just one year.

"When I answered, there was a guy, he wasn't showing his face, he was just showing his parts, he was m***b***** and asking me to show my chest, that kind of thing. So, I went and hung up. He kept texting me, but when I answered, he kept saying, 'Oh, don't tell your mother. No, no, don't say anything to your mother.' And to this day I don't know who did it, you know?"**

But unwanted exposure to sexual content is not always random. Perpetrators may deliberately send sexual content to test boundaries – watching how a child reacts, pushing a little further each time. What starts as an unwanted image or message can shift into pressure or requests:

> **"Messages at that moment were like 'Hello, hello, I'm sorry I'm insisting, how are you?' And suddenly the messages would have photos, disgusting photos, sexual insinuation. He would say I was a b****, that I probably wanted it and things like that."**

Behind this testimony is a young girl from Mexico, who described how a boy close to her age created different social media accounts to send her unwanted sexual content and harass her, demonstrating how unwanted sexual content may be used as part of an ongoing pattern of abuse.

These experiences can involve strangers children meet online, but more frequently they involve people children already know from their own communities, schools, friendships, or intimate relationships. Harm can emerge through ordinary interactions that gradually become sexual, intrusive and abusive.

A young woman from Serbia shared how, as a child, she was repeatedly sent sexual images without warning – sometimes by people she knew and sometimes by strangers. She explained:

> **"A boy actually, whom I knew for a long time, a really, really long time. We were talking [online] normally as friends and then he just said, 'Since you have a boyfriend and you don't want to be my girlfriend, I would love to be your slave', and then he started to send me some pictures and videos from porn sites."**

Children do not always recognize these experiences as abusive. They can feel confusing, easy to dismiss, or not "serious enough" to tell anyone about. A girl from Mexico told us how, when she was only 12 years old, someone she did not know started sending her unwanted sexual images through Facebook:

> **"Well, at that age you have very little information about types of harassment, types of violence, so I felt very uncomfortable, but at that moment I did not, for example, block him and I did not stop replying, right? I kept replying and asking who he was, no? Because I did not know him, we did not have any friends in common."**

When these experiences are not understood as abusive – or are ignored or normalized – perpetrators are able to continue unchecked and escalate the harm. Over time, children may find it increasingly difficult to disclose harm or seek help, especially if they feel shame, self-doubt, or a sense of being to blame for continuing the interaction or sharing sexual content.

Sexual solicitation and extortion

The harm doesn't always stop at seeing or receiving something unwanted. It moves into conversation, where messages become requests. A girl from Brazil highlights being exposed to sexual content via online calls, messages and videos when she was 16 years old:

> **"He'd already sent several photos. M*****b*****, lying down, he sent me a message and wrote: 'I want you to be mine. My little wh***, my hottie. I want to be with you.' He sent me a lot of messages."**

An estimated 9 million children were asked to engage in sexual conversations or to share sexual images or videos when they did not want to.

That is about 1 in 12 internet-using children on average, in a single year.

Exposing children to sexual content, potentially desensitizing them, sometimes goes hand in hand with requesting children to share their own sexual images or videos. These events can be recurring, confusing and emotionally manipulative. Saying no does not always end the abuse. A young person in Brazil described how a perpetrator repeatedly exposed him/her to sexual content, while requesting sexual images in return:

> **"He kept going on about it, sending pictures of his member and saying, 'Look how I am for you', I don't know what else, 'Send me a picture', and I would say no, sorry, I don't feel comfortable, I'm sorry, but I don't want to, I'm scared."**

For some children, the pressure takes other forms. Money, gifts, or attention are offered in exchange for sexual images or in-person meetings. Economic hardship, combined with the normalization of sexual exploitation described earlier, puts children in a particularly vulnerable position, which perpetrators can take advantage of.

A young woman from Colombia recalled being contacted online as a child by a man who offered her money in exchange for sex. She reflected on the fact that she was not aware of the abusive and illegal nature of the situation, given that he provided her with financial support:

> **"I was going through a lot of needs. Then the guy contacted me through social media, he proposed good, well, for me, it was a good amount of money. Because, from having nothing to having what he offered me, well, it was good. Then, after he was arrested by the police, I realized that he took a lot of photos without me realizing it, without my consent."**

An estimated 5.5 million children were offered money or gifts, in return for sexual content or sexual contact in just one year.

What emerges across interviews with young survivors is that sexual solicitation is rarely a one-off request or isolated incident. It often sits within a wider pattern of boundary-pushing, manipulation and the exploitation of children's personal circumstances. This makes it harder for children to recognize what is happening, resist escalating demands, or refuse altogether.

A young woman from Mexico, who was 14 years old when the abuse started, recalls how requests for sexual content were framed in the context of love or fidelity:

> **"After that, he started asking for pictures things like, 'Send me a photo of your pajamas' or 'Show me what you're wearing'. Eventually, it escalated to, 'Take off your shirt'. When I said, 'No,' he'd pressure me, saying, 'If you won't do it, it's because you've already sent it to someone else or because you don't love me.' I'd try to reassure him, 'No, I love you' and he'd reply, 'Then send me a photo without your shirt'. Over time, I started sending them. All of this happened through [Facebook] Messenger."**

In many cases, abuse unfolds within young people's own relationships and social circles, where trust, emotional connection and pressure can become intertwined. A young woman in the Dominican Republic described how, at age 14, she was introduced by a friend to an adult man she had only met online. They developed a relationship and exchanged sexual images. Two years later, the man threatened to share those images with her family and community unless she sent him more.

What began as an attempt to maintain closeness quickly became an experience of vulnerability and harm:

> **"So, we started talking, and we became boyfriend and girlfriend. It was my first relationship, and it was a telephone relationship because we never saw each other in person. When we were in a relationship, as a teenager, your hormones are all over the place, and unfortunately, you listen to everything people tell you, and unfortunately, you fall for the so-called test of love. The person asked me for photos. First, he made me build that bond of trust with him, and then he asked me for intimate photos of myself."**

An estimated 1.5 million children were subjected to threats or blackmail to engage in sexual activities in the year prior to the survey. A further 1.2 million children were threatened with the distribution of sexual images or videos of themselves.†

In many cases, threats and blackmail emerged when a relationship was ending or when one person began distancing themselves and sought to break off contact. This highlights how relationships that initially appear trusting and consensual can quickly shift into coercion, threats and abuse when one party attempts to end the relationship. A young woman in Serbia shared how she was threatened when she tried to end the relationship with her boyfriend:

> **"I said like 'Listen, I really don't want to be with you anymore' and I think that's when the blackmailing started. Like, 'I will post your photos on Facebook, everyone will see them'."**

In these situations, control is maintained through fear of exposure. From that point, children are drawn into escalating pressure, leaving them with little space to refuse, step away, or make it stop.

Non-consensual sharing of sexual content

Although it can lead to harm, some young people today may not see sharing sexual images with others as inherently harmful, but part of relationship-building, flirtation and sexual exploration in a digital age. In our research, young people described sharing images because they were having fun, felt emotionally close to someone, were in love, trusted the recipient, or simply did not see anything wrong with it at the time. A young woman from Colombia who had suffered various forms of abuse and harassment since childhood explained:

> **"When I had my first boyfriend, we sometimes sent each other photos. He was my first boyfriend, it was something very respectful, I don't know how to explain it ... Because I remember that my parents found out about those conversations I had with my boyfriend and they scolded me a lot: 'It's that you don't make yourself respected', all that. And I would say, but, I want to do it, I mean, he's my boyfriend, I like him."**

But what may begin as a private exchange can become a means of abuse. Private images are shared further, sometimes widely, sometimes within peer networks, and often without warning. A 17-year-old girl from Mexico described how she initially shared sexual images with a friend consensually, only to later discover that the images had been distributed to other peers through Telegram without her knowledge:

"I trusted him a lot, and everything was fine. At one point, he started asking me for pictures, and I trusted him, so I sent them to him. Then I realized he was resharing the pictures."

An estimated 4 million children had someone else share sexual images of them without permission in the span of one year.

Having sexual content circulated among peers or in public can cause serious harm, but young people also spoke about the emotional impact of broken trust and loss of control. Many described carrying intense feelings of shame and self-blame, even in situations where others had clearly violated their trust. A young woman from Serbia expressed in the interview that she felt it was "my fault in some way" that her private images were shared with others online. When asked what she meant, she responded:

"So, he asked me for those pictures and I, I just sent them to him. It was so, like ... easy ... and when I think for example today, what I have done, you know, I literally can't, can't believe it. I feel a bit ashamed to talk about it, to tell you the truth."

In other cases, images are created or taken without consent in the first place, then circulated later. The harm is not contained in a single moment – it can resurface repeatedly as content is shared with different people and across spaces. A young woman from Brazil recalls continuously surveilling social media, looking for a sexual image portraying her:

"I remember that every week I would look on Twitter and Instagram for things that had been leaked, nudes of people. I even looked on Google images to see if there were any of me, but thank God, I didn't find any. I remember I spent years and years looking, and I never found it, but I also don't know what he did with that photo. I can't imagine he deleted it."

A girl from Mexico, who was 16 years old at the time, explained how she found out that her sexual images, along with images of multiple girls in her community, were being advertised via a Facebook group, and later sold through Telegram.

> **"They were not 10 folders, nor 20, they were around 300, organized alphabetically by name. I mean, depending on the municipality, there were files for [mentions different municipalities]. They would present the images on Facebook and announce the selling of images folders on Facebook, and I think at the time they cost 7.5 pesos."**

At the centre of these experiences is not wrongdoing by a child, but abuse carried out by those who choose to exploit, expose, or profit from a child's private images. This includes situations where sexual images are not even real but digitally created or manipulated using AI tools. The impact of this form of abuse can be just as severe, and the consequences long lasting.

A young woman from Montenegro recounted receiving a digitally altered image of herself:

> **"It was during a school recess, and I opened [a photo received from a fake profile via Instagram]. They managed to take my photo, take my head and put it on someone else's body and make it look like it was actually my photo, like it was me."**

Over 1.1 million children have had AI-generated sexual images or videos created depicting them in just one year.†

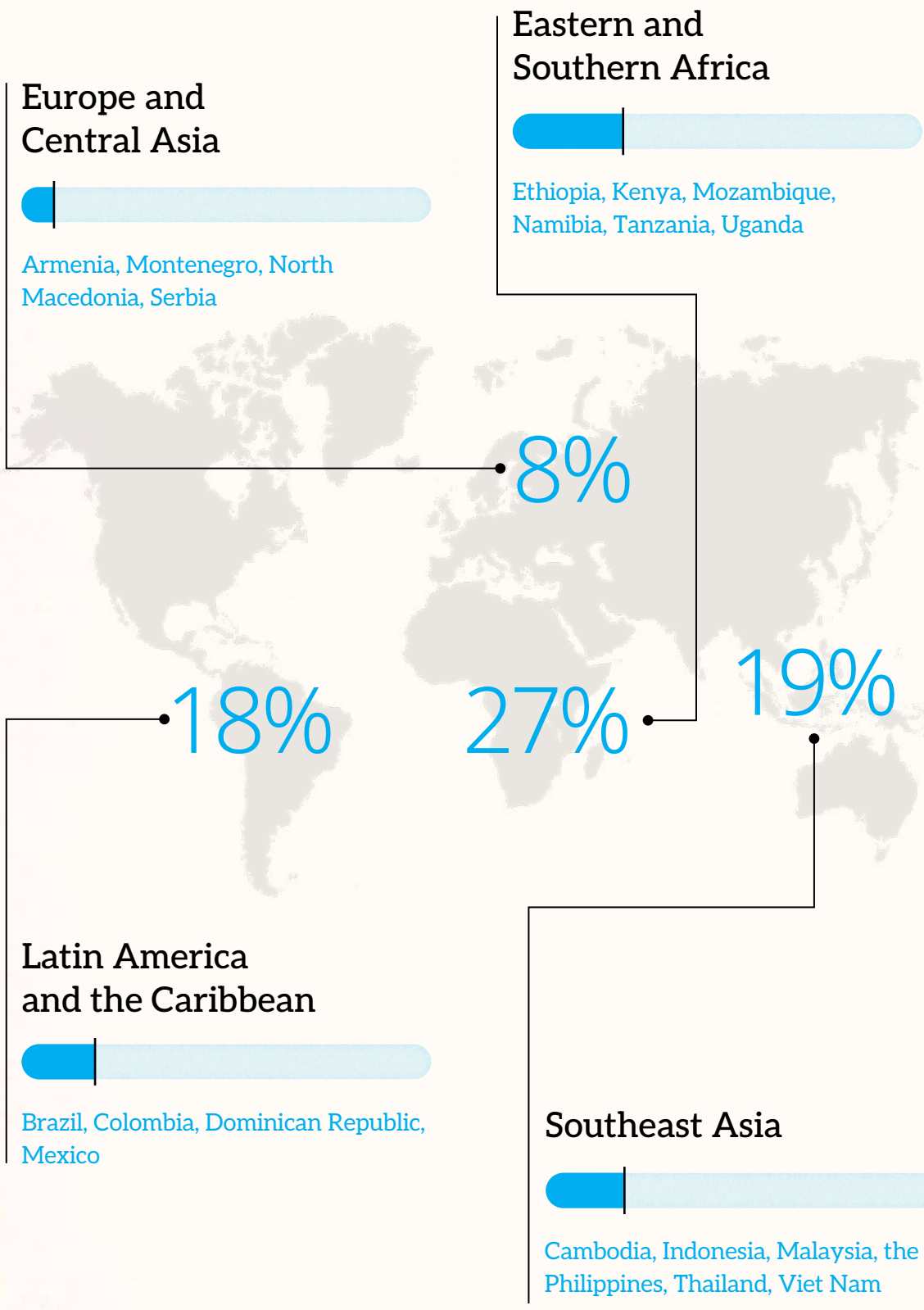
Whether it begins with trust, threats, coercion, or digitally manipulated deepfakes, the outcome is severe. Once an image or video is shared online, it can be reshared and reshaped, and can reappear in ways that can be difficult to contain.

Yet children often end up carrying the burden of what happened. Society questions their decisions, rather than the actions of the perpetrator. Preventing this harm requires shifting that narrative.

Responsibility lies with those who manipulate, coerce, pressure, exploit, or violate children by misusing their private images – not with the child who was harmed. Responsibility also lies with digital service providers who have a duty to prevent, detect and remove non-consensual intimate images, and to ensure their services do not facilitate or profit from such abuse.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix

Percentage of internet-using children subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, by region:



Who abuses children?

It does not always begin with a stranger. More often, it starts with someone a child already knows or recognizes. A classmate, a boyfriend or girlfriend, someone from the community, or a family member. Sometimes it is an adult, but often it is not. In many cases, it is a peer or acquaintance.

These interactions unfold within existing relationships and social networks. Throughout the interviews, young people spoke about their desire to form new social connections; seeking friendship, romance, affection and a sense of belonging. These motivations are a normal and important part of adolescent development. However, it is also something that perpetrators may deliberately or opportunistically take advantage of and exploit.

A girl from the Dominican Republic described how, at 13 years of age, her first relationship with a boy her own age turned abusive:

> **"And I started supposedly my first 'romantic' relationship. I really liked the guy, to tell you the truth, he was my first love. Until a time came when we were supposed to be more comfortable with each other, and he started asking me for images. He would say to me, 'No, you should make a video of yourself dancing, like this, in your underwear', and things like that. And I would think about it a lot, a lot, a lot, but in the end, I did it."**

She later learned that he had shared those images and videos with one of his friends, who subsequently informed her of what had happened. Her experience illustrates how abuse can develop within relationships that initially feel safe, affectionate and voluntary:

> **"I realized that he wasn't just looking at those pictures and videos on his own, but with a friend of his. And at one point, I don't know if he [the boyfriend's friend] felt sorry for me or what happened. He wrote to me and said, 'Look, you should leave him.' And I said, 'But why? Everything is fine'. He sent me one of the photos of me. And, well, I felt like the most used, the dirtiest, the worst person."**

What begins as a request for a photo, a private conversation, or a proof of love can quickly cross boundaries and become harmful. Sometimes this harm is intentional. In other cases, young people may not fully understand consent, privacy, respectful relationships, or the consequences of sharing someone else's intimate content with others. Peer cultures and harmful norms around gender or masculinity can further normalize behaviours that cause significant harm, making abuse harder to recognize and address.

Therefore, prevention efforts cannot focus only on strangers online; they must also help children and young people understand consent, boundaries, respect and responsibility in their relationships with one another.

But some abuse is more deliberate, targeted and predatory. Alongside peer and relationship-based situations, some children are subjected to abuse by unknown individuals who intentionally seek them out online. Perpetrators use digital platforms to identify, contact and manipulate children deliberately. Conversations that begin as friendly, casual and caring can gradually become more coercive and controlling as trust is established and boundaries are tested. In other cases, the abuse is immediate and intrusive, with explicit sexual content or propositions sent without warning.

Perpetrators often exploit the reactions they know children are likely to face if they tell anyone about the abuse. They draw on entrenched gender norms and social attitudes to silence children and strengthen their control. When targeting girls, they weaponize the stigma, shame and harassment that often follow disclosure, knowing girls are more likely to be blamed and judged. When targeting boys, they exploit the tendency for abuse to be minimized or dismissed, as well as expectations that boys should be strong, self-reliant and in control, making it less likely they will seek help from others. Male perpetrators may threaten to reveal or falsely imply a boy's sexual orientation as a tool of blackmail and extortion.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix

Across contexts, victim-blaming attitudes do not just harm children after abuse has occurred, they create the conditions that perpetrators exploit in the first place, shifting responsibility away from those who cause harm and onto children themselves.

In these cases, technology is not simply a communication tool; it becomes an instrument for targeting, grooming, coercing and exploiting children.

Most harm comes from people children know:

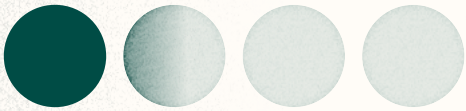
57%



57 per cent of cases involved perpetrators already known to children, including friends, family members, or romantic partners.

Children face risks from both adults and peers:

Over 1 in 4 cases were perpetrated by other children.†



While about 1 in 3 were perpetrated by adults. †



Harm can begin online and in physical spaces:

In 38 per cent of cases on average, children first met the perpetrator online, making the internet the most common point of contact for the types of technology-facilitated sexual abuse captured in the Disrupting Harm survey. This was closely followed by school (26 per cent) and public places (23 per cent), underscoring that risks span both digital and physical environments.

38% Online



26% School



23% Public places



Unknown individuals still present risks to children:

16%

16 per cent of cases involved perpetrators who were complete strangers.

27%

In 27 per cent of cases, children were unable to identify the perpetrator or chose not to disclose their identity.

Where are children abused?

The first contact often happens in schools, neighbourhoods, or other community settings, involving people the child already knows. Existing social relationships extend into digital spaces, where messaging apps and social media become an instrument to continue communication, isolate the child, or initiate abuse in ways that feel informal and familiar. The online environment can make these interactions more constant, private and difficult for adults to observe.

The shift can be subtle or sudden. Conversations move from public spaces into private messages, across open platforms into closed or encrypted chats. These features can create a sense of privacy, while also making interactions harder to see or interrupt. Children may be encouraged to keep the exchange secret, with the perpetrators framing it as something special, not meant to be shared with anyone else.

Throughout, the platforms play a role by enabling contact, shaping how interactions unfold and providing tools that can be misused to isolate, threaten and control. And so the same platforms that connect, entertain and support children can also become an environment where harm unfolds, often quietly, and often unseen.

At the same time, harm can begin solely online. Contact with new people can begin almost anywhere, at any time: a direct message, a comment, a friend request, a private game chat, or a voice channel. Social media

platforms make connection easy and immediate, allowing unknown people to contact children, quickly learn about their interests, build rapport around a shared hobby and create a sense of familiarity that can later be used to manipulate, isolate, or abuse.

A young woman in Montenegro shared how she opened a Facebook account at an early age and shortly after began receiving unsolicited sexual images from adult men:

> **"I was really young when I opened it [Facebook], I mean back when I was in elementary school (...) In the beginning it was more closed off, but then groups started, meeting other people and things like that, and then it started happening – I had some of those minor experiences where adult men would simply send me pictures of their genitals in a message request, even though they knew – I mean, I had my profile picture, you could see it was a child, and that didn't bother them at all."**

Digital platforms should not be seen as simply the location where abuse takes place, but as platforms that can enable or facilitate multiple stages of abuse, including initial contact, relationship-building, sexual solicitation, image-sharing, coercion, blackmail and the continued circulation of sexual content.

Digital service providers therefore have the capacity to prevent harm before it occurs, especially in situations where abuse begins online and is enabled by design. Privacy protections, limits on unsolicited adult contact, rights-respecting detection of abusive material and responsive reporting systems should be built into platforms from the outset, not offered as optional features. Companies that fail to provide these basic protections should be held accountable.

Children should not carry the burden of keeping themselves safe from risks that are created or amplified by digital environments. That responsibility rests with the companies that design, operate and govern the platforms where these interactions take place.

The need for children to protect themselves online reflects a broad failure by digital service providers to design digital environments that are sufficiently safe for children.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix

Most cases happened on social media platforms:

60%

On average, almost 60 per cent of cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse happened on social media platforms.

14%

In contrast, 14 per cent of cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse happened in an online game.

The five social media platforms where most cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse happened were:



Facebook (50 per cent), WhatsApp (29 per cent), Instagram (24 per cent), Snapchat (13 per cent) and TikTok (12 per cent).[1]

1 This adds up to more than 100 per cent because a child can select multiple options when responding; in other words, the same case can occur across multiple platforms.

Who do children tell?

Disclosing abuse is not always an option. It may not feel necessary; for others, it may seem unlikely to make any difference. In some cases, it can feel simply impossible.

There is not always a clear moment when harm is recognized as abuse, only a sense that something was not quite right or felt uncomfortable. Without that clarity, it can be difficult to articulate what happened or know who to turn to.

In this context, abuse is easily minimized. *It was probably not serious enough. Maybe it was nothing. Am I overreacting?* When experiences like receiving unwanted sexual images or being pressured to share explicit images are common and normalized, it becomes even harder to recognize them as violations that warrant support or intervention.

The idea of speaking up also brings its own risks. *Will anyone believe me? Will I get in trouble? Am I to blame?* Feelings of shame, fear of judgement and embarrassment further discourage disclosure. These are not just personal concerns; they are shaped by wider social norms, including those related to gender roles, sexuality and responsibility, which influence how children understand their experiences and whether they feel safe and able to share them. While some of these barriers manifest differently, they often lead to the same outcome: silence.

A young woman from the Dominican Republic, who had been abused online and in-person, explained how the fear of punishment kept her from telling her parents:

> **"I did not want to tell my mum because I did not want her to take away my access to the computer or Facebook. Because if I told my mum or my dad that they were sending me photos on Facebook, the first thing they would do would be: 'No, now you cannot use Facebook so that you do not receive photos'. So I was afraid that they would basically take away my Internet access."**

For many young people we interviewed, disclosure only happened once the situation escalated to a point where they felt they could no longer manage it alone. This might occur when threats intensified, images were shared more widely, or the emotional toll became overwhelming. Disclosure was often described as a last resort, reached after prolonged fear, isolation and distress.

Even when children reach a point where they want help, the path forward is not always clear. They may not know where to go or how to report what happened. Formal systems can feel distant, complex, or intimidating. Very few children report these forms of abuse to police or helplines, underscoring that such services, while critical, are not currently perceived as viable pathways for support.

More often, if children tell anyone at all, it is someone close – a friend, a sibling, a parent. While this can provide some immediate comfort and support, it does not necessarily stop the abuse or hold perpetrators accountable for the harm they have caused.

For some children, the research interview was the first time they had ever spoken to someone about the abuse they were subjected to:

> **"This is the first time that I am telling this aloud. This is my first time saying that someone sent me an image of his p****."**

> **"They [my friends and my parents] never knew what happened. To this day, they are not aware of what happened to me at that time."**

Their hesitation and silence underscore how difficult these experiences can be to talk about, as children experience fear of backlash, shame, confusion, or uncertainty about whether anyone would understand or believe them.

Without early intervention, exploitation and abuse can escalate and continue for years. Children are left to carry the burden of exploitation and abuse alone, without the support they need to recover, while perpetrators are neither stopped nor held accountable.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix

Most cases were not disclosed

41%

On average, across 21 countries, over 2 in 5 cases (41 per cent) of abuse that happened in the year prior to the survey were not disclosed to anyone.

Percentage of cases of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse not disclosed, by region:

Around two in five cases in Europe and Central Asia.

Almost two in five cases in Southeast Asia.

Nearly one in two cases in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Around one in three cases in Eastern and Southern Africa.

When asked why they did not disclose exploitation and abuse to anyone, children most often pointed to a lack of clear support pathways.

25%

They did not know where to go or who to tell

18%

They felt embarassed or ashamed

13%

They did not believe the incident was serious enough to report

7%

They did not care enough about what happened to share it with anyone

7%

They were worried about getting in trouble



Most children who did disclose, chose to do so to a friend (23 per cent), followed by one of their siblings (11 per cent), or their mother/a female caregiver (11 per cent).



Fewer than 1 per cent of cases were reported to the police, a social worker, or through a helpline.

How does abuse affect children's lives?

For children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse, the impacts can be severe. When sexual content is shared without consent, or children are threatened or extorted using intimate content, they often struggle to understand what is happening and why they have been targeted. Many spoke of feeling confused and overwhelmed in the moments and days that followed.

What begins to take hold is the fear that it will not stay contained. *What if someone sees? What if it spreads?* The fear is not only about the content itself, but about everything around it – who might find out, how they might react, what they might say.

Young people who had been subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse shared how these feelings profoundly shaped their sense of belonging and safety within their communities. What happens online does not always stay there. It follows children into their everyday lives; into school, friendships and relationships. Some withdraw, avoiding the people and places where they feel exposed; others face bullying or exclusion as content continues to circulate beyond their control. Many describe ongoing anxiety after their sexual content was shared, even when it was fake or digitally manipulated.

A young woman from Mexico reflected on how the abuse affected her life in the years that followed:

> **"There were many [challenges]. Mainly in my social environment, something that worried me a lot was how to relate to society after what happened. I did know how they would react if I told them what happened to me, I was afraid of facing that. Also, family ... that was something ... well it took a lot of effort ... to tell them so they would understand. Well, the school environment too, it was very hard for me to go to school and [hear] things like 'What happened?' 'What's this?' 'What was that?' It was very difficult ... there were many challenges. Mainly it affects my emotional health, it made me feel depression and anxiety."**

Shame, embarrassment and self-doubt shape how children see both themselves and the abuse they were subjected to. These feelings do not exist in isolation; they are reinforced by anticipated reactions from others and by social norms that sustain them. This is particularly evident in cases of image-based abuse where a child has initially shared an image voluntarily. Internalized shame and self-blame can deepen the harm and intensify an already distressing experience.

A young girl in the Dominican Republic recalls being blamed by her parents for following perpetrators' instructions and taking a picture of herself and sending it. At first, she struggled to understand why she was being blamed and punished for the abuse she was subjected to, but later she had come to internalize it: "After a long time, I understood that what I did was wrong, the photo I took and all that". She reflected that her family continued to blame her over time: "Literally years can go by and every time there is an argument, they bring up what happened".

Parents' victim-blaming reactions towards their children can have negative impacts on their relationships. Such reactions may compromise trust and make children less likely to communicate openly, especially about sensitive issues such as sexuality, relationships and other topics they are learning to navigate, as explained by another young person interviewed in the Dominican Republic:

> **"Well, perhaps the only way I think it affected me was that since that moment, I don't tell my mum anything related to sexuality or anything like that. In a way I have always kept it to myself and when I want to talk about it, I always turn to a friend; I still do not talk about that, about any of that with my mum."**

The consequence of victim-blaming is that children who experience it may be less likely to seek help if they are ever exploited and abused again, or if they face other challenging life experiences. This limits access to guidance, protection, support and recovery.

Professionals consistently emphasized that technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse can be deeply traumatic, with lasting consequences for children's mental health, even when it does not involve physical abuse. Social workers and psychologists we interviewed repeatedly reported cases of self-harm, suicide attempts and post-traumatic stress disorder following technology-facilitated sexual abuse, which were often linked to feelings of guilt, social rejection and stigma. These impacts are further reinforced by survey data from thousands of affected children.

For more details about the statistics presented in this section, view the Appendix

Many continue to live with the fear that content could resurface, the anxiety of being recognized, and a lasting difficulty in trusting others and building new relationships. These experiences reflect the long-term impact and the profound loss of control that characterize technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were:



4 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours;



4 times more likely to engage in self-harm tendencies;



And reported anxiety levels were approximately 11 percentage points higher.

The findings presented reflect the median observed across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

How do children get support and recover?

Children and young people are not passive in the face of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Even within environments that are often unsafe or unsupportive, they continuously make decisions, act and look for ways to navigate harm and support one another. Blocking perpetrators, seeking support, warning friends, reporting harmful content, or disclosing abuse are all expressions of agency and resilience. These actions show that children are not defined solely by the harm they experience, but also by the ways they attempt to regain safety, control and support.

Interviews with survivors show how agency often appears in small but important acts of self-protection. One girl in Mexico who was coerced into sending intimate images at the age of 14 described choosing a platform with a "view-once" function in the hope that the perpetrator would not be able to save her images. Such decisions reflect the constrained ways children attempt to reduce harm within situations shaped by coercion and unequal power.

Children also exercise agency collectively. Friends, siblings and peers were often the first people children turned to, for emotional support, advice, or help seeking justice. Some young people described finding strength through feminist movements and public conversations about online violence, which helped them recognize that what happened to them was abuse – not something they deserved, nor something they should carry alone.

Agency is also visible in how children seek care and advocate for themselves, even when systems fail to respond appropriately. Some continuously searched for psychological support even after their concerns were dismissed or minimized by adults, while others navigated multiple services in search of someone who would listen without judgement. In some cases, children chose to step away from justice processes that felt retraumatizing or unsafe, an unfortunate but important act of self-protection.

At the same time, recognizing children's agency must never mean placing responsibility on them to manage abuse they have been subjected to. Many of the strategies children use to protect themselves emerge precisely because platforms, institutions and adults have failed to create environments that are sufficiently safe or responsive.

Children's resilience should not be treated as a substitute for protection. Rather, the need for children to rely on their own coping and safety strategies is evidence of systemic failures and shows how urgently platforms and protection systems need to improve.

However, as some of the young women interviewed in North Macedonia reflected, prevention and support should not only be thought of in terms of rules, protocols, or awareness campaigns. Instead, they stressed the importance of emotional safety, trust and relational support. One young woman from Montenegro described a sense of distance from prevention initiatives that rely on warnings, or abstract risk narratives, noting how such approaches often fail to resonate with young people:

> **"No matter how many posters or infographics are made on Instagram and things like that about cyberbullying or any 'cyber' issue, or even things that happen in person, there's always that moment when young people go: 'Okay, what do these adults know? This wouldn't happen to me. And why should I listen to you? I'll use my phone how I want; I'll go online how I want.'"**

A common response to technology-facilitated abuse is to teach children to block the perpetrator or report their account. On the surface, this seems sensible. But by the time a child is blocking someone, the harm has often already occurred. Abusive messages have been sent, manipulation has taken place, or sexual images have been seen.

Even then, blocking is often not the end of the story. Children describe perpetrators returning through new accounts, different usernames, or on entirely different platforms, finding ways to re-establish contact and continue the abuse. Rather than relying on children to protect themselves after contact has been made, greater attention is needed on preventing perpetrators from targeting and reaching children in the first place.

While helping children recognize and respond to risks is important, too much responsibility is currently placed on their shoulders, even though this burden should never be theirs to carry.

Children should not have to fight so hard to be safe and supported.

Conclusions

Children around the world are navigating harm shaped by the interaction between digital technologies and the wider social norms and power dynamics of offline life. Some learn to block perpetrators, manage privacy settings, avoid certain platforms, document evidence and carefully calculate who might be safe to talk to.

But real protection begins earlier, and must be embedded in the values and systems that surround children, long before harm occurs.

It begins with schools, families, communities and public institutions creating environments where children know that abuse is never their fault, no matter the circumstances.

It requires challenging the social and gender norms that normalize exploitation, contribute to stigma and victim-blaming, and discourage children from seeking help or reporting abuse.

It means building homes and classrooms where children can speak openly about relationships, boundaries and uncomfortable experiences without fear of punishment, shame, or losing access to technology.

When children do seek help, they should be met by people and systems that are prepared to respond with care. Responsibility should be placed with the perpetrator, and society needs to act accordingly. A disclosure should not lead to retraumatizing interviews, disbelief, judgment, or endless referrals between disconnected services. Police officers, teachers, social workers and judges need the training, resources and coordination necessary to respond in ways that are child-centred, trauma-informed and effective.

Support should be accessible, compassionate and designed around the needs of children.

To support this transition, legal systems must evolve to reflect how abuse happens today. Grooming, sexual extortion and image-based abuse are not isolated online phenomena; they are part of broader patterns

of exploitation and violence against children. Laws, investigations and cross-border cooperation need to reflect this reality and ensure that perpetrators can be identified and held accountable.

The digital environment also needs to become safer by design. Platforms should not rely on children to repeatedly report abuse, navigate complex safety settings, or identify dangerous interactions on their own. Privacy protections, restrictions on unsolicited adult contact, proactive detection of abuse material in privacy-preserving ways and responsive reporting systems should be standard, not optional. Companies that fail to take reasonable steps to protect children must be held accountable.

Children should not have to navigate these harms on their own. Real protection requires all of these systems – families, schools, communities, governments, law enforcement, justice sectors and technology companies – to create environments where children are safe, believed and supported, long before harm occurs.

Recommendations

The evidence in this report points to clear opportunities to prevent harm, strengthen support for children and ensure that those responsible for children's safety play their part. The recommendations below set out practical actions for governments, technology companies, service providers, schools, families and communities to help create a safer world for children. The recommendations align with INSPIRE – seven evidence-based strategies to end violence against children – underscoring that the systems that protect children from violence offline are the same ones that must now be equipped and supported to protect them in a digital world. They also align with the WeProtect Model National Response, which outlines a comprehensive systems-based approach to address child sexual abuse and exploitation, including abuse facilitated by technology.

Build societies that place responsibility where it belongs.

Children should not be held responsible for protecting themselves.

- Develop national, multisectoral strategies that shift the burden of protection away from children and onto the systems responsible for keeping them safe.
- Drive public messaging, school programmes and professional guidance that consistently reinforce one core principle: abuse is never the child's fault, regardless of the circumstances surrounding it.
- Address the economic vulnerabilities that perpetrators exploit by expanding social protection and family support services, alongside economic empowerment opportunities for adolescents. These measures must be backed by sustained investment and be able to reach children and families in all communities.
- Address harmful social and gender norms by challenging the sexualization of girls, harmful ideals of masculinity and the normalization of relationships with significant power imbalances. These norms can contribute to victim-blaming, discourage disclosure and reinforce abusive behaviours.

Create environments where children can speak without fear.

Many children remain silent because they fear blame, punishment, shame, or losing access to technology.

- Support parents, caregivers, teachers and other adults to create ongoing, open channels of communication with children. Trust is built through everyday conversations, not only discussions about risk or abuse. Strong, non-judgmental relationships help children feel safe seeking help and enable earlier recognition of harm before a child is able to identify or disclose it themselves.
- Support schools, families and communities to effectively respond when children disclose abuse, rather than react with judgement or restriction. This includes training parents, teachers and frontline professionals to respond calmly, empathetically and without victim-blaming attitudes.
- Provide culturally informed and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality and relationship education to help children understand consent, coercion, boundaries and healthy relationships, both in person and online.

Ensure platforms are designed for child safety, not maximum engagement.

While platform safety tools and digital skills are important, children should not be required to navigate complex privacy settings, identify dangerous interactions, or repeatedly report abuse to stay safe.

- Regulate platforms to enforce safety-by-design standards, including privacy-by-default settings for children, stronger restrictions on unsolicited contacts, effective moderation systems and rapid removal of abusive content. This includes guardrails for AI-powered tools so that these cannot be used to generate sexual content depicting children or to facilitate the sexual abuse of children in other ways.
- Ensure recommender algorithms do not promote harmful content to children, especially content that might desensitize them to sexual abuse, nor share children's contact details or profiles with unknown adult users. Regular child rights impact assessments should be conducted.

- Require platforms to proactively detect and disrupt all forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, while respecting fundamental rights. Ensure robust enforcement measures (e.g., meaningful financial sanctions) when platforms fail to take reasonable steps to protect children.
- Equip regulators and oversight bodies with adequate technical expertise, resources and powers to carry out their roles and hold industry accountable.

Equip professionals to respond effectively and without re-traumatization.

For many children, pathways to support, help-seeking, justice and recovery often feel confusing, dismissive, or retraumatizing.

- Provide police, prosecutors, judges, social workers, educators and healthcare professionals with ongoing, specialized training on technology-facilitated abuse, including digital evidence handling, trauma-informed interviewing and child-centred communication.
- Invest in long-term, stable funding to ensure that social, health and justice services are accessible, adequately staffed, coordinated and capable of providing sustained support rather than short-term crisis responses.
- Develop institutional policies and multi-disciplinary models that seek to minimize the number of times children must retell their experiences and ensure they are treated with dignity throughout the process.

Modernize legal frameworks to reflect how sexual abuse happens today.

Legal systems must keep pace with the realities of sexual abuse in a digital age.

- Strengthen the implementation and enforcement of existing laws by investing in specialized law enforcement, judicial capacity, digital forensic capabilities and child-centred investigative procedures, while ensuring these coordinate effectively with victim services. Governments should regularly assess and address gaps between legislation and practice to ensure offences are investigated, perpetrators are held accountable and children receive timely protection and support.
- Update national legislation to comprehensively cover all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation; this includes, for example, explicitly criminalizing online grooming, sexual extortion, livestreaming of abuse and the possession or viewing of child sexual abuse material, including abuse involving self-generated content and the production of AI-generated sexual content depicting children.

About the research

Seven years ago, UNICEF Innocenti, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and Safe Online embarked on a journey to better understand how technology is being used to sexually exploit and abuse children, and how governments, institutions, communities and technology companies can prevent these crimes and respond more effectively.

What followed became one of the largest research projects on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to date: the Disrupting Harm project. Tens of thousands of children, caregivers, professionals and policymakers shared their experiences and perspectives, helping build a richer understanding of how this form of violence affects children's lives.

Throughout the research, children shared experiences that were often deeply distressing and painful to hear. At the same time, it has foregrounded children's agency, insights and willingness to contribute to research that they hoped would help protect others.

One of the most important lessons from Disrupting Harm is that it is possible to conduct research on these sensitive issues ethically and safely with children. Doing so, however, is not a straightforward process. It requires careful preparation, robust safeguarding systems, skilled researchers, meaningful partnerships with local organizations and an unwavering commitment to placing children's well-being first.

It also requires donors with the vision and commitment to invest in high-quality, ethical research while providing the flexibility needed to navigate complex realities on the ground. Safe Online's long-term support is what made this research possible. ECPAT International and INTERPOL's Crimes Against Children Unit have remained steadfast partners throughout, demonstrating that sustained collaboration, mutual trust and complementary expertise are essential for overcoming complex research challenges and generating robust evidence that no single organization could have produced alone.

This report aims to contribute to a better future; one in which policymakers, practitioners, technology companies, educators and communities have better evidence to guide their decisions, and in which children's voices and experiences are taken seriously and translated into meaningful action. It seeks to strengthen the systems that prevent harm, support children when abuse occurs and hold perpetrators accountable.

Ultimately, lasting change will depend not only on stronger systems, but also on transforming the social norms and values that enable violence against children to persist. Only by challenging the attitudes, inequalities and assumptions that enable exploitation and silence survivors can a future be built in which all children are truly safe, supported and protected.

Children have shared their experiences with honesty and courage. Their voices must lead to change.

Contributors

This research reflects the contributions of many dedicated researchers and participants over the past seven years. We acknowledge and thank all those who shared their experiences to help build a stronger evidence base to protect children from technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

This report was conceptualized and written by Daniel Kardefelt-Winther and Anisha Bhargava.

Quantitative data analysis for the report was led by Anisha Bhargava and Hélène Guillou.

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Appendix

Introductory information

This technical appendix provides additional information on the data, measures and analytical methods used in the report *Through Children's Eyes – How digital technologies enable child sexual abuse*. It describes the data sources, study sample, variable construction and statistical analyses undertaken to support the findings presented in the report. The analyses draw on data from the Disrupting Harm research project.

Disrupting Harm

Funded by Safe Online, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti) partnered to design and implement the Disrupting Harm research project and methodology. The original project concept was developed by Safe Online, providing the foundation for this collaborative effort.

This unique partnership uses a multidisciplinary approach to enhance our collective understanding of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the national response to these forms of violence against children. A combined investment of US$15 million allowed the Disrupting Harm research to be conducted in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia from 2019–2022 and in another 12 countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Middle East and North Africa and South Asia from 2022–2026.

Disrupting Harm implements a mixed-methods methodology that includes:

- A nationally representative household survey with ~1000 internet-using 12 to 17-year-olds per country, and one of their parents;
- Interviews with justice professionals and front-line workers who worked directly with cases of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse;
- Interviews with law enforcement personnel specializing in this crime type;
- Interviews with children and young people aged 16–24, who had been subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in childhood;
- A comprehensive analysis of national policy and legislation.

A comprehensive description of the methodology can be found here: https://safeonline.global/dh2-research-methods_final-2/

Study sample for this report

The analyses presented in this report are based on nationally representative household survey data from internet-using children aged 12–17 years across 21 countries. Approximately 1,000 children and 1,000 of their parents or caregivers were surveyed in each country. The indicators in the analysis are comparable across countries.

The dataset includes the 12 countries from the first round of Disrupting Harm, with data collected primarily during 2020–2021: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Uganda (Eastern and Southern Africa); and Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam (Southeast Asia).

It also includes nine countries from the second round of Disrupting Harm with data collected during 2024–2025: Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico (Latin America and the Caribbean); Armenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Eastern Europe and Central Asia); and Pakistan (South Asia).

Where analyses combine data from both rounds of the study, findings should be interpreted with the understanding that data were collected during different time periods. Unless otherwise stated, analyses presented in this appendix combine estimates from all 21 countries listed above. Country-level estimates are presented individually, with summary statistics reported as the sum of country-level population estimates, and the average estimate across the 21 countries, where appropriate. Analyses relating to indicators introduced only in the second round of Disrupting Harm are based on the nine countries for which these data were available at the time the report was published.

How does digital technology enable child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Overview of variables

The analysis draws on available data on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm project.

A comparable seven-indicator measure of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was included across both rounds of research, enabling comparisons of patterns observed in 21 countries over the past five years. Children were asked: "In the past year, how often have these things happened to you?" in relation to the following forms of sexual exploitation and abuse:

- 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 [may be fully 'online' or also through in-person interactions] *
- I have been asked to share an image or video showing my private parts (for example, my bottom, genitals, or breasts) when I did not want to
- 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 [may be fully 'online' or also through in-person interactions] *
- Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission
- Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities [may be fully 'online' or also through in-person interactions] *

For each indicator, participants responded using a five-point frequency scale: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, or Very often. Responses were recoded into binary indicators, with Never classified as "No" and all other responses classified as "Yes." Questions marked with an asterisk (*) were only included in the estimate if respondents subsequently confirmed that the incident had occurred on a social media platform or in an online game, rather than exclusively in person. A binary technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse variable was then created to indicate whether a child had been subjected to one or more of the seven forms of exploitation and abuse listed above.

In the second round of Disrupting Harm, two additional indicators were included:

- Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me
- Someone used Artificial Intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos of me

These indicators were coded using the same binary approach described above. Analyses of these two forms of abuse are used in the report and presented separately, but not included in the aggregate statistics. They are based on data from the nine countries included in the second round of the study.

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Finding: "Across 21 countries, 20 million children aged 12-17 were subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a single year. That is about 1 in 5 internet-using children, on average."

Table overview: Table A01 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each country who reported being subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the one year preceding the survey. Country estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect data collected between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A01: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percantage of children subjected to abuse
Armenia	9507	4.34
Brazil	3021468	18.46
Cambodia	341640	25.86
Colombia	848828	20.1
Dominican Republic	251981	21.9
Ethiopia	943567	28.62
Indonesia	2129202	8.82
Kenya	1292364	26.83
Malaysia	334808	12.22
Mexico	1556565	12.31
Montenegro	4804	10.27
Mozambique	807316	35.82
Namibia	52366	21.96
North Macedonia	11727	9.42
Pakistan	1197974	4.97
Philippines	4762012	42.51
Serbia	33884	8.98
Tanzania	457134	9.01
Thailand	917448	20.09
Uganda	913878	38.54
Viet Nam	430408	6.11
Sum	**20318881**	
Average Percentage		**18%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in this study, children's self-reported exposure to the forms of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey ranged from 4.34 per cent to 42.5 per cent, with an overall average of 18 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences and/or their willingness to disclose sexual exploitation and abuse to researchers can differ substantially across contexts.

This table should not be interpreted as a ranking of countries or be used to make comparisons between them. Differences in self-reported exposure are likely influenced by a range of complex factors beyond the prevalence of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse alone. Children's willingness to disclose exploitation and abuse is shaped by social norms, levels of stigma, awareness of what constitutes abuse and how comfortable they feel talking about sensitive and personal experiences. Importantly, higher reported levels of exposure do not necessarily indicate that children are less safe. In some contexts, it may also reflect greater public awareness of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, stronger recognition of children's rights and environments in which children are better able to identify abusive behaviours and more comfortable disclosing them. Conversely, lower reported levels may partly reflect under-recognition or under-reporting.

In addition, the survey only measures nine examples of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Other forms of abuse that were beyond the scope of the survey may be more common in some settings, meaning that cross-country differences should be interpreted with caution. For this reason, the overall average across countries should not be viewed as a precise measure of country-level exposure.

These considerations highlight the challenges of measuring child abuse through surveys alone. For this reason, the report complements quantitative findings with detailed accounts of children's own voices and experiences, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of how technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse affects children's lives. This interpretation is not intended to downplay the seriousness of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse or the significant number of children affected by it. Rather, it acknowledges that measuring children's exposure to these forms of abuse is inherently challenging.

The most important message is not the precise estimate of exposure in any one country, but the consistent finding that technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse affect many children across all countries studied, and demand sustained attention everywhere.

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Finding: "An estimated 15 million children were exposed to sexual content they did not want to see in just one year."

Table overview: Table A02 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each country who reported being exposed to sexual images or videos they did not want to see in the year prior to being surveyed. Country estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect data collected between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A02: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were exposed to unwanted sexual content online in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	6343	2.8
Brazil	2274885	13.7
Cambodia	243811	17.2
Colombia	639953	14.6
Dominican Republic	174909	15.1
Ethiopia	701396	20.4
Indonesia	1630953	6.7
Kenya	995260	20.1
Malaysia	247644	8.8
Mexico	924033	7.1
Montenegro	3106	6.6
Mozambique	630945	27
Namibia	38123	15.8
North Macedonia	9436	7.5
Pakistan	714954	2.9
Philippines	3570177	31
Serbia	22864	5.9

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Tanzania	269998	5.2
Thailand	747785	15.9
Uganda	642262	26.7
Viet Nam	380404	5.3
Sum	**14,869,241**	
Average Percentage		**13%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, children's reported exposure to unwanted sexual content online ranged from 2.8 per cent to 31 per cent, with an overall average of 13 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence.

In all countries where these data were collected, unwanted exposure to sexual content was the most common form of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse. This indicator therefore makes up a considerable proportion of the total estimates presented in Table A01. As this report demonstrates, exposure to sexual content can be a precursor to further sexual exploitation and abuse – a way to desensitize children to sexual content or conversation – and can be part of a deliberate and sustained pattern of abuse that persists over long periods of time.

The question specifically asked whether "**someone**" had exposed the child to sexual content they did not want to see. This wording was intended to exclude non-interpersonal forms of exposure, such as sexualized advertisements, pop-ups or algorithmically served content.

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Finding: "An estimated 9 million children were asked to engage in sexual conversations or to share sexual images or videos when they did not want to. That is about 1 in 12 internet-using children on average, in a single year."

Table overview: Table A03 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who said the following happened to them in the year prior to the survey: "Someone asked me to talk about sex or sexual acts when I did not want to" and "Someone asked me to share an image or video showing their private parts when I did not want to". Country estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect data collected between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A03: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were asked to talk about sex or sexual acts when they did not want to, or to share an image or video showing their private parts when they did not want to, in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	3694	1.7
Brazil	1726839	10.5
Cambodia	145360	10.5
Colombia	267432	6.2
Dominican Republic	93556	8.1
Ethiopia	430347	13.1
Indonesia	466130	1.9
Kenya	634505	13
Malaysia	118022	4.3
Mexico	613623	4.8
Montenegro	3211	6.8
Mozambique	329237	14.3
Namibia	27378	11.4
North Macedonia	7458	6

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Pakistan	409183	1.7
Philippines	2452946	21.7
Serbia	19783	5.2
Tanzania	237482	4.6
Thailand	457420	10
Uganda	433457	18.2
Viet Nam	77279	1.1
Sum	**8954341**	
Average Percentage		**8%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, children's exposure to sexual solicitation ranged from 1.1 per cent to 21.7 per cent, with an overall average of 8 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence.

Perpetrators often employ sexual talk or sexual solicitation as part of a grooming process to manipulate or desensitize children. Grooming strategies typically involve misrepresenting their identity, building trust through attention and emotional validation, and gradually shifting interactions towards increasingly personal or sexual topics, including soliciting content from the child. It can be difficult for children to recognize these behaviours as abusive, given their gradual nature, especially if the perpetrator is someone they know or trust. The distinction between consensual and non-consensual sharing of sexual content is not always clear, particularly in relationships characterized by power imbalances, emotional dependence, or limited understanding of consent and privacy.

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Finding: "An estimated 5.5 million children were offered money or gifts, in return for sexual content or sexual contact."

Table overview: Table A04 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each country who reported being offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of themselves, or being offered money or gifts to meet someone in person to do something sexual, during a one-year period preceding the survey. Country estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect data collected between 2020–2021 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A04: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of themselves, or to meet someone in person to do something sexual, in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	2085	0.9
Brazil	890530	5.3
Cambodia	104851	7.6
Colombia	276504	6.3
Dominican Republic	75063	6.5
Ethiopia	299453	8.8
Indonesia	322791	1.3
Kenya	375436	7.7
Malaysia	57726	2.1
Mexico	426649	3.3
Montenegro	954	2
Mozambique	201303	8.7
Namibia	14557	6.1
North Macedonia	4562	3.6
Pakistan	245526	1

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Philippines	1434301	12.5
Serbia	3764	1
Tanzania	134991	2.6
Thailand	364495	7.9
Uganda	293588	12.4
Viet Nam	24218	0.3
Sum	**5553348**	
Average Percentage		**5%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, children's exposure to these forms of sexual exploitation ranged from 0.3 per cent to 12.5 per cent, with an overall average of 5 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence.

The findings highlight the financial dimension of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children. As is evident in qualitative interviews, in some contexts, perpetrators exploit children's financial insecurity and unmet economic needs, manipulating or coercing them into sexual exploitation in exchange for money, goods or other forms of financial support. While these experiences are often linked to economic vulnerability, the qualitative data from Disrupting Harm also point in some settings to the involvement of organized networks engaged in the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children.

Commercial sexual exploitation is not always recognized by children as exploitation. For some, sharing sexual content for money was viewed as providing a degree of financial independence and autonomy. These findings underscore how economic vulnerability, unequal power relations and limited recognition of exploitation can shape children's experiences, making financially motivated sexual exploitation particularly difficult to identify and address.

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Finding: "Across nine countries, an estimated 1.5 million internet-using children were subjected to threats or blackmail to engage in sexual activities in the year prior to the survey, of which 1.2 million children were threatened with the distribution of sexual images or videos of themselves."

Table overview: Table A05 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each of the nine countries included from the second round of the Disrupting Harm study who reported being threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities during a one-year period preceding the survey. This measure includes children who reported being threatened with the distribution of sexual images or videos of themselves, the data for which are presented separately in Table A06. These estimates are based on data collected between 2024 and 2025. The tables also present the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the nine countries included in the analysis.

Table A05: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2024–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	2266	1
Brazil	702864	4.3
Colombia	176675	4.1
Dominican Republic	43028	3.7
Mexico	279445	2.1
Montenegro	442	0.9
North Macedonia	5528	4.4
Pakistan	237992	1
Serbia	3284	0.8
Sum	**1451523**	
Average Percentage		**3%**

Table A06: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were threatened with the distribution of sexual images or videos of themselves in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2024–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	944	0.4
Brazil	618717	3.7
Colombia	142418	3.3
Dominican Republic	36969	3.2
Mexico	244266	1.9
Montenegro	442	0.9
North Macedonia	5304	4.2
Pakistan	136738	0.6
Serbia	3284	0.8
Sum	**1189081**	
Average Percentage		**2%**

Commentary: Across the nine countries included here, children's exposure to threats or blackmail to engage in sexual activities ranged from 0.8 per cent to 4.4 per cent, with an overall average of 3 per cent (table A05). In the same nine countries, children's exposure to threats of having sexual images or videos of themselves shared with others ranged from 0.4 per cent to 4.2 per cent, with an overall average of 2 per cent (table A06). This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence.

While perpetrators may threaten children without possessing any compromising material, sexual extortion commonly involves using sexual images or videos as leverage to coerce children into producing additional sexual content, or engaging in sexual acts online or in person. By leveraging children's fear of exposure, perpetrators are able to maintain control, escalate their demands and prolong the exploitation and abuse. The increasing availability of artificial intelligence tools introduces a further dimension to this form of exploitation, as these tools can be used to fabricate compromising material for perpetrators to leverage, even where no real sexual images exist.

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Finding: "An estimated 4 million internet-using children aged 12–17 across 21 countries had someone else share sexual images of them without permission in the span of one year."

Table overview: Table A07 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each country who reported that someone shared sexual images or videos of them without their permission during a one-year period preceding the survey. Country estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect data collected between 2021–2022 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A07: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 whose sexual images or videos were shared without their permission in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	1221	0.5
Brazil	466411	2.8
Cambodia	110469	7.9
Colombia	73064	1.7
Dominican Republic	26327	2.3
Ethiopia	188197	5.5
Indonesia	280224	1.1
Kenya	355251	7.3
Malaysia	73977	2.6
Mexico	202721	1.6
Montenegro	327	0.7
Mozambique	150261	6.5
Namibia	12989	5.4
North Macedonia	4240	3.4
Pakistan	28410	0.1
Philippines	1582173	14.1

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Serbia	884	0.2
Tanzania	84815	1.6
Thailand	338962	7.3
Uganda	215533	9.1
Viet Nam	39395	0.5
Sum	**4235851**	
Average Percentage		**4%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, the proportions of children who had their sexual images or videos shared non-consensually with others ranged from 0.1 per cent to 14.1 per cent, with an overall average of 4 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence.

Perpetrators often obtain sexual images or videos after adolescents share them within the context of a trusted or perceived relationship, or by capturing images or videos without the child's knowledge or consent. They then distribute the images to humiliate, manipulate, coerce, or maintain control. Adolescents do not always recognize this as abusive; instead, when trust was violated through the non-consensual sharing of images, it was often followed by feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame, as heard in interviews. Young people described intense fear, shame and anxiety, often driven by uncertainty about who had seen the images, whether they continued to circulate, or if they might reappear in the future.

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Finding: "An estimated 1.1 million children aged 12–17 had AI-generated sexual images or videos created depicting them."

Table overview: Table A08 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each of the nine countries included in the second round of the Disrupting Harm study who reported that artificial intelligence was used to create sexual images or videos depicting them during a one-year period preceding the survey. These estimates are based on data collected between 2024 and 2025. The table also presents the sum of the country-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the nine countries included in the analysis.

Table A08: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who had AI-generated sexual images or videos created depicting them in the year prior to being surveyed, by country (2024–2025).

Country	Number of children subjected to abuse	Percentage of subjected to abuse
Armenia	1195	0.6
Brazil	501666	3
Colombia	95968	2.2
Dominican Republic	47364	4.1
Mexico	179625	1.4
Montenegro	195	0.4
North Macedonia	5277	4.3
Pakistan	280468	1.2
Serbia	2254	0.6
Sum	**1114012**	
Average Percentage		**2%**

Commentary: Across the nine countries included here, the proportion of children who reported that AI-generated sexual images or videos had been created depicting them in the previous year ranged from 0.4 per cent to 4.3 per cent, with an overall average of 2.0 per cent. This demonstrates a wide variation between countries, highlighting that children's experiences differ substantially across contexts, with similar caveats as in relation to overall prevalence. It should be noted that children surveyed may be unaware of existing AI-generated images or videos depicting them, so these figures may be underestimated.

AI-powered image and video generation tools are becoming increasingly widespread and powerful, marking an escalation of the risks children face through digital technology. While the proportion of children subjected to this form of abuse is still comparatively low, it signals a pressing and likely escalating challenge. Offenders are now able to produce highly realistic sexual images of children without the child's participation or knowledge. As a result, a child's right to protection can be violated even if they have never shared content, interacted with the perpetrator, or are aware that the abuse has occurred.

The harms caused by fabricated images extend well beyond the digital environment. Even though these images are not real, the consequences can be just as severe. Interviews with children collected under the Disrupting Harm project illustrate the shame, stigma and social or moral judgment that children face when such content is shared online. Such material can also normalize the sexualization of children and reinforce demand for exploitative content. It also makes victim identification more difficult by obscuring whether an image portrays a real child in immediate need of protection. This places additional strain on already limited law enforcement resources and potentially delays interventions.

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Finding: Findings varied across regions:

- Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam): 19 per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Mexico): 18 per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda): 27 per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Europe and Central Asia (Armenia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia): 8 per cent of internet-using children aged 12–17 were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Table overview: Table A09 presents the estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 in each region who reported being subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the one year preceding the survey. Regional estimates are drawn from different waves of the Disrupting Harm research project and therefore reflect data collected between 2021–2022 and 2024–2025. The table also presents the sum of the regional-level population estimates and the average prevalence across the 20 countries included in this regional analysis. Pakistan (South Asia) was not included in this analysis because a regional estimate cannot be produced based on data from one country.

Table A09: Estimated number and weighted prevalence of internet-using children aged 12–17 who were subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed, by region (2020–2025).

Regions	Countries	Average Prevalence	Population Estimate
Eastern and Southern Africa	Ethiopia	26.80%	4466625
	Kenya		
	Mozambique		
	Namibia		
	Tanzania		
	Uganda		
Europe and Central Asia	Armenia	8.25%	59922
	Montenegro		
	North Macedonia		
	Serbia		
Latin America and Caribbean	Brazil	18.19%	5678842
	Colombia		
	Dominican Republic		
	Mexico		
Southeast Asia	Cambodia	19.27%	8915518
	Indonesia		
	Malaysia		
	Phillippines		
	Thailand		
	Viet Nam		

Commentary: Across the four regions included in this analysis, the estimated prevalence of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse among internet-using children aged 12–17 ranged from 8.3 per cent in Europe and Central Asia to 26.8 per cent in Eastern and Southern Africa.

These regional estimates should be interpreted with caution and should not be viewed as representative of entire regions. Rather, they reflect the average occurrence across the countries included in the Disrupting Harm study within each region. Differences between regions may be influenced by a range of factors beyond the underlying prevalence of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including variation in cultural norms, awareness of abuse, willingness to disclose sensitive experiences, access to the internet, and the broader social and policy contexts in which children live.

In addition, the regional estimates are based on data collected during different rounds of the Disrupting Harm study and therefore reflect different time periods (2021–2022 and 2024–2025). They are also derived from a limited number of countries within each region rather than all countries in those regions. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of the participating countries rather than estimates for the regions as a whole.

Despite these limitations, the findings demonstrate that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse affects substantial numbers of children across diverse contexts. The presence of this abuse across all four regions underscores that it is a global child protection issue requiring coordinated prevention, reporting and response efforts across countries and sectors.

Who abuses children?

Overview of variables

This section examines the perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse using the comparable seven-indicator measure described in Section 1.

Analyses in this section are conducted at the incident level rather than the child level. This is because children may have been subjected to more than one form of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse measured in the survey. Subsequently, each incident may have involved a different perpetrator. To facilitate incident-level analyses, the data were reshaped so that each reported instance of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse represented a single observation. Consequently, the numbers and proportions presented refer to **individual instances of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse**, rather than the number of children subjected to abuse.

To enable comparisons across both rounds of Disrupting Harm, harmonized perpetrator categories were developed to account for differences in the perpetrator response options between survey rounds. These harmonized categories account for changes introduced in the second round of Disrupting Harm, where perpetrator response options were expanded and further disaggregated by age to provide more precision.

Perpetrators were grouped into three overarching categories: **strangers, someone the child knows**, and **unidentified perpetrators.**

Category used in analysis	Survey item in Disrupting Harm round 1	Survey item in Disrupting Harm round 2
Strangers	• Someone I didn't know before this happened	• Someone I didn't know before this happened
Someone the child knows	• Someone in my family • A romantic partner (or ex) • A friend or someone else I knew who is 18 years or older • A friend or someone else I knew who is younger than 18 years old	• Someone in my family who was 18 years or older • Someone in my family who was younger than 18 • A girlfriend, boyfriend, or someone I had a crush on who was 18 years or older • A girlfriend, boyfriend or someone I had a crush on who was younger than 18 • A friend or someone else I knew who was 18 years or older • A friend or someone else I knew who was younger than 18 years
Unidentified	• I don't know who the person was • Prefer not to say	• I don't know who the person was • Prefer not to say

Children in the second round of Disrupting Harm were also asked where they first met the perpetrator(s), with the following response options: **at school, on the internet, at home, in a public place, at a place where you do sports** and **other**.

Some analyses presented in this section are based only on data from nine countries in the second round of Disrupting Harm. These analyses take advantage of additional information collected during the second round, including whether the perpetrator was an adult (18 years or older) or another child (under 18 years), and where the child first met the perpetrator.

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Findings: "57 per cent of cases involved perpetrators already known including friends, family members, or romantic partners."

"16 per cent of cases involved perpetrators who were complete strangers. In 27 per cent of cases, children were unable to identify the perpetrator or chose not to disclose their identity."

Table overview: Table A10 presents the distribution of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by perpetrator category. Using data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study, the table shows the percentage of instances involving perpetrators known to the child, strangers and unidentified perpetrators. Perpetrator categories are based on the harmonized constructs described in the Overview of Variables section.

Table A10: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by perpetrator category, including someone known to the child, a stranger, or an unidentified perpetrator (2020–2025).

Country	Someone the child knows	Stranger	Unidentified
Armenia	54	24	23
Brazil	55	20	25
Cambodia	66	10	24
Colombia	41	22	37
Dominican Republic	53	11	36
Ethiopia	65	12	23
Indonesia	54	15	32
Kenya	66	17	18
Malaysia	30	16	54
Mexico	60	14	26
Montenegro	68	16	16
Mozambique	58	21	21
Namibia	62	15	23
North Macedonia	80	6	15
Pakistan	50	19	31

Country	Someone the child knows	Stranger	Unidentified
Philippines	35	19	46
Serbia	56	24	20
Tanzania	70	13	16
Thailand	73	8	20
Uganda	67	16	17
Viet Nam	37	12	52
Average Percentage	**57%**	**16%**	**27%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries included in the analysis, 57 per cent reported instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involving someone the child already knew, compared with 16 per cent involving a stranger and 27 per cent where the perpetrator was unidentified. While the proportion varied across countries, the overall pattern consistently shows that these forms of abuse are most commonly perpetrated by individuals within children's existing social networks rather than exclusively by unknown individuals.

These findings highlight the importance of moving beyond narratives that frame technology-facilitated sexual abuse primarily as a risk posed by strangers. They also emphasize the central role of trust and relational proximity in how abuse unfolds. Children may be subjected to abuse through interactions with individuals they already know, including people within their families, peer networks, or romantic relationships. Existing relationships can provide perpetrators with opportunities to build trust, exert influence, or exploit existing power imbalances.

The complexity of these dynamics was further illustrated in qualitative findings from Disrupting Harm, where abuse developed and persisted across different types of relationships and through technology. Children described abuse involving manipulation, pressure, coercion, grooming and exploitation of trust from both known and unknown perpetrators. These accounts demonstrate that technology can enable perpetrators to initiate, maintain, or escalate harmful interactions, including within relationships where children may initially feel safe. They also reinforce the importance of prevention approaches that address both online and in-person environments, strengthen children's understanding of healthy relationships and boundaries, and ensure children have access to support from various avenues when abuse occurs.

Finding: "In a subset of data from nine countries, over 1 in 4 cases were perpetrated by other children, while about 1 in 3 were perpetrated by adults."

Table overview: Table A11 presents the percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by perpetrator age category. Using data from the second round of the Disrupting Harm study across nine countries, the table shows the proportion of instances where a child was abused or exploited by another peer and/or by an adult aged 18 or older.

Table A11: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by perpetrator age category, including perpetrators under 18 and perpetrators aged 18 or older (2024–2025).

Country	Percentage of instances perpetrated by a child under 18	Percentage of instances perpetrated by an adult over 18
Armenia	21.8	39.5
Brazil	34.6	27.5
Colombia	16.6	25.7
Dominican Republic	22.7	33.3
Mexico	28.8	35.1
Montenegro	40.2	36.7
North Macedonia	21	59
Pakistan	13.3	36.5
Serbia	39.7	11.7
Average percentage	**27%**	**34%**

Commentary: Among the nine countries included in this analysis, 27 per cent of reported instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involved a perpetrator under the age of 18, while 34 per cent involved an adult aged 18 or above. Instances were not included in this table where perpetrator age was unknown or not reported, hence percentages do not add up to 100 per cent.

This finding highlights the need to support children to develop an understanding of healthy relationships, consent, boundaries and respectful behaviour both online and in person. Children may not always recognize when requests, interactions, or exchanges involving sexual content are inappropriate or harmful, particularly in contexts where peer pressure, curiosity, social expectations, or unequal dynamics influence behaviours. Prevention efforts should therefore

include age-appropriate education that helps children understand their rights and responsibilities when interacting online. Where appropriate, responses should include the early identification and assessment of harmful sexual behaviours among children, with referral to evidence-based, child-centred therapeutic interventions that are tailored to the child's age, development, needs and circumstances.

At the same time, abuse perpetrated by adults require continued attention. Adults use technology to pressure, manipulate and exploit children, including through relationships where perpetrators seek to establish trust or influence. Together, these findings highlight the need for prevention approaches that address harmful behaviours across age groups while ensuring that children subjected to abuse receive appropriate protection, support and care.

Finding: "In 38 per cent of cases on average, children first met the perpetrator online, making the internet the most common point of contact for the types of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse captured in the second round of the Disrupting Harm surveys. This was closely followed by school (26 per cent) and public places (23 per cent), underscoring that risks span both digital and physical environments."

Table overview: Table A12 presents the distribution of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by the location where the child first met the perpetrator. Using data from the second round of the Disrupting Harm study across nine countries, the table shows the proportion of instances by reported location where the child first met the perpetrator, including at school, on the internet, at home, in a public place, at a place where they do sports, or another location. As this was a multiple-choice question, the percentages sometimes add up to more than 100 per cent.

Table A12: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by the location where the child first met the perpetrator (2024–2025).

Country	At school	On the internet	At home	At a public place	At a place where I do sports	Other
Armenia	18.2	61.2	26	12.1	4.2	0
Brazil	24.5	55.5	8.5	12	2.6	2
Colombia	26.6	35.3	23.7	14.4	4	2.1
Dominican Republic	38.1	35.3	15.2	13.5	4.6	4
Mexico	37.3	31.9	11.2	16.5	2.1	0

Country	At school	On the internet	At home	At a public place	At a place where I do sports	Other
Montenegro	38	30.8	2.3	31.6	18.8	0
North Macedonia	18.3	19.4	18.5	52.8	7	0
Pakistan	0	34.2	15.8	30.3	0	0
Serbia	33.9	35.6	0.4	20.5	1.5	3.7
Average percentage	**26%**	**38%**	**14%**	**23%**	**5%**	**1%**

Commentary: Among the nine countries included in this analysis, the most commonly reported place where children first met the perpetrator was on the internet (38 per cent), followed by school (26 per cent) and in a public place (23 per cent). Smaller proportions of instances involved perpetrators first met at home (14 per cent), at a place where the child played sports (5 per cent), or another location (1 per cent).

These findings should be interpreted as describing where children first encountered the perpetrator, rather than where the abuse occurred. They demonstrate that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can emerge from both online and in-person interactions. The internet can provide opportunities for perpetrators to initiate contact with children, which emphasizes the opportunity that technology companies have to create barriers to this kind of contact or to build in better safeguards.

At the same time, the findings show that technology may also be used to facilitate abuse that begins in existing in-person environments, such as schools, homes, or community spaces. This reinforces the need for prevention approaches that do not frame technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse solely as an online risk. Supporting children to recognize unsafe situations, understand healthy relationships and boundaries, and seek help when something feels wrong is important across all environments where children interact with others.

Where are children abused?

Overview of variables

This section examines where technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse occurs, using the comparable seven-indicator measure described in Section 1.

Analyses in this section are conducted at the incident level rather than the child level. This is because children may have been subjected to more than one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Subsequently, each instance may have involved different locations or platforms. To facilitate incident-level analyses, the dataset was reshaped so that each reported instance of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse represented a single observation. Consequently, the numbers and proportions presented in this section refer to instances of abuse rather than the number of children who experienced abuse.

For each reported instance, children were asked whether the abuse occurred on a social media platform or in an online game, rather than exclusively through in-person interactions. Children who reported that the incident occurred on a social media platform were subsequently asked which platforms were involved. In the second round of Disrupting Harm, some social media platforms were added or removed to account for changes over time and regional differences in platform use. To enable comparisons across both rounds of data, 15 social media platforms were included in the analysis below: Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Telegram, Viber, LINE, Twitch, Discord, Flickr, Pinterest and Tinder.

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Finding: "On average, almost 60 per cent of cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse across 21 countries happened on social media platforms. In contrast, 14 per cent of cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse across 23 countries happened in an online game."

Table overview: Table A132 presents the distribution of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by the reported online environment where the incident occurred, by country. The analysis combines data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. As this was a multiple-choice question, the percentages sometimes add up to more than 100 per cent. The average percentage across the 21 countries included in the analysis is presented in the final row of the table.

Table A13: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances by the type of online environment where the incident occurred, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Social Media (%)	Gaming (%)	In-Person (%)
Armenia	75.3	8.5	10
Brazil	66.5	12.3	18.1
Cambodia	36	19.1	19.5
Colombia	53.7	12.1	19.3
Dominican Republic	53.2	10.5	21.2
Ethiopia	38.8	18.2	18.9
Indonesia	50	14.3	20
Kenya	61	11.6	17.9
Malaysia	64.2	21.2	12.2
Mexico	67.1	3.1	21.5
Montenegro	83.3	3.9	15.2
Mozambique	59.4	8.3	19.5
Namibia	65.7	10.8	20.6
North Macedonia	54.6	31	12.8
Pakistan	47.5	4.7	30.8
Philippines	50.2	11.7	8.5
Serbia	80	2.5	14.1
Tanzania	54.1	21	21.6
Thailand	75.4	51.5	25
Uganda	54.4	14	19.1
Viet Nam	56.2	7.6	17
Average percentage	**59%**	**14%**	**18%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, 59 per cent of incidents of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse occurred on social media, while 14 per cent occurred in gaming environments and 18 per cent in person.

Social media platforms were the most common space where technology-facilitated sexual abuse occurred, in all countries included in this study. This ranges from 36 per cent of incidents in Ethiopia to 83.3 per cent of incidents in Montenegro. Gaming environments feature in the data but less frequently, with a range of 2.5 per cent in Serbia to 51 per cent in Thailand (noting that Thailand is an outlier, as the average percentage of incidents occurring on gaming platforms is

only 14 per cent). In most countries, it was more common for children to experience technology-facilitated sexual abuse in person than on gaming platforms.

Although it may seem counterintuitive, technology-facilitated child sexual abuse can occur both online and in person. While sexual exploitation and abuse can happen entirely via online platforms, technology can also function as a tool that facilitates in-person sexual abuse. For example, a perpetrator may use a smartphone to photograph or record sexual abuse of a child, then use social media to share the child sexual abuse material. In this situation the abuse starts in person and technology facilitates the creation, storage, or distribution of child sexual abuse material. Likewise, grooming and other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse may begin through social media or online platforms before moving into offline settings, or they may originate in person and continue or escalate through digital communication.

Finding: "The five social media platforms where most cases of technology-facilitated sexual abuse happened were Facebook (50 per cent), WhatsApp (29 per cent), Instagram (24 per cent), Snapchat (13 per cent) and TikTok (12 per cent)."

Table overview: Table A14 presents the ten most commonly reported platforms involved in technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances, by country. The analysis combines data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. As analyses are conducted at the incident level, percentages represent instances of abuse occurring on social media platforms, rather than the number of children subjected to exploitation and abuse.

Table A14: The ten most commonly reported platforms involved in technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances, in the year prior to the child being surveyed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Facebook	WhatsApp	Instagram	Snapchat	TikTok	YouTube	Twitter	Telegram	Viber	Line
Armenia	6	6.5	45	45.4	23	15.2	0.3	13.4	3.9	2.6
Brazil	12.7	52.1	57.2	10.1	8	6.5	6.9	NaN*	0.6	1.5
Cambodia	74.3	1.4	6.1	5.9	14.5	9.9	8.8	0	0	1.7
Colombia	79.6	30.2	14.8	6.3	5.5	5.1	1.9	3.4	NaN*	0.9
Dominican Republic	34	62.8	27.9	10	9.8	3.7	1.1	NaN*	NaN*	NaN*
Ethiopia	63	4.3	4.5	1.7	2.4	6.1	7.9	33.3	2.5	1.8
Indonesia	51.9	57	15.2	3	7.1	10.1	12.7	0	0	1.5
Kenya	51.6	53.3	14.9	6.4	7	15.8	7.9	2.2	0.4	0.5
Malaysia	42.4	62.2	16.2	9	13.3	10	8.3	17	0	4.8
Mexico	54	46.6	10.6	2.4	7.5	2.6	1.3	NaN*	0	0
Montenegro	8.9	4.9	45.6	21	7.3	2.1	1.5	NaN*	43.7	0
Mozambique	73.9	37.7	3	2.6	2.9	4.9	3.1	1.3	1	0.2
Namibia	58.5	43.9	38.1	7.1	5	2.3	7.4	2.2	0.3	0.6
North Macedonia	37.7	39.2	71.9	54.8	51.9	26.7	21.4	NaN*	2.2	NaN*
Pakistan	14.3	30.8	15.1	43.2	7.2	11.7	0	NaN*	0	0
Philippines	90.1	0.7	6.3	5.3	7.5	5.4	5.9	0	0	0
Serbia	8.3	15.7	47.6	11.9	10	0.5	1.4	NaN*	19.1	0
Tanzania	60.9	18.6	13.9	7.2	2.7	14.4	9.8	0	0	1.1
Thailand	81.1	6.5	44.7	20.4	51.7	25.7	60.9	0	0	17.6
Uganda	72.4	34	3	2.6	3	5.8	5.9	0.8	0.1	4.1
Viet Nam	79.4	0	2.5	0	12.3	8.5	0	0	0	0
Average Percentage	**50%**	**29%**	**24%**	**13%**	**12%**	**9%**	**8%**	**5%**	**4%**	**2%**

* Could not produce a valid result as the sub-sample was too small.

Commentary: Across the 21 countries included in the study, Meta-owned platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, were, on average, the platforms on which children most frequently experienced incidents of technology-facilitated sexual abuse.

At the same time, some regional differences are evident. Children in Eastern Europe and Central Asia saw comparatively few incidents occurring on Facebook or WhatsApp, with Instagram featuring more prominently. In contrast, Facebook was disproportionately represented in surveys with children living in Eastern and Southern Africa, Southeast Asia and parts of Latin America.

The first round of data was collected between 2019 and 2021, during which platform popularity and safety features may have differed from 2022–2025. This could account for some of the regional differences observed. However findings from the second round suggest that the top five platforms where most children have been subjected to technology-faciliated sexual abuse remained largely the same.

These findings highlight that a relatively small number of social media platforms account for a disproportionate share of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cases. This underscores the critical role that a small group of widely used platforms play in shaping children's exposure to online harm and the importance of ensuring that effective safety measures are implemented where children are most active.

How do children get support and recover?

Overview of variables

This section examines how children disclose technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the barriers they face when deciding whether to seek support or make a formal report, using the comparable seven-indicator measure described in Section 1.

Analyses in this section are conducted at the incident level rather than the child level. This is because children may be subjected to more than one form of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Each instance of abuse may have involved different disclosure and reporting decisions. To facilitate incident-level analyses, the data were reshaped so that each reported instance of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse represented a single observation. Consequently, the numbers and proportions presented in this section refer to instances of abuse rather than the number of children who were subjected to technology-facilitated sexual abuse.

For each reported instance, children were asked whether they disclosed what happened to anyone. Those who said they disclosed were asked who they told. Those who did not disclose were asked about the reasons why they chose not to tell anyone.

In both rounds of Disrupting Harm, children who reported disclosing an instance of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were asked: "Who did you tell about what happened?" Response options included:

- I didn't tell anyone about it
- Father, step/foster father, or male carer, caregiver, or guardian
- Mother, step/foster mother, or female carer, caregiver, or guardian
- Brother or sister
- Friend
- Teacher or educator
- Other adult I know and trust (e.g., coach, neighbour, doctor, or babysitter)
- Religious leader (added in Disrupting Harm II, but excluded from these analyses)
- Social worker
- Helpline
- Police
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

Children who said that they did not tell anyone were asked about the barriers they faced. Response options differed between the two rounds of Disrupting Harm. In the first round, children were asked whether any of the following reasons contributed to their decision not to tell anyone:

- I did not know where to go or who to tell
- I felt embarrassed, ashamed, or that it would be too emotionally difficult to tell
- I did not think anyone would believe me or understand my situation
- I was worried I would get in trouble if I told someone
- I felt that I did something wrong and did not want to tell
- I did not think it was serious enough to report
- I did not want the person who did this to get into trouble
- I feared it would cause trouble for me or my family
- I did not think anything would be done
- I did not know you could report these things
- My friends discouraged me from reporting
- My parents discouraged me from reporting
- I feared it would not be kept confidential
- Other (please specify)
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

In the second round, response options were revised. These responses were harmonized with the first round to enable comparisons across both datasets:

- I did not know where to go or who to tell
- I felt embarrassed
- I did not think anyone would believe me
- I was worried I would get in trouble
- I felt that I did something wrong
- I did not think it was serious enough
- I did not want the person who did this to get into trouble
- I did not want anyone to know
- I did not care enough to tell anyone about it
- I was threatened not to tell anyone
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to say
- Don't know

Where possible, conceptually similar response options across both rounds were combined to create harmonized categories for analysis.

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Finding: "On average, across 21 countries, over two in five cases (41 per cent) of abuse that happened in the year prior to the survey were not disclosed to anyone."

Table overview: Table A15 presents the proportion of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances that were disclosed to someone or not disclosed among 21 countries. The table also presents the average percentage across the 21 countries included in the analysis.

Table A15: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances that were disclosed or not disclosed, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Disclosed abuse to someone (%)	Did not disclose (%)
Armenia	39.8	60.2
Brazil	56.8	43.2
Cambodia	71.3	28.7
Colombia	53.2	46.8
Dominican Republic	55.9	44.1
Ethiopia	69.5	30.5
Indonesia	54.6	45.4
Kenya	67.3	32.7
Malaysia	57.6	42.4
Mexico	51.4	48.7
Montenegro	40.5	59.5
Mozambique	74.7	25.3
Namibia	65.7	34.3
North Macedonia	87.6	12.4
Pakistan	28.6	71.4
Philippines	62	38
Serbia	56.8	43.2
Tanzania	65.9	34.1
Thailand	76.2	23.8

Country	Disclosed abuse to someone (%)	Did not disclose (%)
Uganda	69.4	30.6
Viet Nam	41.4	58.6
Average Percentage	**59%**	**41%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries included in the analysis, an average of 59 per cent of reported instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were disclosed to someone, while 41 per cent were not disclosed. Non-disclosure rates varied from 12 per cent to 71 per cent, indicating disclosure is more common in certain settings compared to others, or that some forms of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse are more likely to be disclosed than others. However, the findings indicate that a substantial proportion of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse remains undisclosed regardless of setting, meaning many children may not receive the support or protection they need following abuse.

This table should not be interpreted as a ranking of countries or be used to make comparisons between them. Differences in disclosure between countries should be interpreted with caution. Children's decisions to disclose abuse are influenced by a range of individual, social and contextual factors, including their relationships with trusted adults, perceived consequences of disclosure, confidence that they will be believed or supported, and broader social and cultural norms surrounding child sexual abuse.

Disclosure is rarely a single decision, but often a complex process. In interviews, children described weighing fears of blame, shame, punishment, or not being believed against the need for support. Others spoke about disclosing only after abuse had escalated or because they could no longer cope with the emotional impact. These findings highlight the importance of creating safe, child-centred environments in which children feel able to disclose abuse and can access timely, trauma-informed support when they do.

Finding: Across regions:

- **Around one in three** cases in **Eastern and Southern Africa.**
- **Almost two in five** cases in **Southeast Asia.**
- **Around two in five** cases in **Europe and Central Asia.**
- **Nearly one in two** cases in **Latin America and the Caribbean.**

Table overview: Table A16 presents the proportion of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances that were not disclosed, in each region.

Table A16: Percentage of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances that were not disclosed, by region (2020–2025).

Regions	Countries	Not Disclosed (%)	Average Not Disclosed (%)
Eastern and Southern Africa	Ethiopia	30.5	31
	Kenya	32.68	
	Mozambique	25.34	
	Namibia	34.26	
	Tanzania	34.08	
	Uganda	30.63	
Europe and Central Asia	Armenia	60.16	44
	Montenegro	59.48	
	North Macedonia	12.36	
	Serbia	43.17	
Latin America and Caribbean	Brazil	43.18	46
	Colombia	46.84	
	Dominican Republic	44.14	
	Mexico	48.65	
Southeast Asia	Cambodia	28.71	39
	Indonesia	45.36	
	Malaysia	42.4	
	Philippines	37.99	
	Thailand	23.81	
	Viet Nam	58.59	

Commentary: Rates of non-disclosure varied across the four regions included in this analysis, ranging from an average of 31 per cent in Eastern and Southern Africa to 46 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. In every region a substantial proportion of children who were subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse did not tell anyone about what had happened. These findings demonstrate that non-disclosure is a widespread challenge that cuts across diverse cultural and geographic contexts.

Regional differences should be interpreted with caution. The estimates are from specific participating countries within each region rather than all countries, and data were collected during different time periods. Differences in disclosure are likely influenced by a range of contextual factors including social norms, children's awareness of what constitutes abuse, trust in adults, availability of support services and perceptions of whether disclosure will result in a helpful response.

The consistently high levels of non-disclosure across all regions highlight the importance of strengthening child-friendly pathways for disclosure and support. Creating environments in which children recognize technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, know where to seek help and feel confident they will be believed and supported is critical to improving both prevention and response.

Finding: "When asked why they did not disclose exploitation and abuse to anyone, children most often pointed to a lack of clear support pathways, saying they did not know where to go or who to tell. Feelings of embarrassment were also a significant barrier, alongside perceptions that the incident was not serious enough to report. Some children expressed a desire to keep the experience private and not have anyone else know, while others said they did not care enough about what happened to share it with anyone."

Table overview: Table A17 presents the most common barriers to disclose of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances, using data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. The table presents the top five reported reasons for non-disclosure by country, with the average percentage across countries presented at the end of the table. As children could select more than one reason, percentages do not sum to 100 per cent.

Table A17: Percentage of most commonly reported reasons why children did not disclose instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, by country (2020–2025).

Country	I did not know where to go or who to tell (%)	I felt embarrassed (%)	I did not think it was serious enough (%)	I was worried I would get in trouble (%)	I did not care enough to tell anyone about it (%)
Armenia	20.4	34.7	2.1	3.5	10.6
Brazil	21.9	21.2	12	3.9	3.8
Cambodia	47.6	18	5.3	5.9	4.7
Colombia	33.3	16.2	9.1	3.2	13.7
Dominican Republic	22.8	16.2	9.8	13.9	10.1
Ethiopia	36.9	19.2	6.7	5	4.3
Indonesia	23.6	16.6	7.9	14.4	1.6
Kenya	25.5	22.1	9.5	14.6	2.7
Malaysia	29.5	15.3	12.4	7.3	9.4
Mexico	14.4	20.7	14.8	8.2	8.8
Montenegro	4.8	19.7	22	8.7	20.2
Mozambique	29.2	17.5	15.7	7.9	5.4
Namibia	16.4	11.9	17.3	8.5	12
North Macedonia	7.5	19	13.4	2.1	4.2
Pakistan	25.5	29.8	9.7	8.5	0
Philippines	37	18.1	10.6	7.1	1.3
Serbia	5.6	11.7	33.8	6.1	17
Tanzania	39.2	18.5	4.5	5.2	0
Thailand	43.4	4.8	22.9	0.8	2.6
Uganda	29.8	22.5	12.2	9.2	3
Viet Nam	18.5	10.1	23.3	9.3	7.6
Average Percentage	**25%**	**18%**	**13%**	**7%**	**7%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries included in the analysis, the most commonly reported reason for not disclosing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was not knowing where to go or who to tell (average 25 per cent), followed by feeling embarrassed (average 18 per cent) and not thinking the incident was serious enough to report (average 13 per cent). Worrying about getting into trouble (average 7 per cent) and not caring enough to tell anyone (average 7 per cent) were reported less frequently.

While the proportions for each barrier to disclosure vary across countries, the findings consistently suggest that barriers to disclosure are shaped by a combination of practical, emotional and social factors. These findings reinforce that disclosure processes are complex and decisions rarely driven by a single factor. The variety of barriers that children grapple with underscores the need for a multi-pronged approach that addresses knowledge gaps about where to report, that creates safe spaces for children to disclose and that addresses stigma, shame and victim-blaming related to sexual violence against children.

Finding: "Most children who did disclose, chose to do so to a friend (23 per cent), followed by one of their siblings (11 per cent) or their mother/a female caregiver (11 per cent)."

Table overview: Table A18 presents the most commonly reported people children disclosed instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to, using data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. As analyses are conducted at the incident level, estimates represent instances of abuse that were disclosed rather than the number of children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse. The table presents the top five disclosure recipients by country and excludes responses of "prefer not to say" and "don't know." The average percentage across countries is presented at the end of the table.

Table A18: Percentage of disclosure recipients (top 5) for reported instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Friend (%)	Brother or sister (%)	Mother, step/ foster mother, or female caregiver/ guardian (%)	Father, step/ foster father, or male caregiver/ guardian (%)	Teacher or educator (%)
Armenia	10.8	4.4	6	7.2	2.2
Brazil	25.3	6.9	11.1	7.8	1.1
Cambodia	17.7	14.5	8.7	15.4	6
Colombia	17	7	15.1	4.3	0.4
Dominican Republic	19.7	10.8	11.7	5	1.3
Ethiopia	28.8	9.9	6	9.9	6.6
Indonesia	32.4	5.8	6.4	4.1	0.2
Kenya	34.4	6.8	5.9	8.7	4.1
Malaysia	22.8	11.1	8.7	9.8	3
Mexico	16.8	14	15.3	2.4	2.1
Montenegro	21.4	7.9	7.3	4.8	1.1
Mozambique	25.2	19.1	9.6	12.5	0.5
Namibia	25.8	17	8.7	8.2	4.1
North Macedonia	23.9	19.6	23.7	10.4	2.1
Pakistan	16.1	6.8	0	3.2	0
Philippines	24.1	9.5	11.9	7	1.2
Serbia	32.4	6.9	12.9	6.6	0
Tanzania	29.3	11.9	9.2	10.4	4.1
Thailand	19.3	20.8	22.6	11.5	2.4
Uganda	32.3	13.6	8.6	6.8	5.2
Viet Nam	12.4	11.9	13.8	3.1	2.6
Average Percentage	**23%**	**11%**	**11%**	**8%**	**2%**

Commentary: Across the 21 countries included in the analysis, friends were the most commonly reported recipients of disclosures of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse (average 23 per cent), followed by siblings and mothers or female caregivers/guardians (both 11 per cent). Fathers or male caregivers/guardians were reported as disclosure recipients in an average of 8 per cent of instances, while teachers or educators were reported less frequently (2 per cent). As children could disclose an instance of abuse to more than one person, percentages may not sum to 100 per cent.

The findings highlight the important role that children's existing support networks play in responding to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Across countries, friends and family members are often the first people children turn to when seeking support, underscoring the importance of ensuring that those around children have the knowledge and confidence to respond in a supportive and safe manner and help connect children with appropriate services when needed. Consideration should also be given to how best to support children who receive disclosures of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Little is known about those children's experiences, perspectives and needs, which is an area for future research.

Finding: "Fewer than 1 per cent of cases were reported to the police, a social worker, or through a helpline. This demonstrates that these services are currently not seen as a viable support pathway for children, at least not in the short term or for the types of violence captured in the survey."

Table overview: Table A19 presents the proportion of disclosed technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances that were reported to formal support or reporting mechanisms, including the police, a social worker, or a helpline, using data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. The average percentage across countries is presented at the end of the table.

Table A19: Percentage of disclosed technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse instances reported to formal reporting mechanisms, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Police (%)	Social Worker (%)	Helpline (%)
Armenia	0	1.8	0.0
Brazil	0.1	0.5	0.0
Cambodia	1.5	1.1	0.1
Colombia	0.1	0	0.0
Dominican Republic	0.5	0.7	3.8
Ethiopia	1.7	1.4	0.3

Country	Police (%)	Social Worker (%)	Helpline (%)
Indonesia	0.8	0.2	1.9
Kenya	1	0.4	0.6
Malaysia	1.8	0.4	0.0
Mexico	0.7	1.2	0.2
Montenegro	0.2	0.4	0.9
Mozambique	2	0.5	3.8
Namibia	0.1	2.2	0.4
North Macedonia	0.3	0.7	0.0
Pakistan	0	0	0.4
Philippines	1.8	0.8	0.3
Serbia	0	0	0.7
Tanzania	0.6	0	1.8
Thailand	0.6	0.4	2.2
Uganda	1.7	1.1	0.8
Viet Nam	1.6	2.2	1.9
Average Percentage	**1%**	**1%**	**1%**

Commentary: Among reported instances of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that were disclosed to someone, disclosure to formal support and reporting mechanisms was uncommon across the 21 countries included in the analysis. Police, social workers and helplines were each reported as disclosure recipients in approximately 1 per cent of instances, on average.

These findings should be interpreted in the context of the broader disclosure patterns presented in previous tables. Children were substantially more likely to disclose to informal support networks, including friends and family members, than to formal services in the year after the exploitation and abuse occured. Low levels of disclosure to formal mechanisms do not necessarily indicate that these services are unavailable or ineffective, but may reflect a range of factors including children's awareness of available services, trust in formal systems, concerns about confidentiality or consequences and whether children perceive the abuse they endured as something that can or should be reported.

The findings reinforce the importance of ensuring that formal support pathways are accessible, seen as a viable alternative for children, and connected to the trusted adults and communities that children turn to when seeking support.

How does abuse affect children's lives?

Overview of analysis

Both rounds of the Disrupting Harm survey asked internet-using children aged 12–17 about their mental health and well-being. This section examines the relationship between technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and selected well-being indicators.

For these analyses, technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were used as the exposure variables, and children's well-being indicators were assessed as outcomes.

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse: The seven-indicator binary measure for technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation as described in section one was used as the main exposure variable in the analyses.

Mental health: The study assessed anxiety using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 item (GAD-7) Scale. In Disrupting Harm I, a truncated version was used by including four items. Participants were asked: "In the last two weeks, how often did you", followed by four response options including:

- Feel fearful
- Feel nervous
- Feel restless, like you can't sit still
- Generally feel worried

Participants could answer: "Not at all", "Rarely", "Sometimes", or "Often" to each response option. A scalar variable was derived from the sum of the responses with "Not at all" coded as 0 and "Often" as 4, then standardized. This question was interviewer-assisted.

In Disrupting Harm II, the full version of the GAD-7 was used:

- Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it is hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

Participants could answer: "Not at all", "Rarely", "Sometimes", or "Often" to each response option. A scalar variable was derived from the sum of the responses with "Not at all" coded as 0 and "Often" as 4, then standardized. This question was interviewer-assisted.

Self-harm: The study assessed self-harm tendencies by asking: "In the past year, have you hurt yourself on purpose in any way?" Participants could answer: "No" or "Yes", and the dichotomous response was used for analysis.

Suicidal thoughts and behaviours: The study assessed suicidal thoughts or behaviours by using a truncated version of the Paykel (1974) Suicide Scale. Participants were asked: "Have any of the following happened in the past year?" followed by four response options including:

- Have you felt like life was not worth living?
- Have you thought of taking your life, even if you would not really do it?
- Have you reached the point where you seriously considered taking your life or perhaps made plans how you would go about doing it?
- Have you made an attempt to take your life?

Participants could answer: "No" or "Yes" to each response option. A binary variable ("Yes"/"No") was created where a participant counted as "Yes" if responded in the affirmative to at least one of the four response options above. These questions were self-completed to ensure respondent privacy but they were referred to available support services near them if they responded yes to any of the above items.

Analysis approach: Associations between technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and well-being indicators were examined using survey-weighted regression models, accounting for the complex survey design and sampling weights. Models were adjusted for child age and gender.

For binary well-being outcomes, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts or behaviours, prevalence ratios were estimated using survey-weighted Poisson regression models with a log link and robust variance estimation. Results are presented as risk ratios (RRs) with 95 per cent confidence intervals.

For continuous outcomes, including anxiety scores, survey-weighted linear regression models were used. Results are presented as percentage changes in the standardized outcome score.

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Finding: "In the 21 countries participating in Disrupting Harm, children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse were:

- 4 times more likely to experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours;
- 4 times more likely to engage in self-harm tendencies;
- And reported anxiety levels were approximately 11 percentage points higher."

Table Overview: Tables A20 and A21 present results from survey-weighted regression analyses examining the association between technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and selected well-being indicators using data from both rounds of the Disrupting Harm study. Models were adjusted for child age and gender.

Table A20 presents adjusted risk ratios for binary outcomes, including suicidal thoughts and behaviours and self-harm, while Table A21 presents adjusted mean differences in standardized anxiety scores.

Overall, children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse had a higher prevalence of suicidal thoughts and behaviours and self-harm compared with children who did not report being subjected to these forms of violence (Table A20). They also had higher anxiety scores on average (Table A21).

Table A20: Adjusted risk ratios for the association between technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and suicidal thoughts and behaviours and self-harm, by country (2020–2025).

	Suicidal thoughts or behaviours	Acts of self-harm
Country	**Effect Size [CI]**	**Effect Size [CI]**
Armenia	5.15 [3.58, 7.42] ***	13.24 [6.1, 28.74]***
Brazil	2.39 [1.83, 3.11]***	4.13 [2.65, 6.43]***
Cambodia	4.67 [3.37, 6.48]***	3.45 [2.13, 5.58]***
Colombia	2.64 [1.96, 3.55]***	2.65 [1.46, 4.83]**
Dominican Republic	2.32 [1.71, 3.16]***	1.98 [1.04, 3.75]*
Ethiopia	2.2 [1.72, 2.81]***	1.66 [1.03, 2.66]*
Indonesia	4.93 [3.05, 7.96]***	4.38 [1.82, 10.56]**
Kenya	2.22 [1.9, 2.6]***	2.29 [1.82, 2.87]***
Malaysia	8.38 [4.87, 14.42]***	13.08 [4.94, 34.63]***
Mexico	8.95 [5.42, 14.75]***	12.5 [5.74, 27.2]***
Montenegro	5.3 [2.36, 11.9]***	8.46 [2.3, 31.11]**
Mozambique	3.08 [2.38, 3.97]***	2.94 [1.88, 4.61]***
Namibia	2.57 [1.85, 3.58]***	2.52 [1.7, 3.75]***
North Macedonia	8.64 [2.85, 26.19]***	9.43 [3.25, 27.41]***
Pakistan	13.63 [6.3, 29.49]***	8.46 [3.71, 19.32]***
Philippines	2.75 [2.13, 3.55]***	3.31 [1.93, 5.66]***
Serbia	1.57 [0.73, 3.38]	92.35 [9.65, 883.53]***
Tanzania	3.81 [2.59, 5.6]***	3.32 [2.06, 5.35]***
Thailand	15.17 [8.51, 27.03]***	23.15 [10.13, 52.89]***
Uganda	1.52 [1.33, 1.75]***	1.81 [1.46, 2.25]***
Viet Nam	6.45 [3.6, 11.57]***	6.34 [2.6, 15.45]***
Average	**5.2**	**10.5**
Median	**3.81**	**4.13**

Key: * = p<.05; ** = p<0.01; *** = p<0.001

Table A21: Adjusted mean differences in standardized anxiety scores associated with technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, by country (2020–2025).

Country	Adjusted mean difference in standardized anxiety score [CI]
Armenia	0.29 [0.18, 0.4]***
Brazil	0.14 [0.09, 0.19]***
Cambodia	0.12 [0.08, 0.16]***
Colombia	0.11 [0.06, 0.16]***
Dominican Republic	0.08 [0.04, 0.13]***
Ethiopia	0.1 [0.06, 0.13]***
Indonesia	0.15 [0.09, 0.21]***
Kenya	0.08 [0.04, 0.12]***
Malaysia	0.13 [0.07, 0.19]***
Mexico	0.12 [0.07, 0.17]***
Montenegro	0.1 [0.02, 0.17]*
Mozambique	0.06 [0.01, 0.1]*
Namibia	0.15 [0.1, 0.19]***
North Macedonia	0.2 [0.07, 0.33]**
Pakistan	0.11 [0.03, 0.19]*
Philippines	0.08 [0.05, 0.12]***
Serbia	0.06 [0.01, 0.1]*
Tanzania	0.15 [0.09, 0.21]***
Thailand	0 [-0.06, 0.05]
Uganda	0.07 [0.03, 0.11]***
Viet Nam	0.14 [0.07, 0.21]***
Average	**0.12**
Median	**0.11**

Key: * = p<.05; ** = p<0.01; *** = p<0.001

Commentary: Across the 21 countries in the study, children subjected to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse were consistently more likely to report suicidal thoughts and behaviours (effect size range: 1.52-15.17, median 3.81) and engage in self-harm tendencies (effect size range: 1.66-92.35, median 4.13) than children who were not subjected to these forms of abuse. They were also subjected to greater anxiety levels (mean difference range 0.06-0.29, median 0.11). Although the strength of these associations varied across countries, the overall pattern was remarkably consistent, with statistically significant positive associations observed in almost all settings.

These findings are consistent with the qualitative evidence collected through Disrupting Harm. However, the findings from the qualitative interviews revealed impacts on children beyond negative mental health outcomes. Many children described experiencing fear, shame, anxiety, isolation, loss of trust and ongoing distress following technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. For some children, these impacts appeared immediate, while others described longer-term effects on their relationships, well-being and sense of safety. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings underscore that the consequences of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can extend well beyond the abusive incident itself, highlighting the importance of ensuring that children have timely access to trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support alongside appropriate protection and justice responses.

Differences in the magnitude of the adjusted risk ratios and mean differences should be interpreted with caution. Estimates are influenced not only by the underlying relationship between technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and these indicators of harm, but also by differences in sample size, the prevalence of these outcomes within countries, and unknown co-variates, affecting the statistical precision. In countries where suicidal thoughts, self-harm and anxiety were relatively uncommon, confidence intervals are wider and effect estimates may appear inflated or more variable.

As these analyses are based on cross-sectional survey data, they demonstrate associations rather than causal relationships. While the findings cannot establish that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse caused poorer mental health outcomes, they consistently show that children reporting these forms of abuse were substantially more likely to report adverse well-being outcomes across diverse contexts.

About us

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