

PROTECTING CHILDREN IN ETHIOPIA FROM ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: THE WAY FORWARD

Children in Ethiopia are facing the harm and realities of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA): 1 in 10 internet-using children aged 12-17 were victims of OCSEA, according to latest available *Disrupting Harm* data. Public awareness and understanding of OCSEA is low, prevention efforts are underdeveloped, and victims receive little support. The government, public institutions, and society can all do more to respond to OCSEA and disrupt the harm it is causing, and will continue to cause, to children in Ethiopia.

Recommended actions

Combating OCSEA and providing better support to victims requires comprehensive and sustained actions from government duty-bearers, law enforcement agencies, justice and social support professionals, the tech industry, and communities. To support the implementation of a comprehensive and sustained response to OCSEA, *Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia* lays out an actionable blueprint to protect children, through a series of evidence-based recommendations spanning legislation, law enforcement, legal processes, social services, and public awareness. These recommendations call on the Government of Ethiopia and its partners to act, educate and invest.

Act

- Amend legislation to explicitly criminalise online sexual harassment, live streaming of child sexual abuse, and sexual extortion committed in the online environment.
- Amend legislation to extend the crime of online grooming for sexual purposes to situations where the sexual abuse is not the result of a meeting in-person but is committed online; for example, when children are manipulated into producing child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and sharing it with the offender.
- Strengthen and diversify mechanisms for children to disclose concerns, report abuse and seek help and advice, including through child-friendly, online methods.
- Establish a clear reporting process to the police for cases of OCSEA, and widespread training for all police to ensure child friendly implementation.
- Develop and implement guidelines on interviewing children during the criminal justice process and train prosecutors and judges on how to handle OCSEA cases and deliver child-friendly justice.
- Provide children who report an OCSEA offense – and their caregivers – with a standard information package about their rights, including the right to compensation, and the procedures that will follow.
- Create mechanisms for collaboration on OCSEA between law enforcement and civil society organisations, including secure information exchange platforms for sharing evidence.
- Improve the ability of the Cybercrime Unit – a dedicated unit that handles a broad range of online crimes – to flag/refer cases of OCSEA to global tech platforms, to establish a national image database on OCSEA, and to connect to INTERPOL’s International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database. The ICSE database is an intelligence and investigative tool, which allows specialised investigators to share data on cases of child sexual abuse.
- Introduce legislation and policy to ensure social media platforms and other internet service providers are actively contributing to the safety of children on their platforms by removing access to CSAM, detecting and reporting incidents, and promptly complying with law enforcement information requests.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.



- Accede to the Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection that was adopted by the African Union in 2014.
- Consider legal amendments to align with international conventions that offer guidance for addressing OCSEA, such as the Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) and the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) that were adopted by the Council of Europe.

Educate

- Inform police officers and prosecutors, especially at the Kebele and Woreda levels, about the provisions of law that can be used to bring charges in cases of online sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Beyond schools, use all other available channels to ensure that age-appropriate and culturally appropriate sex education reaches children throughout the country. This includes information on sexual consent, personal boundaries, and risks and responsibilities when taking, sending and receiving sexual images. This knowledge will help children identify risky or inappropriate interactions both online and in person.
- Improve caregivers' understanding of children's online activities, through community-based awareness and education programmes that help caregivers recognise the risks – and benefits – of online tools; and teach them how to be involved and supportive of a child's internet use and have a more open dialogue when a child faces dangers or harm online.
- Implement public campaigns to inform children – and the general public – about the hotlines and helplines available to report OCSEA and to obtain support outside of the family or the community.

Invest

- Adequately fund all agencies involved in tackling OCSEA and support the creation of an effective mechanism to ensure that international OCSEA referrals, including NCMEC CyberTips, are subject to an appropriate level of police investigation with a view to minimising ongoing harm to children.
- Operationalise the guidelines related to the establishment of a Victim Fund, which include supporting children and their caregivers with free legal aid, temporary housing, psychological services and transportation.
- Invest in developing and delivering OCSEA training to police officers, prosecutors, judges/magistrates, lawyers, courtroom staff, child protection officers and frontline workers, especially at Woreda and Kebele Level.
- Provide the National Police Force funding for establishing more specialised child protection units with trained female and male personnel capable of delivering child-friendly support.
- Improve the capacity of the frontline social service workforce, including teachers/staff in schools, health workers, and organisations operating child helplines in Ethiopia. This is to ensure their sustainability and their ability to receive reports and to provide adequate psychosocial support to children, including for OCSEA-related issues.

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Key insights

Through various research activities, *Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia* has identified four key insights:

1. In the past year alone, 10% of internet-users aged 12-17 in Ethiopia were victims of grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse. This includes blackmailing children to engage in sexual activities, sharing their sexual images without permission, or coercing them to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts. Scaled to the population, this represents an estimated 300,000 children who were subjected to any of these harms in the span of just one year.
2. Of the children who were subjected to OCSEA in Ethiopia, very few turned to formal reporting mechanisms like helplines or the police.
3. The justice system has not yet processed any OCSEA cases that could be determined by the *Disrupting Harm* research team. There is an urgent need for investment in knowledge, capacity and structures for law enforcement and judicial systems to better detect and respond to OCSEA.
4. Important OCSEA-related legislative reform is required to facilitate action.

The full report and complete list of recommendations can be found [here](#).

About Disrupting Harm

Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia is part of an unprecedented, multi-country research project on OCSEA, focusing on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. This large-scale research project draws on the expertise of ECPAT, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, and their global networks of partners. *Disrupting Harm* is supported by the [Fund to End Violence Against Children](#), through its Safe Online initiative.

In Ethiopia, research took place from early 2020 to early 2021, including interviews with high-level representatives from the Government of Ethiopia and a range of public bodies and organisations

active in the country. Research activities included a comprehensive analysis of the legislation, policy and systems addressing OCSEA in Ethiopia, as well as interviews with justice actors and frontline service providers, and a nationally representative household survey with internet-using children and their caregivers.

Data from these multiple sources were compared and triangulated to produce the *Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia* national report. Recommendations from the data were presented and discussed at a national consultation event in Addis Ababa in September 2021.