

ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION TO COMBAT ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

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: a substantial number of children and caregivers lack awareness and understanding of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, which affects their ability to appropriately recognise and respond to such abuses. The overview from countries where data on comprehensive sexuality and relationships education was available revealed a common pattern of significant gaps in such education programmes, especially when it comes to integrating online safety. This points to the urgent need for comprehensive sexuality and relationships education programmes that incorporate online safety, equipping children to handle sexual exploitation and abuse in all forms. Teachers are identified as crucial to delivering this education, yet there are notable deficiencies in their preparedness and the relevance of curricula. Additionally, societal norms and taboos around discussing sexuality hinder ineffective education, depriving children of critical information on consent and bodily integrity and increasing their risk of abuse and exploitation.



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.

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LACK OF AWARENESS OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



The analysis of the data from 13 countries where *Disrupting Harm* took place highlights inadequate awareness and understanding of online child sexual exploitation and abuse among children and caregivers.

The household surveys in all countries revealed that the lack of awareness by children about the kinds of behaviours that constitute online sexual exploitation and abuse was one of the top barriers to children reporting such forms of abuse. Children believed that what happened to them was not serious enough to report or did not recognise having been the victim of a crime. In the Philippines, a lack of awareness about online child sexual exploitation and abuse was also mentioned as a potential vulnerability factor by frontline workers surveyed.¹ A frontline worker from the Philippines stated: “Most of the people doesn’t have any idea that online child sexual exploitation and abuse exists in our country.” Moreover, a child protection officer representing a civil society organisation in Uganda shared: “A number of our children don’t know that they are exploited. There are high chances they will not recognise that they are being

abused sexually. So that is one of the greatest challenges.”²

Many children did not understand online child sexual exploitation and abuse and its manifestations, often failing to recognise certain behaviours as abusive or exploitative, partly potentially because these topics were not covered adequately in their education.

In Cambodia, 52% of internet-using children surveyed had never received information on how to stay safe online, and similar trends were evident in Kenya and Tanzania with 56% and 66% respectively. In Uganda, only 35%, mostly older children aged 14–17, reported having received information on how to use the Internet safely.³ The lack of general awareness and knowledge on online safety may also have an impact on a child’s capacity to recognise and understand the risks associated with online sexual harm. A medical doctor from a government One Stop Centre in Tanzania stated: “One main thing would be first to continue or increase awareness of sexual abuse online and the government can do this maybe in school, include that as part of the education right now.”⁴

The data from multiple countries indicates a significant gap in how children deal with experiences related to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Across all the countries where *Disrupting Harm* took place, approximately one in three (34%) children who were subjected to online sexual abuse and exploitation did not tell anyone at all.⁵ Among those who confided in someone about their abuse, it was most likely with their peers. For instance, in Ethiopia, a third of children chose to confide

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

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

3 *Ibid.*

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

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

in friends rather than adults when solicited⁶ for sexual images. In Malaysia, the data also shows that when children lack information from parents, they tend to seek answers on the Internet or from peers,⁷ including boyfriends, girlfriends, and school friends. It was highlighted in conversations with survivors that in some instances, friends felt ill-equipped to help and advised⁸ them to tell a caregiver or another adult. This pattern of children depending primarily on their peer group for advice on these serious matters further highlights the critical need for more accessible, and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality and relationships education, developed with children.

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION FOR INTERNET-USING CHILDREN



The percentage of Internet-using children who received sexuality education remains low across many countries. For instance, in Indonesia and Malaysia, 72% and 60% of Internet-using children respectively reported not receiving any sexuality education.

In Tanzania, only 30% of children reported to have received sexuality education.⁹ Even in countries where higher proportions of children indicated having received sexuality education, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Africa, the figures were not particularly high overall - 43%, 53%, and 62% respectively.

Notably, in Viet Nam, while specific data from *Disrupting Harm* regarding the number of children receiving sexuality education is lacking, the Ministry of Education and Training mandated sexual abuse prevention classes in elementary schools in 2019, providing manuals and developing a life skills training programme with UNICEF's support.¹⁰

Generally, across countries where *Disrupting Harm* research was conducted, younger children reported receiving sexuality education at lower rates than older teenagers, suggesting that related education programmes are often introduced later in the school curriculum. This delay could miss crucial early opportunities for intervention. Participants in various discussions, including survivors, emphasised the importance of starting age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education at a young age. One young survivor from Malaysia stated: "No, no one taught me about it. Yeah, so like, yeah, you should start teaching them when they are young, four years old, you should start telling them, 'It's not right, it's not right!'"¹¹ This approach aligns with suggestions from a South African Police Service Captain who believed comprehensive sexuality education should be targeted at children as young as pre-primary school, around age six.

- 6 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 7 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 8 ECPAT International. (2022). [Disrupting Harm – Conversations with Young Survivors about Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 9 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Tanzania: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 10 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Viet Nam: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 11 ECPAT International. (2022). [Disrupting Harm – Conversations with Young Survivors about Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#). Safe Online.

COUNTRY APPROACHES TO EXISTING SEXUALITY EDUCATION PROGRAMMES



A prevalent approach to sexuality education programmes across Malaysia (83%), Indonesia (85%), and Tanzania (76%) was the strong focus on morality. This suggests a common cultural or policy inclination towards framing sexuality education within the context of ethical or moral values.

This perspective can be seen as limiting the recognition of children as sexual beings with rights and agency. As discussions with survivors suggest, there is a growing need to shift the narrative towards acknowledging and accommodating young people's progressively emerging sexuality.¹² One survivor from Kenya stated, *"I would want that children are taught that they have sexual and human rights too. Because if they know about their rights, they would be in a better position."*¹³

In recognition of the dangers posed by sexual violence against children, some countries (Cambodia, Kenya, Thailand, and the Philippines) reported incorporating educational measures into their school curricula to combat these threats. For example, in the Philippines, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Act mandates the inclusion of reproductive health information in educational systems, which encompasses sexual violence prevention.¹⁴

According to the children who took part in the household survey, there is also a notable emphasis on teaching assertiveness and the ability to say 'No' in the context of existing sexuality education programmes in Malaysia (71%), Indonesia (84%) and Tanzania (82%). This indicates a recognition of the importance of personal boundaries and consent in relationships, which is a positive trend towards empowering children and young adults to make informed decisions. This is to be balanced however with the fact that some preventive and educational approaches may contribute to making children feel as if they are in fully in charge of protecting themselves. A sentiment that is heightened by self-blame tendencies, with as many as 10% of children surveyed who had been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse saying that the reason they did not disclose the abuse to anyone was because they felt that they had done something wrong. It is therefore paramount to ensure that such perceptions are considered when designing and delivering programmes and curricula on comprehensive sexuality and relationships education.

ROLE OF SCHOOL TEACHERS IN DELIVERING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION



In the countries where data on the preferred and primary sources for children for sexuality education and information was available (Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia), teachers

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.

were identified as both a primary and preferred source.

For instance, in Malaysia, 90% of children regard teachers as their primary source of sex-related information –followed by friends (32%) and mothers (31%), a trend similarly strong in Indonesia (74%) and Cambodia (88%).

Additionally, in Malaysia, 48% of the children surveyed indicated that they would prefer to learn about sex and sexuality from their school teachers.¹⁵ In Indonesia, school teachers were the preferred source of sexuality education for 28% of the children surveyed.¹⁶ In Cambodia, 50% of children identified school teachers as the preferred source of sex-related education or information.¹⁷ In addition, in Ethiopia, when caregivers participating in a household survey were questioned about their preferred source for guidance on keeping their children safe online, 41% responded that schools should be the ones to provide this information.¹⁸

Across several countries, the effectiveness of educational approaches to discuss complex topics such as online child sexual exploitation and abuse was questioned. For instance, a member of the National Child Online Task Force Team from the Office of the First Lady in Namibia critiqued the educational materials as “very basic” and lacking in current or relevant information.¹⁹ The member emphasised the need for materials to be appropriately tailored to address the realities of child sexual abuse and exploitation, both online and in-person, for various age groups and developmental stages.

TABOOS AND DISCOMFORT SURROUNDING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION



Interestingly, 37% of children in Indonesia and 22% of children in Malaysia indicated that they did not want to receive any sexuality education.

This reluctance may reflect a broader trend across society where discussions on sexuality are stigmatised due to cultural and moral perceptions. This discomfort is not only internalised by the children, but is also reinforced by caregivers, teachers and societal norms that view comprehensive sexuality education as inappropriate or taboo.

The widespread discomfort in discussing sex and sexuality was highlighted across most countries where the *Disrupting Harm* research took place.

Forty-eight out of 49 frontline workers in South Africa identified ‘taboos around discussing sex and sexuality’ as a factor that increased children’s risk of online sexual exploitation and abuse. One frontline worker suggested that the general reluctance to talk openly about sex “*may nudge children towards online activity in their efforts to read up about things*”

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

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

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

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

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

they disagree with or in an effort to find belonging to an online community.”²⁰ This was also confirmed by 86% of frontline workers in Thailand, who reported in a survey that taboos around discussing sex and sexuality increased children’s vulnerability to online sexual exploitation and abuse.²¹ Similarly, 44 out of 50 frontline workers in Tanzania noted the same concerns.²²

This reluctance impacts the effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality and relationships education. For instance, despite the introduction of sexuality education programmes in some of these countries like Malaysia’s PEERS curriculum, the implementation remained limited for various reasons, including a lack of support from parents and the wider community. Such opposition is often fuelled by the prevailing view that sex is a taboo subject, not to be discussed openly, particularly with or among children.²³ When it comes to including comprehensive sexuality and relationships education in school programmes, a representative from the Department of Basic Education in South Africa described the potential difficulty in ensuring caregivers and teachers are comfortable discussing topics relating to sex and sexuality: “The resistance to sexuality education has amazed us. Maybe the country still feels it’s not appropriate.”²⁴

This sentiment was echoed by a government official from Malaysia who noted: “Sex is taboo to society; thus educators, parents and community leaders require sensitisation seminars or exposure to accurate information contained in sexuality education modules.”

Across the different data presented, it is clear that a reticence to provide comprehensive sexuality and relationships education to children - especially younger ones – persist. However, with up to 20% of Internet-using children across the countries where *Disrupting Harm* took place, having been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to the study,²⁵ the importance of enhancing the provision of comprehensive sexuality and relationships education and going beyond taboos and discomfort cannot be ignored. This is particularly relevant especially as many children turn to social media and websites as their only source of information on sex and sexuality, which may not always allow them to learn comprehensively about the various aspects of relationships that are integral parts of sexuality.



- 20 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in South Africa: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 21 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Thailand: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 22 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Tanzania: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 23 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 24 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in South Africa: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 25 UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (2022). [Children’s Experiences of Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in 12 Countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia](#). *Disrupting Harm Data Insight 1*. Safe Online.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



Across the *Disrupting Harm* research's recommendations, some specifically focused on the importance of focusing on enhancing the effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality education to address online child sexual exploitation and abuse:



Inform children about their right to be protected from all forms of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and exploitation, and on how to stay safe by setting boundaries, recognising appropriate and inappropriate behaviour from adults and those around them, including family members and friends, and how to seek help.²⁶



Facilitate access to trusted online sources of information for children as a complement to adult-led comprehensive sexuality education.²⁷



Help children, caregivers, teachers, and those working with children to understand the full extent of the risks when sharing sexual content online and how to engage in harm minimisation to limit possible negative repercussions.²⁸



Like schools, caregivers can inform children about their right to be protected from all forms of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and engage them in conversations about reproductive sexual health and rights, consent, personal boundaries, what adults or others around them can or cannot do to them, risks and responsibilities when taking, sending and receiving sexual images, and how to say no to others. Guidance could be given to caregivers and teachers on how to counsel children regarding harmful content online.²⁹

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 were published. In particular, two regional workshops in March 2024 (Bangkok, Thailand)³⁰ and May 2024 (Saly, Senegal)³¹ 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.

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

27 Recommendation from *Disrupting Harm* reports for Indonesia and Malaysia.

28 Recommendation from *Disrupting Harm* reports for Cambodia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mozambique, Namibia, the Philippines, Uganda, and Viet Nam.

29 Recommendation from *Disrupting Harm* reports for Namibia and Tanzania.

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

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

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS:

- Establish support networks for teachers that provide them with regular counselling and professional advice on teaching comprehensive sexuality and relationships education effectively, especially in environments where this subject might be considered taboo.
- Create spaces, for example workshops and seminars, for teachers to access learnings on such topics and that focus on overcoming societal and cultural barriers in the classroom, enabling them to engage students in open and honest discussions about sexuality and online safety.

ADVOCACY FOR POLICY REFORM:

- Engage with policymakers to ensure that comprehensive sexuality and relationships education is inclusive, age-appropriate, informed by children's insights and perspectives, and regularly updated to reflect new research and trends. Such education programmes should be introduced early in the life of children and be adapted to their developmental level and needs. Comprehensive sexuality and relationships education should be available not only in school but also in other spaces that children, including those who are out of school, access such as sports and recreation settings, religious institutions, and others.

RESEARCH:

- Partner with academic institutions and research organisations to analyse the effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality and relationships education in preventing online child sexual exploitation and abuse. This collaboration should aim to identify gaps in current curricula and develop evidence-based approaches to fill those gaps.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

- Work within communities to challenge and change cultural norms that prevent open discussions about sexuality and safety.
- Organise community dialogues and create spaces to educate parents and caregivers about the importance of comprehensive sexuality and relationships education and its role in protecting children.
- Engage community members– including leaders, educators, peers, social workers, justice professionals, and all those who are in contact with children -, ensuring they know what to do with existing means at their disposal. This may include training on online child sexual exploitation and abuse, co-designing action plans tailored to their dynamics, establishing meaningful dialogue with children and youth, developing referral pathways and standard operating procedures adapted to their context.