



GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: A FOCUS ON BOYS

This brief is based on secondary analysis of reports published in the context of the *Disrupting Harm* project conducted across 13 countries and focusing on the topic of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

This secondary analysis highlighted a significant insight: while gender does not determine the risk of such form of abuse and exploitation, gender norms and biases often hinder boys from recognising their victimisation and seeking assistance. These norms also contribute to a societal reluctance to recognise boys' exposure to harm. This leads to a widespread culture of silence among boys, exacerbated by fears of self-incrimination, and reinforced by a combination of additional individual, relational, community, and institutional factors. Without ways to voice their experiences or find support, boys often may internalise these norms, which can manifest as guilt, shame, and suppressed anger. Failing to protect boys and support them when victimised may also lead to their involvement in other forms of violence and situations of risk. This underscores the importance of implementing prevention strategies that are adapted to each child, stressing that such measures must be comprehensive, gender-sensitive and inclusive.



This brief is based on secondary analysis of published data from *Disrupting Harm*, a multi-country research study funded by Safe Online and led by ECPAT International, Interpol and UNICEF Innocenti - Global Office of Research and Foresight.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of ECPAT International and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisations involved in *Disrupting Harm*.

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PERCEPTION OF RISKY ONLINE ACTIVITIES



Across the 13 countries where *Disrupting Harm* took place, the data did not consistently reveal significant gender differences with regards to the perception of risks in children's online activities. However, there are few exceptions in some countries where differences in behaviour and perceptions between boys and girls were particularly pronounced.

For example, in the Philippines, differences emerged in how boys and girls viewed the risk of talking about sex online, with girls being twice as likely to regard this as a high-risk behaviour (42% versus 21%).¹ Meanwhile, in Cambodia, more girls (29%) than boys (22%) considered meeting someone in person following an online interaction as a very risky behaviour.² This suggests a gap between recognising online dangers and engaging in risky online behaviours, pointing to a potential underestimation of the consequences, a sense of invulnerability among boys, or the lack of prevention actions targeting boys.

Furthermore, despite minor gender differences in digital skills and knowledge in most countries, the research in Indonesia and the Philippines revealed a disparity in the receipt of online safety information. In these two countries, a higher proportion of boys reported never receiving education or guidance on safe online practices.

Specifically, only 39% and 38% of boys, (compared to 46% and 52% of girls, respectively) indicated they had received such training. This lack of information exacerbates the gaps in digital literacy and safety education, potentially contributing to observed differences in risk perception and behaviour between genders.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



As part of the household survey, children were asked about being subjected to of specific instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse within the year prior to the survey. They were asked if they had encountered situations like being blackmailed to engage in sexual activities, having their sexual images shared without permission, being coerced to engage in sexual activities through promises of money or gifts, and receiving unwanted requests to talk about sex and requests for images showing their private parts.

Across all countries, no overall patterns emerged regarding gender differences in being subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Slight variations in

- 1 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse*. Safe Online. p34.
- 2 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). *Disrupting Harm in Cambodia: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. Safe Online. p31.

online experiences exist across countries, for example in Cambodia, where boys were almost twice as likely as girls to report being subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse.³

Such findings align with increasingly extensive data and insights on the prevalence of boys being sexually abused and exploited. Although patriarchal gender inequalities, hierarchies, power imbalances and discrimination have unique and disproportionate manifestations and implications for women and girls, it is clear that boys are victimised too and have specific challenges.

One interesting trend noted in four countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Cambodia) was that boys were targeted through a wider range of platforms than girls. These platforms included Periscope and live.me, Twitch, Roblox and Discord.

Notably, in Southeast Asian countries, both boys and girls tended to engage in online gaming more frequently compared to their counterparts in Africa. In Southeast Asia, rates ranged from 66% to 89% for boys and 16% to 75% for girls. Meanwhile, in Africa, the numbers varied from 11% to 60% for boys and 8% to 50% for girls.

BARRIERS TO DISCLOSURE, REPORTING AND ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR BOYS SURVIVORS OF ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



From a young age, children — both boys and girls — are affected by unequal power structures and influenced by strict gender norms, expectations and cultural practices, which may impact their disclosure of sexual abuse and exploitation. In the countries where *Disrupting Harm* took place, one-third (34%) of children who faced online sexual exploitation and abuse chose not to disclose their abuse with anyone, showing no significant differences in the rates of non-disclosure across different age groups or between boys and girls.⁴

There are several reasons that lead children to not disclose and/or report. For example, a main barrier to reporting online child sexual exploitation and abuse in South Africa stemmed from a reluctance to interact with law enforcement, viewed by many as overly punitive. In Cambodia, the fear of causing trouble for their family and being discouraged by family members to report were two of the reasons that kept some children silent.

3 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Cambodia: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). Safe Online. p47.

4 ECPAT International & UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. (2022). [Children's Disclosures of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). Disrupting Harm Data Insight 2. Safe Online. p2.

In some countries, despite the data showing that girls are more likely to disclose, the household survey indicated similar levels of exposure to online abuse and exploitation between boys and girls. This inconsistency may be attributed to differences in data scope, reporting rates, or variations in the forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse captured by different methodologies. However, embarrassment, shame, and the emotional difficulty of explaining what has happened may be significant factors deterring boys from reporting their experiences. A frontline worker from Namibia reported: “Women are open to approach various services compared to men. [...] More girls than boys report, boys are a little bit shy.” They also stated: “They (girls) will approach different services for assistance, and lately attention on boys is lacking behind as most programmes focus on girls.”⁵ These feelings are exacerbated by societal expectations and discomfort many feel in discussing sex and sexuality. When asked which societal factors increase children’s vulnerability to online sexual exploitation and abuse, across all surveyed countries (12 out of 13), a significant percentage of frontline workers, ranging from 50% to 86%, highlighted perceived stigma from the community and taboos around discussing sex and sexuality as one of the main factors. In addition, despite the lack of data on the topic in the *Disrupting Harm* research, it is plausible that also the lack of safe and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms on the platforms contributes to boys’ reluctance to report.

Adding to this complexity is an underestimation of certain behaviours and a lack of awareness of what constitutes sexual exploitation and abuse, as highlighted by a forensic psychologist from South Africa, who reported that, in some cases, when children disclose to a caregiver,

the response may be dismissive: “‘Boys will be boys’ is often a response to boys ‘playing’ [viewing online sexual content] in this way – but when girls are involved this creates a panic.”⁶ Such attitudes can obscure the recognition of sexual exploitation and abuse, impairing boys’ ability to identify abuse, disclose their experiences, and seek support.

Moreover, this lack of awareness can prevent caregivers from recognising when children are exposed to harm online, hindering open discussions and age-appropriate information sharing. “It’s not easy for boys to open up. Not unless they trust the person a lot” (young survivor from Kenya) and “If I were a boy, it is not going to be easy to tell my family, or even to talk or to open up to anybody because it’s like you are a man, you are supposed to stand up for yourself... a boy would expect a lot of criticism, more than a girl” (young survivor from Namibia)⁷ shed light on societal norms and the additional hurdles boys face in expressing the challenges they have to experience in society.

In many cultures, discussing sexual and relationship matters is taboo, and the expectation for boys to conform to certain masculine ideals discourages them from expressing vulnerability or seeking support. Legal and societal stigmas, particularly regarding homosexuality, further complicate the willingness of boys to seek help. This is evident in Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, and Malaysia, where homosexuality is deeply stigmatised and/or criminalised, and boys face an additional layer of fear. This fear is not only of legal repercussions, but also of public judgment and victim-blaming for being perceived as having a diverse sexual orientation.

5 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). *Disrupting Harm in Namibia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse*. Safe Online. p69.

6 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). *Disrupting Harm in South Africa: Evidence on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. Safe Online. p60.

7 ECPAT International. (2022). *Disrupting Harm – Conversations with Young Survivors about Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. Safe Online. p13.

RISK OF SELF-INCRIMINATION



In Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Namibia, Ethiopia, and Malaysia, laws against homosexuality could potentially subject boys reporting abuse by male offenders to legal jeopardy, even as victims. This situation influenced the *Disrupting Harm* research methodology, prioritising the safety and legal protection of participants, with an intentional decision not to involve boy survivors in the research in these countries.

In several countries, the intersection of legal frameworks and societal norms creates a risk of self-incrimination for boys facing (online) child sexual exploitation and abuse. This risk significantly impedes their willingness to report incidents of violence or abuse, particularly in contexts where legal systems criminalise certain behaviours or identities. For example, in Ethiopia, Uganda and Malaysia, there are laws that criminalise same-sex sexual acts, defining them as “sexual deviations”,⁸ “unnatural offences”,⁹ or “acts against the order of nature”.¹⁰ Such provisions cast a shadow over child victims of abuse by a perpetrator of the same sex, who may fear legal repercussions not just for their offenders but for themselves as well.

Kenya and Namibia present a similar pattern, where legal and societal norms contribute to a silence around (online) child sexual exploitation and abuse. In Kenya, the criminalisation of homosexuality and societal expectations around masculinity create a daunting environment for male victims of same-sex abuse to seek help or justice.¹¹ In Namibia, boys, particularly those affected by sexual extortion and non-consensual sharing of self-produced sexual images, often handle their trauma alone due to fears of getting into trouble or reluctance to implicate the perpetrator.

Across these diverse contexts, the challenge remains how to create a legal and social environment where children, especially boys victimised by same-sex perpetrators or involved in incidents that could implicate them under current laws, feel safe and supported in reporting concerns and abuses.

8 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p62.

9 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2021). [Disrupting Harm in Uganda: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p67.

10 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p59.

11 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (October, 2021). [Disrupting Harm in Kenya: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p68.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



Some of the recommendations across the *Disrupting Harm* reports specifically focused on gender norms:



Learn about what children are doing both online and in-person. Because online sexual exploitation and abuse affects children regardless of sex and gender, caregivers should be vigilant about all children's online and in-person interactions regardless of their gender or gender identity;¹²



Ensure that children who were subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse have access to recovery and reintegration services tailored to their specific needs and circumstances. Such services should be focused on the best interests of the child and adapted (for their age and development, gender, family situation, harms experienced). Support should integrate views of the child and prioritise safely situating them amongst family and community where possible.¹³

For the purpose of this brief, additional recommendations have been drafted targeting specifically civil society organisations. These new recommendations also incorporate the learnings from actions and events that took place after the *Disrupting Harm's* reports where published. In particular, two regional workshops in March 2024 (Bangkok, Thailand)¹⁴ and May 2024 (Saly, Senegal)¹⁵ that brought together a diverse array of stakeholders, to address the sexual exploitation of children, including in the digital world, with a strategic focus on evidence-based advocacy tools such as the *Disrupting Harm* data.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS:



Use available, or create, interactive online and in-person platforms featuring animated videos and stories that educate children on recognising online dangers, tailored with language and examples relevant to boys' experiences;



Host regular spaces to engage, for example through annual "Internet Safety Weeks" in schools, youth clubs, sports clubs and others, with workshops led by survivors, to discuss the importance of online safety, focusing also on the specific risks and challenges that boys may face.

12 Recommendation from Disrupting Harm reports for Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Malaysia, Namibia, the Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda.

13 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p114.

14 ECPAT International. (2024) [Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Regional Workshop. Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

15 ECPAT International. (2024) [Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Regional Workshop. West and Central Africa](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

ADVOCACY FOR LEGAL REFORM:

- 🔒 Advocate for changes in laws, pushing for the decriminalisation of homosexuality and ensuring legal protections are equally applicable to all children, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics or disability.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

- 🔒 Coordinate with diverse community leaders and influencers, including men, to lead public talks and community radio sessions, podcasts, and videos debunking myths about masculinity (including biases on victimisation and stereotypes on strength and help seeking behaviours) and sexual abuse, aiming to change perceptions at the grassroots level;
- 🔒 Engage wider communities around these issues in community dialogues and spaces, forums, workshops, and peer support groups;
- 🔒 Partner with local sports clubs to open opportunities for dialogue and reflection on resilience, rights, and reporting mechanisms for boys, using sports as a medium to engage, support and educate.

COLLABORATION WITH JUSTICE AND CHILD PROTECTION PROFESSIONALS:

- 🔒 Work closely with justice authorities, to ensure that cases of (online) child sexual exploitation and abuse, especially those involving boys and perpetrators of the same sex, are handled with sensitivity and confidentiality. Challenge any gender biases, whether conscious or unconscious, regarding boys' exposure to online sexual exploitation and abuse. Civil society organisations can serve as intermediaries, advocating, facilitating the reporting process, and supporting victims through legal proceedings.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION:

- 🔒 Assist schools in developing a peer mentorship programme where trusted students are trained to support peers in navigating online challenges, with a focus on encouraging boys to share emotions, show vulnerability and speak up about their experiences (including experiences of abuse and exploitation in its different forms);
- 🔒 Create a toolkit for parents that includes signs to watch for that may indicate their child is experiencing online abuse, conversation starters about online safety tailored for discussions with sons, and local resources for help and support.