DATA INSIGHT NO 12

CHILDREN'S DISCLOSURES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



DISRUPTING HARM

Funded by Safe Online

Implemented by ECPAT INTERPOL unicef for every child

Disclosure of child sexual exploitation and abuse – or when a person conveys that they are being or have been sexually exploited or abused during childhood – is a complex process that requires a close understanding of the decision-making and factors involved. Disclosure can take many forms: some children may speak explicitly about what happened, while others may express themselves indirectly, through changes in body language or other non-verbal cues. Disclosure is not always deliberate; it can be accidental, partial or unclear, and is rarely a one-time event. More often, it unfolds gradually as part of an ongoing process, shaped by the child's evolving sense of safety, trust and readiness.

Our understanding of children and young people's disclosures of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse is still evolving. This includes whom they speak to when they have been subjected to these forms of violence and why those who do not speak to anyone stay silent. Importantly, in some countries, the availability of research that includes the perspectives and experiences of children themselves is inadequate.

The data collected under the Disrupting Harm research project shed light on common pathways to disclosure in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as key barriers that children may face. The data contribute to a body of evidence that highlights the culture of silence around sexual violence but also adds to our understanding of disclosures when sexual abuse is facilitated – in whole or in part – by digital technologies. The experiences of children and young people engaged in this research show that speaking up and seeking help can often seem like far-fetched options, with children staying silent and trying to contain the situation themselves, until the exploitation and abuse become unbearable.

DEFINING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term "technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse" to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as "online" child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term "technology-facilitated" is now preferred to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

While the interviews allowed participants to speak about any form of sexual violence perpetrated using digital technologies, the Disrupting Harm survey in the first round of studies measured seven different indicators related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Two additional measures were added in the second round of studies (see table 1). Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of all the ways that digital technologies can facilitate sexual violence against children, it offers data on a range of abusive behaviours, from exposure to sexual content to sexual extortion and image-based abuse.

TABLE 1. SURVEY QUESTIONS USED TO MEASURE TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

DISRUPTING HARM 2020-2021		DISRUPTING HARM 2024-2025
Someone sent me sexual images I did not want		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		I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to
I have been asked for a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to		I have been asked to share a photo or video showing my private parts when I did not want to
Someone shared sexual images of me without my consent		Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission
Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself		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		Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual
Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities		Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities
-		Someone used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of me
-		Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

The aim of this brief is to update findings around children's disclosures from the first round of Disrupting Harm studies. The data presented in this brief come from the primary data collection undertaken for Disrupting Harm during two research cycles, the first from 2020 to 2021 in 13 countries and the second from 2024 to 2025 in another 10 countries. This includes interviews with children and young people (aged 16–24) who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at some point when they were under the age of 18. The experiences and perspectives of professionals who supported children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are also presented in this Data Insight. Nationally representative household surveys were also conducted, and data from around 21,000 12–17-year-old internet-using children and their caregivers across 21 countries are also presented here.[1] More details on the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

1 Out of the 25 countries where the Disrupting Harm research was conducted, data from four countries – South Africa, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco – have not been included in the survey data analysis presented here. In South Africa, a different approach was used for the sample, and some changes were made to the survey questions. In Jordan, all questions related to sex and sexual violence were removed from the survey, while Tunisia and Morocco are not included as data were not available for public release at the time this brief was written.

This brief presents survey data from children who were subjected to the forms of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse listed above. The children were asked several follow-up questions about whether they disclosed the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to in the previous year, whom they disclosed to and what barriers stopped them from disclosing. Since transcripts from the first round of studies have been deleted due to data privacy requirements, the qualitative data collected in the second round of studies were analysed separately and common themes that arose from the first and second rounds are included in this brief.

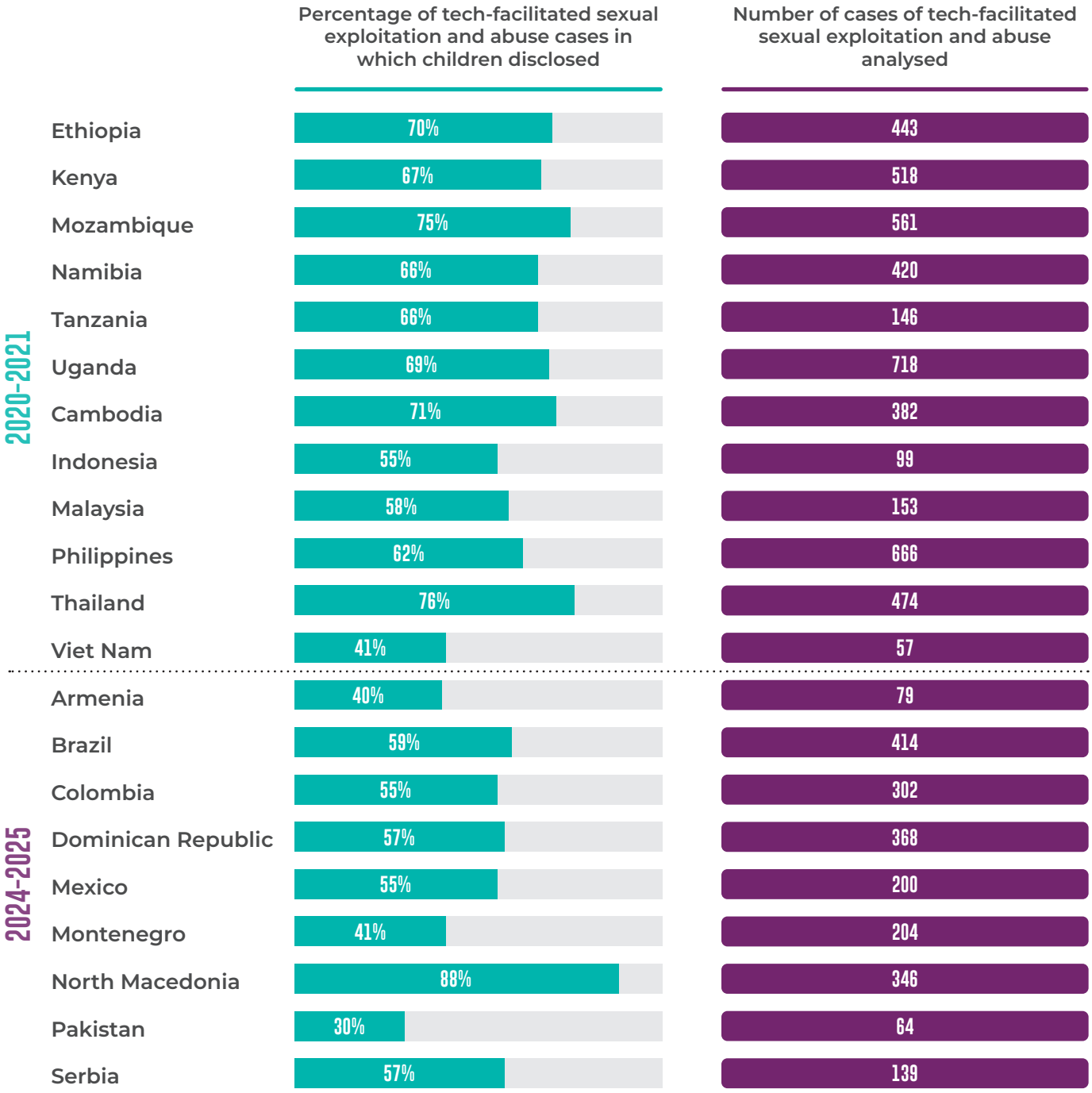
The survey data collected in the first round of studies were based on a seven-variable construct of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as listed in the box above. In the second round of studies, this construct was expanded to include two additional variables, reflecting the evolving understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the need to capture additional forms of abuse not measured in the first round of research. As understanding of children's experiences in digital environments has developed, the updated framework incorporates a broader range of harmful behaviours and abusive dynamics, resulting in a more comprehensive measure of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. While findings from the first and second round are not directly comparable, together they highlight persistent patterns and trends in tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that transcend contexts across a wide range of countries over the past seven years.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT DISCLOSURES?

Based on the household survey data, children disclosed tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in 61 per cent of cases across the 21 countries listed below. This figure ranged quite substantially depending on the country, from 30 per cent to 88 per cent. This emphasizes the importance of understanding the wider policy, social, community and interpersonal contexts around a child and how these may impact their path to disclosure. More in-depth analysis of the country-specific contexts is presented in the Disrupting Harm national reports.

There were no statistically significant gender differences in rates of disclosure among the boys and girls surveyed in any of the countries, except in Armenia and Cambodia – where boys were more likely to disclose – and in the Dominican Republic, where girls were more likely to disclose.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF TECH-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE CASES IN WHICH CHILDREN DISCLOSED



Across all countries included in both rounds of Disrupting Harm studies, few boys or young men agreed to participate in interviews despite extensive participant recruitment efforts. In the first round of studies, out of the 70 children and young people interviewed about the tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse they were subjected to during childhood, only 9 were boys. In the second round, out of the 100 children and young people interviewed, only 12 boys or young men came forward to participate in interviews. This suggests that **boys may find it more difficult to disclose or speak openly about the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to**. Although the survey data did not reveal many gender differences in disclosure rates, it is critical to find pathways to engage with boys around topics of sexual violence and disclosure through in-depth and trauma-informed qualitative research in order to understand how best to support them.

Across the 21 countries included in the survey data analysis, friends were by far the most common group that children disclosed to (23 per cent of disclosures). In the second round of studies, qualitative interviews with young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during their childhoods indicated that friends were sometimes perceived as emotionally close and less likely to judge or punish. Importantly, some children and young people highlighted how interventions from their peers were not always enough to stop the exploitation and abuse. In some cases, they provided emotional support while in others, they normalized the harm or even encouraged the young people interviewed to remain silent.

Another common finding across countries is that relatively few children seek help from others in their support network, particularly adults: 11 per cent sought help from a sibling, 11 per cent from a female caregiver and 8 per cent from a male caregiver, and even fewer children turned to teachers (3 per cent) or other trusted adults (1 per cent). The qualitative data suggest that when children disclosed to parents or caregivers it was often to their mothers or aunts, who had responded with support in other moments of difficulty and were described as less likely to respond with anger.

Similarly, turning to police and other formal services was rare: out of the 6,696 cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that were analysed from the survey across 21 countries, children contacted a social worker in only 1 per cent of cases; in the same percentage of cases, children contacted a helpline or the police. These data relate to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that occurred in the year before the child was surveyed, so it is possible that children reached out to these formal channels later on. Nevertheless, the data indicate that in the relatively short term, children are not speaking directly to professionals about the sexual exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to. Disrupting Harm law enforcement data confirm this, indicating that reports of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse usually come to specialist police units from other law enforcement agencies and adults, but rarely directly from children themselves.

Considering that in 39 per cent of cases, children do not tell anyone about the exploitation and abuse at least in the year after the abuse took place, these findings are alarming. A considerable number of children likely received no help at all – at least in the short term – for what they had been through, which could result in a range of long-term impacts on their health and well-being. No child should have to suffer such things alone.

> ***[I told] no one, that was my own little skeleton I put it back into the closet until I was ready to deal with it one day.***
>
> **(Young person, Namibia)**

> ***At that moment, you feel so bad about yourself that you want to tell someone in search of some support, but instead of getting support, you fear judgment. I think my mind just closed off in that moment, and I felt like, 'No, don't tell anyone, it's over, just leave it.'***
>
> **(Young person, Mexico)**

These findings illustrate how children are unlikely to disclose abuse to adults or services. This makes the task of supporting children difficult, or even impossible, for those with a duty of care. It also raises the question of why children are currently not comfortable disclosing to adults and what needs to change so that the support mechanisms available are seen as a realistic alternative by children. With children more often disclosing to friends and siblings, it is important to consider how children receiving disclosures from other children can be best supported.

WHAT INFLUENCES SPEAKING UP?

Evidence generated from the Disrupting Harm study highlights several critical and interrelated factors shaping whether children disclose tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Central to children's decision-making is the expectation that a trusted individual will respond in a non-judgmental way that respects the child's privacy. At the same time, shame, victim-blaming and gaps in knowledge among both children and those expected to support them influence whether disclosure occurs. Four key themes emerged consistently across countries in both rounds of studies:

- Non-judgmental support
- Limited understanding or normalization of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse
- Access to a trusted peer or family member
- Stigma, shame and self-blame

Feeling safe from judgment when sharing

At the same time, a substantial proportion of children feel embarrassed or lack access to anyone they feel safe disclosing to. Among the 39 per cent of cases where children did not disclose, the most common barrier was that the child did not know where to go or whom to tell (26 per cent). Additionally, in 19 per cent of cases, children did not disclose because they were embarrassed. As one girl explained:

> ***What will they say? What will the community say? That's where the fear started coming in, whereby my reputation will be ruined and I don't know what this man will say about me and what people will think.***
>
> **(Young person, Namibia)**

Qualitative findings also highlight concerns that disclosure may result in not being taken seriously, being accused of exaggerating or facing anger. Children may also fear consequences such as losing internet access, being forced to change schools or being blamed for encouraging the abuse. Reflecting on these victim-blaming attitudes, one young woman in Malaysia shared that:

> ***[He asked me] 'Why did you do that?' when the question should have been like, 'Why did he do that to you?'***
>
> **(Young person, Malaysia)**

Linked to these victim-blaming attitudes, children often fear that disclosing sexual exploitation and abuse will lead to punishment from their caregivers. Children may worry about restrictive or punitive responses, such as limitations on their social life, independence or education, and in some cases, even the risk of physical violence:

> ***And she scolded me because I accepted everything. She'd say 'See? That's why you want to be on Facebook?', like saying things I shouldn't do. 'You're accepting anyone [as a Facebook friend], that's what you get.'***
>
> **(Young person, Brazil)**

> ***After those incidents...her mother accompanies her everywhere, she does not trust her daughter. Coming here, going to school, going to the store, going for a walk, mom has to follow her all the time. Now we also have the problem that she decided not to go to university...***
>
> **(Front-line worker, Armenia)**

In some contexts, non-disclosure becomes a protective strategy, particularly where disclosure may expose children to severe punishment, violence or blame. A case described by a professional in Pakistan illustrates how perpetrators can exploit this fear and the severe consequences of not having a safe and trusted adult to turn to:

He pretended to care for her, then blackmailed her using her videos. She became terrified and didn't know whom to ask for help. He later brought in other cousins and friends, and they collectively gang-raped her.

(Front-line worker, Pakistan)

Discomfort, stigma and taboo around discussing sex and sexuality among both children and adults can further reduce opportunities for disclosure and early intervention. These dynamics highlight the importance of accessible, trusted and non-threatening disclosure pathways.

LEARN ABOUT CHILDREN'S INTERESTS, RELATIONSHIPS AND LIVES (ONLINE AND IN PERSON) AND BE A SAFETY PARTNER

Part of online safety is an extension of the safety and care that children get in their personal networks. First and foremost, caregivers should aim to demonstrate to children that they can be a trusted and non-judgmental source of advice and information. This includes learning more about children's interests, relationships and lives while respecting their right to privacy, especially as they get older.

Related to the digital space specifically, caregivers must improve their understanding of digital platforms and technologies and engage with children around their online activities, habits and interpersonal relationships. Talk with children about how they interact with others online, as one would in real life. Talk about online risks and about what to do if they encounter harm. Aim to learn together. Reassure children that they can turn to you if something bothers them online and that they will not be judged or blamed for what happened.

Finally, when children do not know about sex and sexuality, it enables offenders to take advantage. Foster environments where children are comfortable to ask questions and raise concerns about sex and sexuality with adults without embarrassment or shame. Awareness-raising messages and responses to disclosures must clearly convey that sexual exploitation and abuse is never the child's fault, regardless of the circumstances.

Misunderstanding or normalizing sexual exploitation or abuse

A critical barrier to disclosure is that many children do not recognize what happened to them as abuse. Harmful behaviours – such as unwanted sexual messages, coercion to share sexual content or online harassment – may instead be perceived as normal aspects of relationships or online interaction.

This normalization is reinforced by limited awareness among both children and adults, and in some cases by adults who minimize or dismiss these abusive behaviours. As a result, children's experiences are invalidated and they might see no reason to disclose or seek help. Survey data show that 13 per cent of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse did not consider it serious enough to report.

Misconceptions about consent may further compound this issue. In some cases, children believe that agreeing to initial contact reduces the responsibility of the offender for subsequent abuse:

We didn't understand that we are a victim... because we agreed to go by ourselves.

(Young person, Cambodia)

Children frequently internalize responsibility, particularly where abuse emerges from interactions that are perceived as consensual, including the sharing of sexual content within peer relationships that were initially consensual. This reinforces reluctance to disclose and can delay help-seeking.

ABUSE IS NEVER THE CHILD'S FAULT

Across all themes, a consistent and critical issue is the misplaced responsibility children place on themselves or is placed on them by others. Many children believe their actions contributed to or caused the abuse, particularly when they engaged online, shared content or trusted the perpetrator.

It is essential that children are clearly and consistently informed that all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse are unacceptable and are never their fault, regardless of how contact was initiated or who the offender is. Without this understanding, children may remain silent and avoid seeking help.

Having a safe, trusted person to confide in

Children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse most often turn first to someone close and accessible, particularly friends, siblings and female caregivers. As discussed above, survey data from both rounds of Disrupting Harm studies show a consistent pattern in disclosure preferences.

In several cases, the qualitative data illustrated how having someone to speak to and verbalizing one's experiences and interactions may support children in processing and recognizing abuse. For example, a young woman interviewed in Serbia, and who was abused by a romantic partner when she was still a child, described how she only came to understand her experience after speaking with her mother:

> ***(...) I didn't realize, until I told my mom, what had happened. I didn't understand the gravity of the situation... only then... I realized what had actually happened.***
>
> **(Young person, Serbia)**

Another young woman interviewed in Namibia had a similar reflection, and explained how this led her to action:

> ***Funny that all along I never thought of it as an abuse... talking to my cousin made me realize... but I just said, okay, I will not talk to this person again.***
>
> **(Young person, Namibia)**

However, while these individuals are trusted, adults and children alike might not always be equipped to respond appropriately. For same-aged peers or siblings in particular, acting as a first responder can place a significant emotional and practical burden on them. Across countries, peer responses often provide immediate reassurance, informal risk assessment and temporary protection. However, they are limited in their ability to stop the abuse or replace formal intervention. For example, a survivor in Brazil recalled telling her brother about abuse by a relative. He encouraged her to remain silent because he had been granted permission to go out at night with that relative and did not want to lose that privilege.

People who receive disclosures could be better supported to respond safely, including understanding how to manage their own emotional reactions, how to respond safely and supportively, and how to accompany children in their decision to tell a trusted adult or to seek support from the appropriate professional services.

LISTEN, ASK AND REPORT

Adults who regularly interact with children or who have a duty of care must be equipped to listen to children's disclosures without judgment or blame, to focus on being supportive and on the child's needs, and to refer children to professional support as needed and in line with their best interests. This requires continuous training for adults that is grounded in the latest evidence on how (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse manifests, and the key barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. In addition, helplines can be used as a source of information about how to best support a child who has suffered abuse. Adults should actively foster open lines of communication with children so they can disclose or seek help for themselves or a friend.

Fear of stigma and self-blame

Stigma and victim-blaming, often rooted in rigid gender norms, are pervasive barriers to disclosure. These factors contribute to internalized shame and can discourage help-seeking. Worryingly, perpetrators seem aware of cultural and societal dynamics and actively exploit children's fear of exposure to threaten, blackmail, and keep children silent and compliant. Children may avoid disclosure to protect themselves or their families from community stigma linked to honour and shame. Professionals frequently described community social exclusion because of disclosure:

> ***They moved [...] because their entire community already knew about this, she was not allowed to go to school, even with some attempts to go there for some classes, she was beaten, beaten on the way, they closed the doors and didn't let her in, so this person was forced to move to another area, to another city.***
>
> **(Justice professional, Armenia)**

Norms around gender and sexuality further shape disclosure. In some contexts, boys fear being labelled gay, while girls face stigma related to beliefs that problematize female sexuality.

Given that the survey data show that girls and boys are subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse at similar rates, but most cases discussed by professionals and young people across countries involve girls, this may be an indication that boys are not disclosing what is happening to them.

> ***No, because I always, since I was a little boy, I wanted my father to be proud of me, so I could not tell [him] about this, about that 'mariconería'[2] as he would call it, he would hit me.***
>
> **(Young person, Dominican Republic)**

As a consequence, boys may be largely left to deal with sexual abuse and its aftermath on their own.

These social pressures contribute to feelings of complicity that form barriers to disclosure and can even be internalized by children. Indeed, 5 per cent of children who did not disclose reported that it was because they felt they had done something wrong. Children often blame themselves for engaging online, responding to perpetrators or not following parental rules. Many young people described how this guilt and self-blame weighed on them:

> ***It's very difficult to absolve yourself of guilt in the face of other people who were much more at fault. And you take that guilt that you have, that part of you that is an active actor, and you make it something that you carry.***
>
> **(Young person, Brazil)**

> ***I didn't want to seek help either...for me, that was a matter of shame, because from the beginning, I was the one who agreed. Even if it was sudden, in my ignorance, but I did agree. Back then, I was very ashamed, and I didn't tell anyone.***
>
> **(Young person, Colombia)**

> ***I knew I was wrong, and I made a mistake, so I knew I was in here on my own doing.***
>
> **(Young person, Malaysia)**

> ***It made me feel really bad because I knew I contributed in a way.***
>
> **(Young person, Namibia)**

> ***I did it [went online] behind her [mother's] back, without her knowledge so with them, yes, it is my fault because I still did it even though I knew it was wrong. She said she didn't know how else to guide me.***
>
> **(Young person, Malaysia)**

2 Highly offensive and derogatory Spanish slang used in reference to homophobic stereotypes.

The findings reveal a critical gap in children's access to trusted adults, support systems and information about available help. When children do not have someone to turn to, intervention is delayed and the risk of (prolonged) harm increases. These barriers are long-standing and reflect challenges in disclosing sexual violence against children more broadly. Efforts to improve disclosure should therefore be integrated into wider violence prevention initiatives. Beyond awareness-raising and skills-building, they should focus on tackling victim-blaming attitudes that can be deeply rooted in gendered and societal norms, and they must reframe tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as a serious rights violation requiring redress rather than as a source of stigma or shame.

ABOUT THE *DATA INSIGHTS* SERIES FROM DISRUPTING HARM

Disrupting Harm is a research project conceived and funded by Safe Online since 2019. The project and its research methodology are designed and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti). This research generates national evidence on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

This publication is part of a series of thematic briefs that explores pressing issues emerging from the research, and recommends ways for key entities and individuals to improve prevention and response. Evidence about tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse was collected in 13 countries between 2020 and 2021: seven in Eastern and Southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania), and six in Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and Viet Nam).

In 2024 and 2025, data was collected in an additional 12 countries: Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Serbia and Tunisia.

Since 2019, the Disrupting Harm project, together with national partners and researchers, have conducted surveys and interviews with more than 25,000 children and young people, including those who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In addition, over 25,000 caregivers were surveyed, and 540 professionals with child protection mandates interviewed. More detailed information about the Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

Data collected by ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti since 2019 are used as the basis for the Disrupting Harm Data Insights series. Authorship is attributed to the organization(s) that produced each brief. While the Disrupting Harm project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organizations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

Suggested citation:

UNICEF, 'Children's disclosures of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse', Disrupting Harm Data Insight no. 12, Safe Online, New York, 2026.

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Funding from Safe Online does not constitute endorsement.

Acknowledgements:

This data insight was written by Angela Davis, Marium Saeed and Camila Perera Aladro, UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti. The data analysis that informed this data insight was prepared by Anisha Bhargava and Hélène Guillou. We acknowledge the contributions of UNICEF colleagues working on the Disrupting Harm project, our implementing partners at ECPAT International, INTERPOL and Safe Online, and all national partners who made this initiative possible. Full acknowledgements for the Disrupting Harm project can be found here.