DISRUPTING HARM

PROTECTING UGANDA'S CHILDREN FROM ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE: THE WAY FORWARD

Children in Uganda are already being confronted with risks posed by digital technology. Public awareness is low, efforts to prevent risks are limited, and when children are subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), they receive little support – and few offenders are brought to justice. The government, public institutions, frontline workers, industry, and caregivers can all do more to respond to these crimes and disrupt harm to children in Uganda.

Key insights

Disrupting Harm in Uganda outlines five key research insights:

- Internet-using children in Uganda are subjected to OCSEA now. Most offenders of OCSEA are someone the child already knows. OCSEA can happen while children spend time online or in person but involving technology.

- OCSEA mostly occurs on social media. Facebook, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp were the most common reported platforms where it occurred.

- Many children did not tell anyone the last time they were subjected to OCSEA. Children tend to disclose to people they know rather than reporting to a helpline or the police.

- Law enforcement, the justice system and social services lack awareness, capacity, and resources to respond to cases of OCSEA. The interviewed children were not successful in bringing their case to justice through the court system.

- Some important OCSEA-related legislation, policies and standards are not yet enacted in Uganda.

The full report and complete list of recommendations can be found here.

Context and considerations

According to *Disrupting Harm in Uganda*, a joint research project conducted by the global ECPAT network, INTERPOL and UNICEF, 40% of 12–17-year-olds in Uganda are internet users. Of a nationally representative sample of children who are online, an important proportion have been exposed to harm. One in ten had been offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos of themselves at least once within the past year, and 3% had been threatened or blackmailed online to engage in sexual activities

Threats and requests like these are made to both girls and boys, often via social media. While many children thankfully refuse such attempts, around 8–15% of children who are threatened online comply.

Worryingly, when these types of requests are made of children, as many as 21–31% of children who are threatened online do not disclose to anyone that it has happened, and if they do it is predominantly to peers. There is a need for open communication about children's online lives, including eventual sexual experiences. Feeling comfortable to share and seek help can certainly prevent problems escalating.

The Ugandan police crime statistics show that from 2017 to 2019, there were nearly 44,000 cases of "defilement". However, it is not clear how many of those involved online elements. During the same period, Uganda also received 19,961 CyberTips from the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) concerning suspected child sexual exploitation in the country, mostly related to the possession, manufacture and distribution of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM).

Undoubtedly, most incidents of OCSEA go formally unreported. Very few (3–11%) children made formal reports to the police or reported to a social worker or helpline. The research showed that children don't report for several reasons: They are unaware that an offence had been committed, they didn't know how to report, embarrassment around discussing sex made it uncomfortable, they feared recriminations, they worried about stigma, victim-blaming, and the risk of self-incrimination.

Disrupting Harm in Uganda conducted interviews on access to justice with children and caregivers who did formally report, as well as justice professionals. All described difficulties with the process. Those children were first required to report to a local councillor before they could speak to the police. Some were not able to proceed to police without 'informal payments', while others had to pay the police for them to investigate cases. Within the justice system, there were requirements to tell and retell experiences repeatedly. This caused distress. There was also limited access to legal aid and cases tended to be drawn-out over many months. None of the cases followed in this report were concluded with a judgment.

Combating OCSEA and strengthening victim support requires comprehensive and sustained actions from policy-makers, law enforcement agencies, justice and social support service professionals, internet providers and the technology industry, communities, teachers and caregivers.

Recommended action

Disrupting Harm in Uganda makes a series of detailed and evidence-based recommendations based on the key research insights. In brief, these call on the Government of Uganda and its partners to **ACT** with required legislative changes, system strengthening and clear procedures, to **EDUCATE** children, adults and public officials so that they can play their roles in preventing online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and to **FUND** the implementation of new and existing arrangements.

Act

- Adopt the National Plan of Action to prevent and respond to online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Ensure that it encompasses the recommendations of this report.
- Properly define and criminalise all forms of OCSEA including online grooming of children for sexual purposes, live-streaming of child sexual abuse, and online sexual extortion.
- Review the Child Online Protection Handbook and disseminate it widely to ensure a common understanding of OCSEA.
- Integrate OCSEA into standard operating procedures for frontline workers, including a suggested referral network and reporting channels.
- Accede to the Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection adopted by the African Union in 2014.

- Establish and maintain a connection to INTERPOL's ICSE database. Adequately investigate international OCSEA referrals, including NCMEC reports. Put an effective hotline in place with access to hotlines in other countries.
- Amend processes to provide OCSEA victims and caregivers with direct access to law enforcement officers – not via local councillors.
- Develop detailed ethical guidelines for police on how to interview children. Ensure that both specialised male and female officers are recruited and available whenever required.
- Develop guidelines on child-friendly and victim-friendly justice. Ensure that family and children courts and child-friendly rooms and props are available everywhere. Guarantee that child victims do not have to face offenders in court, and that OCSEA cases are heard without undue delays.
- Provide officers/prosecutors/courts with a standard information package to inform victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse (including OCSEA), along with their caregivers, of all the relevant procedures and rights, including the right to compensation.
- Legally oblige internet service providers to retain data, filter/block/take down child sexual abuse materials (CSAM) and comply promptly with law enforcement requests for information.
- Provide free psychosocial counselling, medical and legal aid services to OCSEA victims. Increase the numbers of probation and social welfare officers with relevant training in all regions.
- Request a victim impact statement for all OCSEA cases.

Educate

- Raise awareness of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the role of technology, through effective programmes reaching all areas.
- Teach caregivers to talk to children about their lives. Tackle norms around sex and sexuality that can block communication, as well as to recognise exploitative or abusive behaviour, online and offline.
- Teach children from an early age about consent and personal boundaries. Help them understand online risks. Include OCSEA in the National Sexuality Education Framework and related resource material.
- Teach children about internet safety and how to recognise and report OCSEA. Include child online protection (including OCSEA) in the ICT Guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Sports for schools and include OCSEA in computer classes.
- Expand and institutionalise training for police officers from all units and locations, and for all relevant justice and social services professionals, so that they all understand that online abuse is a form of child abuse and is never the child's fault.
- Ensure police officers are sensitive to the rights of children and victims, and are able to investigate, prosecute, hear and facilitate cases effectively while following child-friendly procedures and supporting the victims.

Fund

- Allocate funding earmarked for OCSEA to the relevant government agencies in order to put each of these recommendations into effect, and ensure sufficient funding to implement and monitor the National Plan of Action.
- Allocate a specific budget to support investigations of OCSEA cases. Make a transport budget available to enable victims, caregivers and lawyers to attend court hearings.
- Provide public financial support to Uganda Child Helpline for it to maintain national coverage and to ensure its sustainability.
- While the law stipulates children can access legal representation, there is no legal aid to ensure this is universally available. Provide funding to ensure child victims may access legal supports.

About Disrupting Harm

Disrupting Harm in Uganda is part of an unprecedented large-scale multi-country research project into OCSEA that draws on the research expertise of ECPAT, INTERPOL, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, and their networks of both national and global partners. It is supported by the Fund to End Violence Against Children, through its Safe Online initiative and focuses on 13 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia.

Data collection took place from early 2020 through to early 2021 with the cooperation of the Government of Uganda and a wide range of public bodies and other organisations active in the country.

A comprehensive analysis was made of the legislation, policy and systems addressing OCSEA in Uganda. A range of statistical data was gathered for 2017–2019. Surveys were conducted with internet-using children, their caregivers and front-line service providers from the private and voluntary sectors. Interviews were held with high-level government officials, law enforcement officials, justice professionals, and child victims of OCSEA and their caregivers. All the information was then analysed and triangulated. The analysis for *Disrupting Harm in Uganda* was finalised in May 2021. The recommendations were discussed further at a national consultation on 19 August 2021.