DATA INSIGHT NO 17

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND INSTANT MESSAGING IN FACILITATING TECH-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



DISRUPTING HARM

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In a nutshell:

Disrupting Harm survey data across 21 countries shows that:

in more than half (59 per cent) of cases



of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that happened in the previous year, children were targeted via social media and instant messaging platforms.

Among those cases that happened via social media and instant messaging platforms, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram – all owned by Meta – were the most common platforms where children reported being exploited and/or abused.

Although these findings are likely to reflect the widespread popularity of these platforms among children to an extent, they also demonstrate



the important role that a small number of companies can play in ensuring safer digital spaces for children.

Sexual exploitation and abuse that happens online often reflects and overlaps with in-person abuse, so protecting children requires more than simply restricting social media access. Alongside stronger action from tech platforms,

the underlying drivers of violence against children should be addressed, including harmful social and gender norms, economic insecurity, and weak child protection systems.

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 technologies, the Disrupting Harm survey measured nine different indicators related to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of all the ways that 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:

1. Someone sent me sexual images I did not want
2. I have been asked to talk about sex or sexual acts with someone when I did not want to
3. I have been asked to share an image or video showing my private parts when I did not want to
4. Someone shared sexual images of me without my permission
5. Someone offered me money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of myself
6. Someone offered me money or gifts to meet them in person to do something sexual
7. Someone threatened or blackmailed me to engage in sexual activities
8. Someone used artificial intelligence (AI) to create fake sexual images or videos of me **(only included in the second round of Disrupting Harm surveys conducted between 2024 and 2025)**
9. Someone threatened to share sexual images or videos of me **(only included in the second round of surveys conducted between 2024 and 2025)**

Digital platforms are deeply embedded in the everyday lives of children and young people. Social media, instant messaging, and gaming platforms are among the online spaces where children play, maintain friendships, explore their identities, access information, and participate in their communities.

The same platforms are being used by perpetrators to sexually exploit and abuse children. Perpetrators may use such platforms to contact children, build trust, exert pressure, obtain and distribute child sexual abuse material, threaten or blackmail children. These platforms can also be used to arrange in-person meetings to further groom or sexually abuse children.

In this sense, social media and instant messaging platforms should not be seen simply as the location where sexual exploitation and abuse starts and ends, but as spaces that can amplify and facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse that begins or continues in person. This lens is critical to informing effective prevention and response and in avoiding siloed approaches to child protection.

METHODS

This brief examines tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse that occurs at least partly online (via social media, instant messaging and/or online games), before delving further into the specific social media and instant messaging platforms where children were sexually exploited and abused. One limitation worth noting is that this brief does not include data disaggregated by children's age or gender given the small subsamples included in some of the analysis below.

The data presented in this brief was collected through nationally representative household surveys conducted with around 21,000 internet-using children aged 12–17, and one of their caregivers. The surveys were taken during two research cycles of the Disrupting Harm project, the first from 2020 to 2021[1] and the second from 2024 to 2025,[2] covering 25 countries in six regions. This brief presents data from 21 of those 25 countries,[3] and more details on Disrupting Harm research methods can be found here.

The Disrupting Harm surveys included multiple indicators of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, which have been aggregated to create an estimate. The survey designed for the first round of studies included the seven indicators presented in the box above. In the second round of surveys, this list was expanded to include two additional indicators, 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 our understanding of children's digital experiences has evolved, the updated framework incorporates a broader range of harmful behaviours and abusive dynamics. While not intended to capture every way in which technologies can facilitate sexual violence against children, these additions provide a more comprehensive measure of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Findings from the first and second rounds are therefore not strictly comparable, but the purpose of this brief is not to compare country-level estimates, but to analyse patterns in tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse across 21 countries, and the role of digital platforms in enabling or facilitating it.

In addition, all children who reported experiencing any form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse in the year preceding the survey were asked whether the abuse had occurred, at least in part, in person, on social media and/or through an online game. If children responded that an incident occurred on social media, they were also asked on which specific platform these incident(s) occurred.

1 Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mozambique, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Republic of Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda, Viet Nam.

2 Armenia, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Jordan, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Serbia, Tunisia.

3 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.

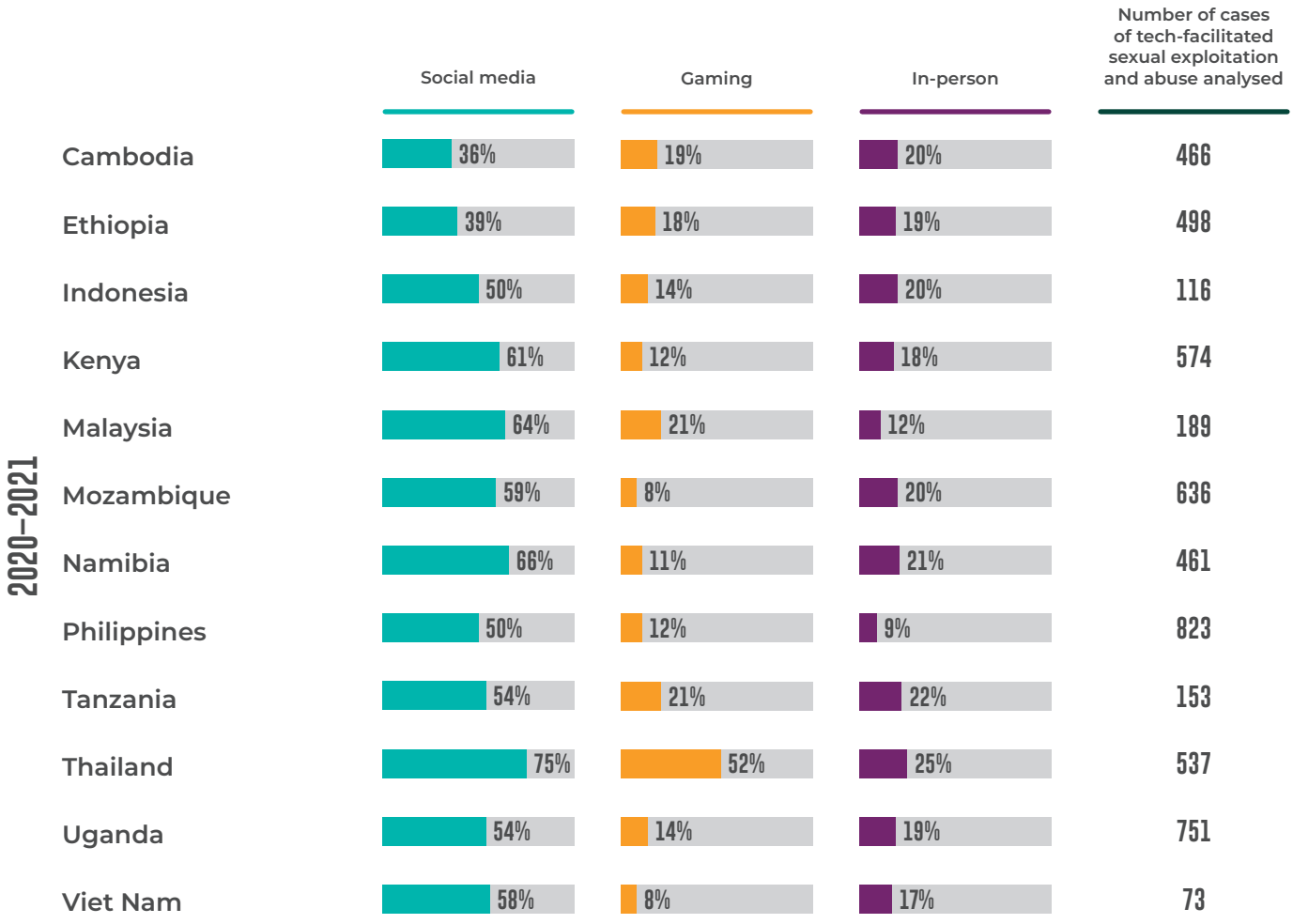
This list of platforms used in the surveys was localized to ensure no relevant platforms were excluded and was further tested with children during the cognitive testing and piloting stages. Children could also specify via open-text fields if the platform they wanted to include in their response was not included in the pre-coded list. The full list of platforms included in the first and second wave of surveys is included in Annex 1. The list was modified before the second round of survey data collection in 2024 to account for new platforms and discontinued platforms. The platforms that were measured in both rounds of surveys were:

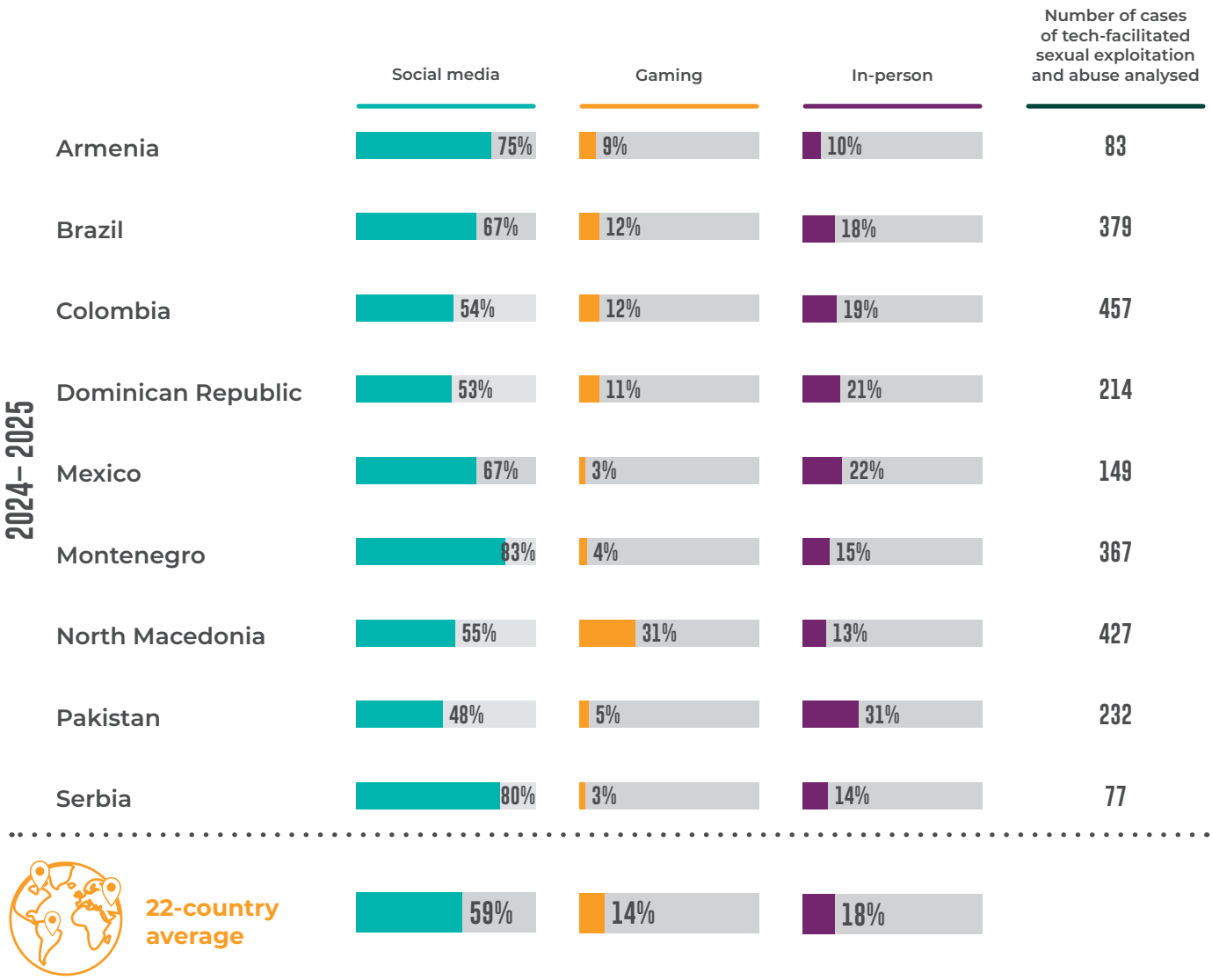
- Facebook
- Facebook Messenger
- Twitter (later changed to X)
- Snapchat
- Instagram
- TikTok
- WhatsApp
- YouTube
- Discord

RESULTS

The survey data from children across 21 countries show that, on average, 59 per cent of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse happened at least partly on social media platforms. In contrast, 14 per cent of cases happened in an online game, while the remainder of cases had an element of in-person interaction (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA





UNDERSTANDING THE DATA

The survey asked whether children were subjected to different forms and cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed. Given that the same child may have been subjected to multiple forms of abuse, the unit of analysis used is not children, but rather instances of exploitation and abuse.

The data demonstrates that the majority of instances of tech-facilitated child sexual abuse and abuse measured in the survey were enabled, at least in part, by social media and instant messaging platforms.

The children surveyed who said they were sexually exploited and/or abused via social media were then asked on which platform this happened (see Figure 2). Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram – all owned by Meta – were the most common platforms where children in the Disrupting Harm study reported being exploited and/or abused. Despite the first round of data being collected between 2019 and 2021, and that platform popularity and safety features may have changed since, data collected in the second round of surveys (2024/25) indicates that these findings remain broadly consistent over time.

However, clear regional variation showed that relatively few cases in Eastern European and Central Asian countries were reported as happening on Facebook and WhatsApp, but more frequently on Instagram. In comparison, in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia, Facebook is clearly over-represented. As mentioned above, the difference in data collection periods (2020/21 for some countries and 2024/25 for others) may have contributed to some of these discrepancies, especially if the popularity of platforms has changed over time.

FIGURE 2. TOP 8 SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS WHERE CHILDREN WERE SUBJECTED TO TECH-FACILITATED SEXUAL ABUSE OR EXPLOITATION, BY COUNTRY (PERCENTAGE OF CASES IN EACH COUNTRY, BY PLATFORM)

		Facebook	WhatsApp	Instagram	Snapchat
	22-country average	50[ii]	29[i]	24	13[i]
2020–2021	Ethiopia	63[i]	4	5	2
	Kenya	52[ii]	53[i]	15	6
	Mozambique	74[i]	38[ii]	3	3
	Namibia	59[i]	44[ii]	38[iii]	7
	Tanzania	61[i]	19[ii]	14[iii]	7
	Uganda	72[i]	34[ii]	3	3
	Cambodia	74[i]	1	6	6
	Indonesia	52[ii]	57[i]	15[iii]	3
	Malaysia	42[ii]	62[i]	16	9
	Philippines	90[i]	1	6[iii]	5
	Thailand	81[i]	7	45	20
	Viet Nam	79[i]	0	3	0
2024– 2025	Armenia	7	8	45[i]	45[i]
	Colombia	80[i]	30[ii]	17[iii]	8
	Dominican Republic	35[ii]	60[i]	30[iii]	12
	Mexico	52[i]	45[ii]	11[iii]	2
	Montenegro	9	5	45[i]	22[iii]
	North Macedonia	34	40[iii]	76[i]	55[ii]
	Serbia	9	15[iii]	46[i]	14
	Brazil	14[iii]	51[ii]	59[i]	10
	Pakistan	18[ii]	39[i]	13	39[i]

i — Highest proportion of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases in country

ii — Second highest proportion of cases in country

iii — Third highest proportion of cases in country

Base: Cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse that happened in the year prior to the survey and that happened on social media.

TikTok	YouTube	Twitter/X	Discord	Number of cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse analysed that happened on social media
13	**9[iii]**	**8**	**2**	
2	6	8[iii]	0	**193**
7	16[iii]	8	0	**350**
3	5[iii]	3	0	**378**
5	2	7	0	**303**
3	14[iii]	10	0	**82**
3	6[iii]	6[iii]	0	**409**
15[ii]	10[iii]	9	1	**168**
7	10	13	0	**58**
13	10	8	2	**122**
8[ii]	5	6[iii]	0	**413**
52	26	61[ii]	31	**405**
12[ii]	9[iii]	0	0	**41**
23[ii]	15[iii]	0	0	**57**
6	6	2	1	**191**
11	5	2	2	**213**
8	3	1	0	**147**
8	3	2	3	**176**
51	29	21	1	**191**
10	1	1	0	**112**
8	7	7	2	**294**
11	12[iii]	0	0	**34**

While these findings, to some extent, are likely to reflect the widespread popularity of these platforms among children, they also demonstrate the role that a relatively small number of platforms play in children's exposure to tech-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation. Overall, the concentration of child sexual exploitation and abuse on a limited number of social media and instant messaging platforms underscores the responsibility of major technology companies to lead the way in proactively identifying risks, strengthening safeguards, and responding rapidly when children are harmed.

However, these findings also present an important opportunity; improvements to safety features, reporting mechanisms, content moderation systems and child-centered design on several widely used platforms could significantly impact children's online safety at scale.

DISCUSSION

Public discourse on children's online safety has increasingly focused on calls for stronger regulation and accountability for technology companies, as well as policies aimed at limiting or delaying children's access to social media in the belief that this will protect them. To inform these policy debates further, this brief provides evidence and insights directly from children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

The data shows that a large proportion of child sexual exploitation and abuse that is facilitated by technologies is happening via social media and instant messaging platforms. Further, several platforms account for a large proportion of cases. Interviews with front-line service providers, justice professionals, law enforcement and young people subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse as part of the Disrupting Harm research[4] illustrate how perpetrators are using social media as a tool to facilitate sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes identifying children's social media profiles and initiating contact, creating fake profiles to build trust, exerting pressure by creating multiple profiles to harass children, distributing (real, digitally altered, or digitally-generated) sexual content, threatening or blackmailing children, or arranging in-person meetings. Digital platforms that offer services to children should therefore aim to address these diverse tactics to make it more difficult for perpetrators to utilize their services as a tool to harm children. Platforms are important allies in prevention, given their ability to design safer services, detect and disrupt abusive behaviour, and strengthen reporting and response mechanisms. Meaningful engagement with platforms should therefore combine accountability with collaboration on prevention measures that are evidence-based, designed with children, and that are tested.

While these findings may be viewed as further confirmation of the need for age bans on children's social media use, it is important to consider that the Disrupting Harm data continues to show a clear overlap between online and in-person abuse.[5] Social media and online environments more generally often mirror the dynamics, interactions and norms that exist in the "real world". While leadership and political will from tech platforms are critical to address these violations against children, this must be coupled with efforts to address root causes of violence against children at large, be it harmful social and gender norms, exposure to misogynistic content,[6] economic insecurity, or child protection systems that are falling behind. The recommendations below are therefore intended not only to address the digital environments that facilitated exploitation and abuse, but also to focus on the systemic factors that enable sexual violence against children and adolescents more broadly. More detailed and nuanced recommendations can be found across the Disrupting Harm national reports.

4 See Disrupting Harm national reports here: https://safeonline.global/disrupting-harm-country-reports/.
5 Link to Online/Offline data insight.
6 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Protecting children from violence and exploitation in relation to the digital environment: Policy Brief', UNICEF, New York, October 2024. https://www.unicef.org/documents/protecting-children-violence-and-exploitation-relation-digital-environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS



For governments, policy makers and regulators

Recommendation 1: Require safety-by-design on platforms widely used by children and enable regulators

A handful of platforms account for a large proportion of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases. This underscores the need for stronger platform accountability and child-centered safety measures. Governments should require platforms to regularly assess and mitigate risks to children through robust child rights due diligence, including impact assessments. Additional measures include privacy-by-default settings, restrictions on unsolicited contact, effective moderation, rapid content removal, and guardrails for AI-generated child sexual abuse material. Regulators and oversight bodies should also be properly resourced and capacitated with adequate technical expertise, resources, and powers to carry out their roles and hold industry accountable.

Recommendation 2: Move beyond debates focused solely on access and bans

Recent debates have focused on restricting children's access to social media. While protecting children online is essential, Disrupting Harm data shows that harm often emerges through existing relationships and social networks that move between online and in-person environments. Efforts to improve children's safety should expand their scope beyond access restrictions and take a multi-pronged approach focused on creating safer digital environments, strengthening child protection systems and addressing the root causes that enable violence against children both online and in person.[7] Keeping children safe requires a whole-of-society approach, including interventions at family, school, community and policy levels. These should be accompanied by stronger platform accountability, safety-by-design measures, and robust child rights impact assessments.

Recommendation 3: Close potential loopholes by aligning legislation globally and building international standards

This brief demonstrates that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is a problem for every country, while also demonstrating that a large proportion of cases remain concentrated within a handful of platforms that operate globally. As such, it is critical to continue efforts to build international standards around legislation, regulation and monitoring that can be adopted and adapted globally to avoid potential loopholes and ensure a streamlined and coordinated effort in creating safer digital platforms for children.



For social media companies

Recommendation 4: Prioritize child protection and safety by design

All platforms – but especially those identified in this brief – should prioritize safety-by-design as highlighted in Recommendation 1, including through safe and ethical co-creation or consultation with children and young people.

This should include taking an active role as a partner in child online protection by designing, implementing and/or funding technological solutions that make it more difficult for perpetrators to identify children and sustain prolonged contact with them and methods that improve detection and removal of child sexual abuse material and that deter their creation and distribution.

In addition, service providers should ensure algorithms do not promote harmful content to children, especially content – including but not limited to misogynistic content - that might desensitize children to sexual abuse, nor share children's contact details or profiles with unknown adult users. Regular risk assessments and child rights impact assessments should be conducted and child rights and safety impact should be disclosed in regular reporting.

7 See the recommendations in the Disrupting Harm national reports for more detailed and country-specific recommendations on addressing some of the root cause of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Recommendation 5: Improve child-friendly reporting and support mechanisms

Children need accessible, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant ways to report harmful interactions, sexual content, coercion, and exploitation. Reporting mechanisms should be easy to locate, easy to understand, with clear information about what happens after a report is submitted. Platforms should also ensure that children can quickly access support services. When designing these reporting mechanisms, platforms should aim to consult or co-create them with a diverse group of children and utilize existing guidance.[8]

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 is 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.

8 See for example: United Nations Children's Fund, 'Keeping children safe online: Trends in online platform regulation and emerging lessons, Policy brief', UNICEF, New York, December 2025. https://www.unicef.org/documents/keeping-children-safe-online.

ANNEX

Survey questions analysed in this brief

If a child was subjected to any form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, for each form of exploitation and abuse they were asked:

Thinking about the last time this happened, did it happen in any of these ways?

Choose as many answers as you wish:

- In person face-to-face (a person who is with you in the same place at the same time)
- On social media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter/X [add local examples])
- In an online game
- Some other way (please specify)
- Prefer not to say
- Don't know

If a child selected "on social media (e.g. Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter/X" they were asked:

And on which app(s) or website(s) did this happen?

Choose as many answers as you wish:

- Facebook or Facebook Messenger
- Twitter [for second round of studies, this was referred to as X]
- Snapchat
- Instagram
- TikTok
- WhatsApp
- Line
- YouTube
- 13. Twitch
- 14. Discord
- Tumblr
- Flickr
- Live.me
- Periscope
- BeReal
- Viber
- Threads
- Roblox
- Wizz
- OnlyFans
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to say
- Don't know

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