OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH RESULTS

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN

BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

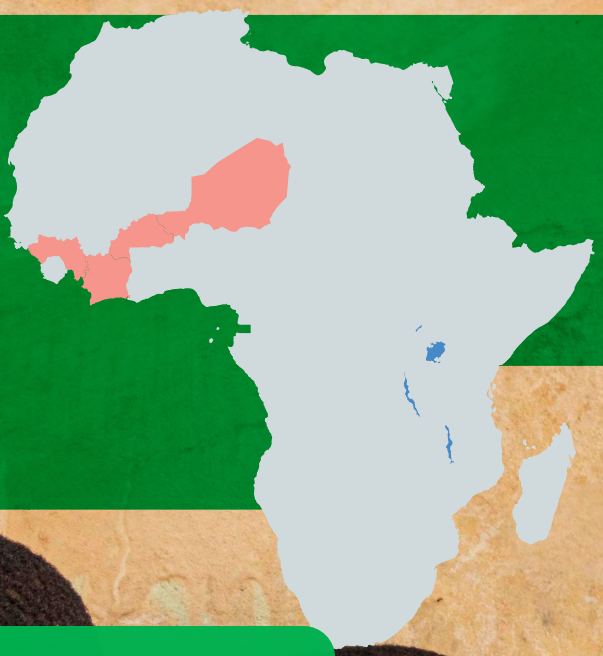

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2

METHODOLOGY 3

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE USE OF THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER 4

USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA 4

PERCEPTION OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY PARENTS 5

USE AND PERCEPTION OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA BY CHILDREN 5

ONLINE CHILD PROTECTION AND SELF-PROTECTION STRATEGIES 6

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER 7

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE RISK OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE 7

PERPETRATORS AND FACILITATORS 8

NATIONAL RESPONSES TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER 9

NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS 9

INITIATIVES BY NATIONAL AUTHORITIES 9

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES 10

PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES 10

IDENTIFIED GAPS 11

RECOMMENDATIONS 12

INTRODUCTION

The "Ensemble" project is a three-year joint initiative (2022-25) by ECPAT International, ECPAT France, ECPAT Luxembourg and national partners Monde Des Enfants (Guinea); SOS Violences Sexuelles and Communauté Abel (Côte d'Ivoire); Association Burkinabè pour la Survie de l'Enfance and KEOOGO (Burkina Faso); and Association Nigérienne pour le Traitement de la Délinquance et la Prévention du Crime (Niger).

In the second year of the project, ECPAT International and its partners explored the issue of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, through research aimed at documenting local knowledge and understanding of the issue in each country, assessing practices and identifying localised responses. The results of this research were consolidated in four specific situational analyses. These were presented and discussed at national consultations held in each country in November-December 2024.

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse refers to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point in the abuse or exploitation. "Technology-facilitated" and "online" are closely related but distinct terms used to describe forms of abuse and exploitation that can occur entirely online or through a mixture of online and face-to-face interactions between perpetrators and children. Online forms of abuse and exploitation generally refer to the production, dissemination, possession, etc. of child sexual abuse material, grooming of children for sexual purposes, live streaming of child sexual abuse, and sexual extortion of children. The term "technology-facilitated" is increasingly used to describe "traditional" forms of abuse or exploitation, such as trafficking for sexual exploitation, where technology plays an increasingly central role, for example in child recruitment.[1]

1 Interagency Working Group on the Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025, April). Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Second Edition. ECPAT International: Bangkok.

METHODOLOGY

The information presented in this summary and in the four situational analyses was gathered through the following research activities in the target countries:

A literature review (including an analysis of local legislation).

Interviews with key informants.

Consultations with children.

Consultations with caregivers.

A total of 172 children took part in the consultations, sharing their experiences and concerns regarding the use of digital technologies, as well as the risks to which they are exposed online. At the same time, the consultations also brought together 89 caregivers from various socio-professional categories and family backgrounds, offering a wealth of perspectives on the challenges of child protection in the digital environment.

Finally, 39 key informants were interviewed in the four target countries. Informants included representatives from public institutions, civil society, the media and the private sector, who shared their perspectives on existing protection mechanisms, context-specific challenges, and institutional responses to the risks of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

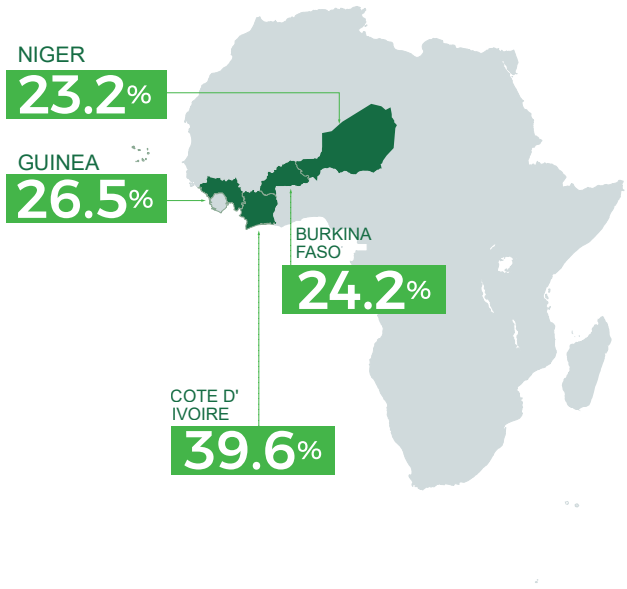
LIMITATIONS

Several limitations were encountered while conducting the research activities, which may restrict the scope of the findings. In the four target countries, consultations with caregivers and children were organised in specific geographical and socio-economic areas, limiting the representativeness of the results on a national scale. The lack of collaboration and interest in participating in the research by representatives from the private sector also hampered access to essential perspectives. Additional challenges included administrative constraints, logistical challenges and, in the case of Niger, a political context that affected the involvement of governmental entities and agencies.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE USE OF THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN

BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

USE OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA



Internet access remains uneven, with some disparities between the countries where this project was conducted. At the start of 2025, Niger had an Internet penetration rate of 23.2%.[2] Burkina Faso and Guinea had similar rates (24.2% and 26.5% respectively),[3] with strong recent growth thanks to the rise of mobile Internet. Côte d'Ivoire stands out with 39.6% of the population connected as of 2025, a figure that has risen sharply over the last decade.[4] In all four countries, Internet access is **almost exclusively via smartphones or tablets.**

Social media use varies greatly from country to country, with particularly high rates in Côte d'Ivoire (59% of Internet users in early 2025)[5] and Guinea (77.1%),[6] where Facebook dominates the digital landscape. In Guinea, this dynamic is driven by young people, who also use WhatsApp, TikTok, Messenger, Instagram, Telegram and Signal. In Burkina Faso (59.1%),[7] the rise of social media accompanies the growing importance of the Internet in daily life, particularly among urban youth. Niger, on the other hand, stands out for its very low rate of social media use: only 10.5% of Internet users had used a social media platform in early 2025.[8]

2 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Niger.
3 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Burkina Faso; Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Guinea.
4 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Ivory Coast.
5 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Ivory Coast.
6 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Guinea.
7 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Burkina Faso.
8 Data Reportal (2025, March). Digital 2025: Niger.

PERCEPTION OF INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY PARENTS

The caregivers consulted in the four countries have **an ambivalent view of the Internet and digital technologies**: useful for information, communication and learning, but carrying significant risks for children. They recognise that these tools can promote academic success and maintain family ties, but are deeply concerned about dangers such as exposure to inappropriate content, interactions with strangers, scams, and sexual abuse and exploitation. The Internet is described as a "**necessary evil**" or a "**double-edged sword**".

From consultations with caregivers and children, as well as interviews with key informants, it appears that parental supervision of children's Internet use remains **generally weak and unstructured**. In practice, children seem to master digital tools better than their parents, making such attempts often ineffective. Only parents who are familiar with digital technology exercise more active control. **Children manage to circumvent the restrictions in place**, notably through the discreet use of donated/borrowed telephones or by connecting from cybercafés. In rural areas, monitoring is even more difficult, as many parents are not fully informed about digital risks and tools.

USE AND PERCEPTION OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA BY CHILDREN

There is **no data** on Internet use by children in the four countries, but most children consulted in the course of this project indicated having **regular** access to the Internet, mainly via smartphones. Some have their own phones, sometimes acquired without parental consent, while others use those of relatives or visit cybercafés (particularly in Côte d'Ivoire). In Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, children tend to use the Internet more independently and frequently, whereas in Niger, use is sometimes more hidden and limited by resources.

The platforms most frequented by the children consulted are TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, as well as video game websites. Boys seem to favor gaming and sports betting sites, while girls are more active on social networks. Children say they use the Internet mainly for communication, entertainment (games, videos, music) and school research.

The children consulted **perceive the Internet as an essential tool** for learning, entertainment and communication, with a strong emphasis on confidentiality in their online exchanges. At the same time, they **generally show a clear awareness of online dangers**, including scams, harassment, exposure to violent or sexual content, and online grooming by strangers. Many have had negative experiences, such as receiving explicit messages or images, being asked for money or having their accounts hacked.

ONLINE CHILD PROTECTION AND SELF-PROTECTION STRATEGIES

The children consulted in all four countries **indicated knowing to a certain extent how to protect themselves online**, although their responses to risks are **often reactive rather than preventive**. Blocking threatening users is the first measure they indicated adopting, sometimes accompanied by deletion of accounts. Older children are generally more inclined to report abuse to the authorities or platforms, unlike younger children, who often seem to lack information on reporting tools.

Some of the children consulted agree that it **is difficult to talk to their parents about their online experiences**, not least because of the fear of being punished or judged. This lack of dialogue is a major obstacle to seeking support. As a result, children **prefer to confide in peers or trusted figures** such as older brothers, and show varying degrees of autonomy depending on their age in dealing with risky situations, particularly in the case of non-consensual distribution of content.

Despite these obstacles, children in all four countries **recognise the importance of parents' protective role and would like to see better digital education** and appropriate, active oversight. They also stress the need for collaboration between caregivers, the state, law enforcement agencies, civil society and Internet service providers to reinforce their online safety. Some proposed concrete measures: **the creation of platforms adapted to children, content filters, age verification, awareness-raising campaigns about the dangers of the Internet and safe browsing practices in schools, and accessible reporting mechanisms.**

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN

BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse is present in all the countries studied, although its **scale remains difficult to measure**. Indeed, data is scarce and often fragmentary, and the figures available - particularly those relating to the online dissemination of child sexual abuse material from target countries - reflect only a fraction of the phenomenon. In all four countries, **growing connectivity is perceived as a risk-increasing factor** by key informants.

The types of abuse and exploitation most identified by key informants include **online grooming of children for sexual purposes, threats to further disseminate self-generated sexual content** to extract money or sexual favours (sexual extortion), as well as **non-consensual sharing** of such content, and **exploitation in prostitution facilitated by online platforms**. Children are exposed on all the apps they use - Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Snapchat - as well as, in Côte d'Ivoire, on classified ads websites. While the risks seem similar in each country, the response remains hampered by the lack of studies on these phenomena.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE RISK OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE

The caregivers and children consulted, as well as key informants, identified several contextual factors that expose children to increased risks of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse:

CAREGIVERS' LACK OF AWARENESS, especially in rural areas or in low-income families, reduces their ability to monitor and support their children's online activities or give them appropriate advice. This makes it harder for children to develop the skills they need to protect themselves on the Internet, thereby putting them at greater risk of being abused or exploited online.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC INSECURITY: children from impoverished, orphaned, displaced or street-connected families are seen as particularly at risk, as some perpetrators exploit their situation to manipulate them or lure them with material promises.

GENDER: Girls are perceived as more exposed to the risk of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This perception seems to be guided by gender stereotypes, according to which some are seen as materialistic or provocative. It reflects a tendency to shift responsibility onto children. Although boys are not immune, under-reporting of abuse, combined with widespread gender discrimination, prevents them from being fully recognised as victims.

CHILDREN'S LACK OF DIGITAL LITERACY: While many children demonstrate awareness of certain online risks, gaps in digital literacy can still make it difficult for them to consistently recognise potentially harmful situations or respond appropriately. This highlights the responsibility of technology companies and governments to ensure digital environments are safe and age appropriate.

PERPETRATORS AND FACILITATORS

The perpetrators of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are **perceived as very diverse** in the countries studied. Caregivers and key informants cited strangers, the victim's entourage, as well as organised criminal networks. In Côte d'Ivoire, some of the perpetrators came from wealthy backgrounds, while in Burkina Faso and Guinea, some cases involved foreign perpetrators operating from outside the country. The motives cited are mainly sexual in the case of grooming, and both sexual and financial in the case of extortion.

Facilitators also play an important role, particularly in technology-facilitated exploitation of children in prostitution. "Pimps", sometimes organised in networks, as well as bar, cybercafé and hostel managers are mentioned, particularly in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Niger. These individuals exploit digital platforms to maximise their profits while reducing the risk of arrest. The **organized nature of certain networks** makes it difficult to dismantle them. These intermediaries are generally motivated by financial gain.

Identifying perpetrators and facilitators **is made difficult by the anonymity offered by the Internet, the lack of in-depth studies** on the issue and the **authorities' lack of resources**. The transnational dimension of certain abuses also complicates prosecution.

In the countries where the project took place, children themselves are sometimes involved in the exploitation of peers, although this **remains poorly documented**. According to key informants, these children may blackmail their peers by threatening to disseminate sexual content to obtain money or sexual favours. In Côte d'Ivoire, the phenomenon is linked to group dynamics. Finally, some children are manipulated by adults or networks to facilitate contact between perpetrators and other children.

NATIONAL RESPONSES TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE IN

BURKINA FASO, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, GUINEA AND NIGER

NATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

The legal frameworks of the four countries fail to comprehensively cover all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, online grooming of children for sexual purposes is not specifically criminalised, while it is only partially so in Niger, where the relevant provisions only cover acts committed against children under 15.[9] In Guinea, there is no provision directly criminalising sexual extortion of children online.

Furthermore, no national legislation explicitly addresses live streaming of child sexual abuse. These shortcomings in binding frameworks hinder the effective repression of such offences. Finally, regulation of the private sector remains inadequate. In Niger, for example, Internet service providers are under no obligation to monitor, report or block illegal content, such as child sexual abuse material.

INITIATIVES BY NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

None of the countries where the project took place has a national policy dedicated to combating technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. In Côte d'Ivoire, the issue has been integrated into the National Child Protection Policy, but as this is yet to be adopted,[10] this progress remains theoretical. In Guinea, the government's commitment focuses more broadly on violence against children and cybercrime in general. In all four countries, prevention efforts are based on awareness-raising campaigns, particularly in schools and communities, but these initiatives do not appear to be systematic. Police units with a mandate to address these crimes do exist, although none is specifically dedicated to this issue, and their capacity for action appears limited. In addition, support services are not equipped to deal with the specific impact of this form of abuse on children.

9 Republic of the Niger. (2019). Loi n° 2019-33 du 03 juillet 2019, portant répression de la cybercriminalité au Niger. Article 20.

10 SOS Violences Sexuelles. (2025). Personal communication.

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

The study shows that civil society organisations can have a **real impact on child protection in the digital space**. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the advocacy of the NGO Forum led to the inclusion of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in the National Child Protection Policy. In all four countries, civil society actions are focused on raising community awareness or providing support services to victims and survivors, sometimes in partnership with the authorities. However, the absence of programmes dedicated to this specific issue and the **lack of resources** seem to limit the effectiveness of these efforts. Better coordination with government institutions and capacity-building are essential.

PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

Private sector involvement in the fight against technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse **remains limited** in the target countries. Apart from a few isolated initiatives, commitment **remains weak or non-existent**, as in Niger. Côte d'Ivoire is a good illustration of these disparities: while several operators remain passive, **MTN Côte d'Ivoire has set an example** by systematically blocking URLs containing child sexual abuse material, and by actively participating in awareness-raising campaigns. In Guinea, only Orange has carried out some training to raise awareness of online abuse, while in Burkina Faso, a Facebook campaign in 2021 to report and combat the dissemination of inappropriate content is the only action noted. In response to this inaction, **several key informants called for the sector to be regulated through legislation** to establish clear responsibilities.

IDENTIFIED GAPS

The **lack of reliable, disaggregated data** on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in the countries studied constitutes a **major structural weakness**. This void prevents not only from assessing the scale of the phenomenon, but also from identifying the profiles of perpetrators, the modalities of abuse, and the dynamics specific to each context. In the absence of targeted research and systematic data-gathering mechanisms, **response strategies are devised without empirical anchorage**, thus running the risk of failing to respond to the realities on the ground.

Although laws against cybercrime and sexual exploitation exist in some of the countries studied, their **scope is often insufficient or their implementation lacking**. There are gaps in several legal frameworks, such as the lack of explicit criminalisation of online grooming of children for sexual purposes or deliberate access to child sexual abuse material. Where texts are more comprehensive, their application remains **hampered by a lack of resources, coordination or political will.**

Interviews suggest that some structures in charge of child protection, investigations or victim support **are under-resourced**. Social services lack staff and training, and law enforcement agencies often lack the investigative tools, technological expertise, or personnel required to identify or track down perpetrators operating online. Added to this is a **lack of coordination between the various entities and agencies involved**, which slows down interventions, weakens the institutional response, and limits the continuity of care for victims and survivors.

Research has also revealed a **widespread lack of awareness of Internet-related risks among parents, educators and communities**. Particularly in rural areas, adults lack the information and skills to accompany or supervise children's digital uses, which in turn hinders children's ability to develop the skills they need to protect themselves online.

Finally, the role of the private sector in preventing and detecting technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse remains, **with rare exceptions, marginal.** Internet service providers, digital platforms and cybercafés are not bound by clear obligations to filter, report or monitor content. In the absence of regulation, child protection therefore depends on the voluntary initiatives of individual companies. The lack of coordinated commitment on the part of the private sector leaves many loopholes open for perpetrators to exploit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are based on national consultations carried out in the project countries at the end of 2024. They reflect the priorities identified collectively to prevent and respond effectively to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse:

1. The first priority is to **raise awareness among children, families and communities** of the risks associated with Internet use, and the protective mechanisms that exist. In all four countries, the recommendations call for the revival or creation of targeted information campaigns, both in schools and in the community, using formats and visual aids that are adapted and accessible to all. The direct involvement of children in the design of messages is emphasised as essential to guaranteeing their relevance.

2. As an extension of these efforts, the recommendations focus on **training parents, educators and community leaders** to better understand and support children in their digital uses. In particular, it was proposed to develop modules on online safety, digital parenting and parental control tools. These actions should aim to establish a climate of trust and intergenerational dialogue around issues related to children's digital lives.

3. On the legal front, **legislative frameworks** need to **be reformed and updated** to provide a better framework for all forms of technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation. Depending on the situation in each country, this may involve explicitly criminalising online grooming of children for sexual purposes, deliberate access to child sexual abuse material, or filling gaps in the private sector's obligations.

4. **Capacity development for law enforcement, the judiciary and social services** is another recurring theme. There is an urgent need to train frontline professionals in the specificities of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, strengthen specialised units, improve technical investigative resources, and foster effective coordination between all the actors involved. The challenge is to ensure rapid detection and appropriate care for victims and survivors.

5. **Strengthening support services for child victims and survivors,** which remain largely inaccessible or underdeveloped, particularly in rural areas, is also seen as a priority. It is proposed to set up hotlines, to ensure nationwide coverage of psycho-social and legal services, to fund local NGOs that provide these services, and to train providers to ensure care is adapted to the specificities of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

6. Finally, emphasis is placed on the **need to actively involve the private sector**. Internet service providers and digital platforms must be encouraged and empowered to implement concrete prevention mechanisms: filtering systems, automated reporting, accessible and free parental control tools. To ensure the effectiveness of prevention and response efforts, **multi-sectoral coordination frameworks** should also be established.

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