



# UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND INSTANCES OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS

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: despite conventional beliefs that link widespread urban connectivity with increased vulnerability to online child sexual exploitation and abuse, the *Disrupting Harm* research shows that children in rural areas are equally or even more vulnerable to these risks compared to their urban counterparts. This pattern emerges despite the observed urban-rural digital divide in Internet access and frequency of use. Factors such as lower digital literacy and limited awareness of online safety contribute to this discrepancy. The concentration of prevention and support services in urban areas further exacerbates the vulnerability of rural children. These findings challenge the assumption that urban children are at greater risk and highlight the need for inclusive and geographically expansive approaches in policy, prevention, and the provision of support services to safeguard all children against online sexual exploitation and abuse.



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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# INTERNET ACCESS AND FREQUENCY OF INTERNET USE



Among the 13 countries where Disrupting Harm research took place, four exhibit a significant urban-rural digital divide in Internet access among children aged 12-17: Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique and Uganda. For instance, in Ethiopia, there was a significant gap, with 45% of urban children accessing the Internet compared to only 21% in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> In Uganda, 56% of children in urban areas were Internet users, compared to 36% of children in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> In Cambodia, Namibia, Tanzania and Viet Nam the divide was less noticeable. For instance, in Viet Nam, 93% of urban children accessed the Internet compared to 88% in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

Tanzania saw a similar trend, with 70% children in urban areas and 65% children in rural areas being Internet users.<sup>4</sup> The remaining countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand showed minimal to no differences in Internet access between rural and urban areas. This data also seems to suggest a

regional trend in which African countries generally have a higher urban-rural digital divide in Internet access among children, with Tanzania being a notable exception. This contrasts with the smaller divide observed in the countries of Southeast Asia, where Internet penetration estimated rates tend to be overall higher than in countries in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The analysis of the frequency of Internet use among children in the 13 countries reveals significant disparities, mainly influenced by the rural-urban divide, with a few exceptions. In 9 out of 13 countries (Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Mozambique, Namibia, the Philippines, Tanzania and Uganda), there is a clear trend of children in urban areas using the Internet more frequently than their rural counterparts. The greatest disparities were noted in Mozambique, where 57% of children in urban areas went online daily compared to 29% of those in rural areas,<sup>5</sup> and in Ethiopia (42% urban vs. 26% rural).<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in the Philippines, while overall Internet access is high in both urban and rural areas (98% urban, 93% rural), there is still a slightly higher frequency of Internet use for children in urban areas (85% of children in urban areas go online daily compared to 74% of those in rural areas).<sup>7</sup> This suggests a situation where the Internet is broadly accessible, yet children in rural regions encounter additional challenges. These might include restrictions set by parents, slow Internet speeds, weak network signals, and inconsistent electricity supply.

- 1 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Ethiopia: 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 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Viet Nam: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 4 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Tanzania: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 5 ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Mozambique: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.
- 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 the Philippines: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.

In the rest of the countries – Malaysia, South Africa, Thailand and Viet Nam – the frequency of Internet use did not differ greatly between children in urban and rural areas. For example, in Malaysia, 96% of children went online daily without significant variation between urban and rural areas.<sup>8</sup> However, in Malaysia, while the frequency of Internet use did not differ much between urban and rural children, the nature of their online activities did. For instance, children in rural areas engaged less in activities such as seeking information or entertainment online compared to urban children.<sup>9</sup>

## INSTANCES OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE



While it might seem that greater Internet access and frequency of Internet use in urban areas would lead to higher vulnerability to online child sexual exploitation and abuse, as suggested by a representative from Constitutional and Religious Affairs in Mozambique who stated, *“This phenomenon of online exploitation occurs more in major cities because children there have access to smartphones and the Internet”*<sup>10</sup> the reality, according to the data collected, is more nuanced.

Contrary to this belief, the disparity in vulnerability to online sexual exploitation and abuse between children in rural and urban areas is surprisingly small. In fact, in cases where differences do appear, it is the children from rural areas who are often more exposed to online sexual exploitation and abuse than their urban peers.

In 11 out of 13 countries — Cambodia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mozambique, Namibia, the Philippines, Tanzania, Thailand and Viet Nam — there is little to no difference between children in urban and rural areas being subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse, suggesting a widespread risk irrespective of geographical setting.

In South Africa and Uganda, children in rural areas faced higher rates of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Notably, children in South Africa reported that it was slightly more common for children living in rural areas to be targeted with unwanted requests (27% vs. 20%), unwanted sexual images (31% vs. 23%), and sexual comments (36% vs. 26%).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, 24% of children living in rural areas experienced such requests, compared to 13% of children in urban centres. Additionally, children living in rural areas tended to experience potential grooming requests more than children living in urban areas.<sup>12</sup>

A similar pattern was observed in Uganda, where there was a slightly higher occurrence of online sexual exploitation and abuse and related incidents among children in rural areas compared to those in urban areas. For example, 23% of rural children in Uganda were reported to have received unwanted requests to talk about sex or sexual acts compared to 17% for

8 ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF. (2022). [Disrupting Harm in Malaysia: Evidence on online child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online. p70.

9 *Ibid.*

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

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

12 *Ibid.*

children in urban areas.<sup>13</sup> Among children in rural areas who used the Internet, 26% experienced sexual comments that made them feel uncomfortable, in contrast to 22% of their urban counterparts.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, 14% of these children in rural areas received unwanted requests for photos or videos of their private parts, compared to 10% of urban children.<sup>15</sup>

This suggests that although greater Internet access in urban areas might be thought to increase the risks of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, it is not a consistent determinant of vulnerability. For instance, in countries like Ethiopia, which exhibits one of the largest urban-rural disparities in Internet usage (45% of urban children compared to 21% of rural children), there was no notable difference in cases of online sexual exploitation and abuse among children in urban and rural areas. This indicates that factors other than just Internet access level might influence the prevalence of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

## DIGITAL SKILLS AND AWARENESS-RAISING ACTIVITIES



Online sexual exploitation and abuse affects children in rural areas due to various factors, including lack of initiatives to increase their awareness on online safety. The digital skills gap, evident in countries like Indonesia and the Philippines, could be a contributing factor to the vulnerability of rural children to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

For instance, in Indonesia, only 49% of children in rural areas knew how to change privacy settings compared to 68% in urban areas, and a similar trend was seen in their ability to report harmful content on social media.<sup>16</sup> This trend is echoed in the Philippines, where children in rural areas also reported weaker digital skills compared to their urban counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

In 7 out of 13 countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mozambique, the Philippines, South Africa, and Uganda), awareness activities about online child sexual exploitation and abuse are notably lacking in rural areas. These initiatives are usually urban focused probably under the assumption that children in urban areas are at higher risk. For instance, in Kenya, the Department of Children's

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

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

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

Services acknowledged that awareness activities are confined to a few counties, notably excluding rural ones.<sup>18</sup> This pattern is consistent in the Philippines, where children in rural areas were less likely to receive information on online safety and to recognise the risks associated with harmful online activities.<sup>19</sup> In South Africa, a lack of coordination in government responses in rural areas and the absence of prevention and education materials in local languages were reported.<sup>20</sup> All this results in a significant information gap in rural communities regarding the risks and prevention of online sexual exploitation and abuse.

However, in some countries, there is a growing realisation that children in rural areas are also at risk. For instance, when interviewed in the context of the *Disrupting Harm* project, a counsellor from the Uganda Child Helpline emphasised the importance of broadening educational efforts to include every part of society: “At first, we [Child Helpline] had thought that this [online child sexual exploitation and abuse] is an abuse that is rampant in urban centres, but then when we went to villages such as Abong, in Karamoja, the secondary school students told us, ‘You know we use FB, we use WhatsApp, we use the Internet.’ This is how we came to learn that this is a program that must be done across the whole country.”<sup>21</sup>

## AVAILABILITY OF PREVENTION AND SUPPORT SERVICES



The data from all countries highlights a significant challenge in providing support services to children who have been subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse. A common issue identified in these countries is the disproportionate concentration of prevention and support services in urban areas, which greatly limits access for children in rural regions.

Surveys with frontline workers in 11 out of 13 countries pointed out this problem. For example, in Cambodia, the concentration of support services in urban areas was the most commonly identified factor (92%) impacting the availability of such services.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in Thailand and Malaysia, the scarcity of services in rural areas was a commonly cited issue (84%). Frontline workers from Indonesia mentioned a notable lack of helplines in rural regions and highlighted that “not knowing where to go or whom to tell” may also increase children’s reluctance to report instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse and seek help.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, frontline workers in South Africa highlighted that logistical challenges such as long distances for psychological, medical or

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

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

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

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

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

other assessments further exacerbate the situation, affecting children's willingness to cooperate and the overall effectiveness of services.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, these findings reveal a clear pattern: the concentration of prevention and support services in urban areas creates significant barriers for children in rural areas to be aware of potential risks online and know where to seek help when needed.

This disparity not only limits the reach of these crucial services but also potentially leaves many children without the support they need. The data underscores the need for a more inclusive and geographically expansive approach to prevention and service provision, ensuring that children in all regions have equal access to the necessary support for recovery from online sexual exploitation and abuse.



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

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS



Across the **Disrupting Harm** research's recommendations, some specifically focused on the importance of making digital literacy education and awareness-raising initiatives accessible to all children, including those in rural areas. In particular:



Facilitate access to trusted online sources of information for children as a complement to adult-led comprehensive sexuality education. The data indicates that children – particularly children living in rural areas – may be reluctant to seek sex-related information and advice from adults and may rely on their peers [...] or may resort to seeking answers online. Social workers, teachers and other trusted adults should promote reliable online sources of information [...] among children.<sup>25</sup>

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)<sup>26</sup> and May 2024 (Saly, Senegal)<sup>27</sup> 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:



Launch targeted awareness campaigns in rural areas using local languages and culturally relevant materials. These campaigns should focus on the risks of online child sexual exploitation and abuse, signs to watch for, which services exist, and how to seek help from such services or others;





Prioritise digital literacy, online safety education in rural areas. Conduct actions – including organising workshops or campaigns - in rural schools and community centres including hands-on sessions on privacy settings, identifying, and reporting harmful content, and understanding the implications of sharing personal information online;


<sup>25</sup> Recommendation from Disrupting Harm reports for Indonesia and Malaysia.

<sup>26</sup> ECPAT International. (2024) [Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Regional Workshop. Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Pacific](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.


<sup>27</sup> ECPAT International. (2024) [Collective Action to End Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Regional Workshop. West and Central Africa](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

-  Implement in rural areas programmes/curricula that cover comprehensive sexuality education. Programmes should cover issues such as consent, personal boundaries, what adults or others around children can and cannot do to them, risks and responsibilities when taking, sending and receiving sexual images, and how to say 'No' to others. Comprehensive sexuality education should cover online child sexual exploitation and abuse and how technology plays a role in the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and equip children to recognise inappropriate interactions both online and in-person. Programmes should be age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and provide accurate information;
-  Map and understand contextually appropriate spaces for enhancing engagement on and spreading awareness about online child sexual exploitation and abuse and available support services. Such spaces could include local radio stations, community newsletters, and other non-formal spaces such as festivals, religious, cultural and sports settings.


### ADVOCACY FOR POLICY REFORM:

-  Advocate for targeted policies that ensure adequate distribution of resources for prevention and support in rural areas for cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Community members – including children - should be involved in the development of these policies. Such policies should be translated into dedicated pillars in implementation strategies, plans, budgets, indicators to measure performance, allocation of teams and efforts, as part of a general vision of local empowerment and decentralisation of approaches.

### RESEARCH:

-  Develop and maintain data collection systems that are decentralised and able to collect data on online child sexual exploitation and abuse from rural and urban areas. The data should be disaggregated by location/setting, as well as characteristics of the child (age, gender, etc.), of the perpetrator (age, gender, relationship with the child) as well as type of abuse and exploitation. This disaggregated data will help in tailoring interventions appropriately.

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

-  Engage community members in rural areas – including leaders, educators, 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. They can act as first responders and trusted figures for children to turn to when they encounter risks online.