



UNDERSTANDING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS ROLES IN PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (OCSE)

Multi-Country Research Report
Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal and the Philippines

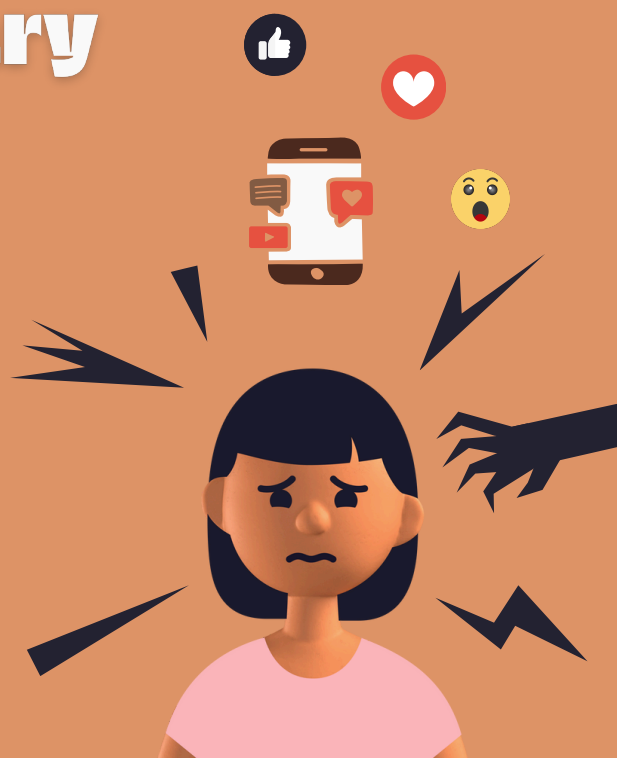
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Executive Summary

Background

The rapid development of communication technology and advancement of the internet has introduced an entirely new dimension to sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) has manifested itself as a global crime in an increasingly digital and borderless world. The crime is becoming more extreme in nature and growing in scale, including grooming and exposure to predators, creation and distribution online of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM), and the spread of self-generated sexually explicit material. Children are being groomed and sexually exploited across social media, online games, and live streaming¹. Policy frameworks, justice systems, law enforcement organisations, parents and caregivers and communities are struggling to keep pace with the rapid growth of this type of abuse.²



Objectives

of the Research

This research study ‘understanding parents and caregivers’ roles in preventing and responding to OCSE’ was undertaken to contribute to Terre des Hommes Netherlands’ (TdH NL) global research agenda and their efforts to design programmes to support and empower parents and caregivers to respond to and prevent OCSE. The objective of the multi-country research is to deepen the limited evidence base on how parents and caregivers can enhance children and young people’s (CYP) risk or resilience to OCSE in SCROL (Safety for Children Online) programme countries, namely - Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines.



Methodology

The methodology for the research was qualitative in nature, incorporated a literature review to map out the services and support available to parents and involved Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews with a range of stakeholders including parents and caregivers, CYP, community members and NGOs. In total 449 respondents participated in the research and the data collection process was facilitated and supported by Youth Advisory Boards in each of the participating countries.

1 We Protect Global Alliance <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-23/>

2 Protecting Children from Violence and Exploitation in Relation to the Digital Environment. UNICEF Policy Brief. 2024.



Main Findings

Understanding the threats and risks Children and Young People (CYP) encounter online

Evidence from all four study countries tells us that children's online usage starts at an early age, with some children as young as 3-5 years watching YouTube videos on their parents' phones or tablets. CYP highlighted that being online is part of their everyday lives and that the internet provides them with a shared sense of belonging in the digital age. They reported using social media apps such as FB, Messenger, Telegram, Tik Tok, YouTube as well as various gaming apps.

Findings indicate that some of the older CYP are cautious about dangers online and demonstrated reasonable knowledge of privacy settings and online grooming risks. Nevertheless, many CYP, especially girls, reported having encountered unsolicited explicit sexual images, videos, or texts online and/or had uncomfortable interactions with boys/men, including foreign men offering gifts in exchange for sexual images. Interestingly, girls talked more openly about their concerns about OCSE compared to boys who mostly emphasised their online gaming activities and concerns around scams and fake accounts, while underestimating their own risks of sexual exploitation. Respondents also reported that boys do not get the same protection and attention by caregivers due to cultural gender norms.

Accounts from CYP suggest that they struggle to talk to their parents and caregivers about online threats and risks due to their fear of caregivers' anger and scolding as well as their lack of faith in their parents or caregivers' digital capacity to protect them online. As a result, CYP are relying on their own instincts to navigate the digital world, despite lacking the guidance, knowledge, and tools to do so. Many CYP reported that they prefer to turn to their peers for support and advice about online threats and risks rather than turn to their parents and caregivers.

Intersectional vulnerabilities

The research study has promoted the application of an intersectional lens to provide a better and more nuanced picture of vulnerabilities and the multiple dimensions of marginalisation. Findings from Cambodia, Nepal and the Philippines underscored that gender diverse children can be more vulnerable to OCSE because of the absence of social support, information, and age-appropriate ways to explore their gender identity which may lead them to seek support in adult settings in high-risk online environments. As many CYP who identify and explore their sexuality online, they may be particularly vulnerable to online grooming for sexual exploitation. Similarly, the abuse of neuro-diverse children, especially those with autism, is largely invisible and they face compounded vulnerabilities in online spaces including unintentional misuse of online platforms.



Understanding the current capacity of parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE

Findings indicate that the digital world is impacting on parenting dynamics and practices. Parents and caregivers are finding it difficult to keep up with the current digital landscape and what their children are doing online. They emphasised being overwhelmed by digital technology and confessed they often lean on their children for support with digital skills. This intergenerational digital gap is creating new sources of conflict and leaving parents battling for respect and authority.



Findings highlight that most parents and caregivers presented with limited knowledge of OCSE, including the extent of the issue, how it could occur, what they should be doing to minimise the risks to their children and the resources available to help. Parents reported that they found the topic difficult to discuss and associated it with high levels of stigma and taboo. Almost all parents and caregivers reported that they had inadequate support and information to take effective preventative action.

Many parents and caregivers raised concerns about the mental health of their children reflecting on issues such as 'addiction' in relation to excessive time being spent on social media and gaming apps. They also emphasised their lack of knowledge on how and where to report OCSE/online risky behaviour, noting that sometimes they may turn to teachers or extended family members for advice and support but overall were not aware of support options. Parents and caregivers highlighted their fear of social judgement and feeling blamed for their children falling prey to OCSE and reflected on how this culture of victim blaming hinders them from discussing OCSE and reporting it. Notably, parents of victim-survivors of OCSE reported high levels of shame and guilt, blaming themselves for the sexual abuse and exploitation suffered by their children online.



Parenting and caregiving norms and practices

Testimonies from parents and CYP informed that high use of corporal punishment persists within the family setting. CYP flagged that this hinders an open, warm, and trusting relationship with their parents and that violent parenting is a key barrier to help seeking for OCSE. Findings also highlight that some parents and caregivers are not effective role models for their children, spending too much time online rather than being present and spending quality time with their children. Testimonies from fathers and male caregivers indicate that they are less involved in safeguarding their CYP from online harm and see themselves more as providers and/or playing a role in discipline.



Most parents and CYP noted that OCSE is a taboo subject in the home and caregivers do not feel comfortable talking to their children about the topic, emphasising barriers in open parent-child communication and lack of inter-familial trust. Testimonies from both parents and children highlight that a gap in parenting skills make it difficult for children to confide in their parents on abusive online occurrences and that parent-child interaction on online activities is generally poor.

Role of the community and NGOs in supporting caregivers

Key informants reflected on the lack of understanding of OCSE, its manifestations and prevention at the community level as well as the overall lack of knowledge on how to respond effectively. Community leaders, including faith-based leaders highlighted the limited community support networks for parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE.

Representatives from NGOs emphasised the need to improve the digital literacy of caregivers as well as their knowledge and awareness of OCSE. They highlighted that positive parenting programmes as well as Parent Support Groups (PSG) can be highly effective in sensitizing parents and caregivers on the risks of OCSE and promoting trust and warm open relations with their CYP. NGO representatives also emphasised the need to drive behaviour change amongst parents and communities, tackling the cultural taboos and stigma on the topic of OCSE, reducing violent parenting and encouraging the involvement of male caregivers in preventing and responding to OCSE.



Recommendations & Ways Forward

Parents and caregivers are the gateway for child internet safety and in all four study countries parents echoed that they need support with improved digital literacy and positive parenting skills to navigate the digital age they live in and tackle the intergenerational digital divide. The findings underscore the central role parents and caregivers have in keeping their children safe online and the need to strategically support and equip parents with the knowledge, skills, and resources to nurture the wellbeing and development of their children and mitigate risks to online harm.

Some of the specific recommendations coming out of the research findings are outlined below.

Develop and expand positive parenting programmes which incorporate the following elements:

Building the digital literacy skills of parents and caregivers, improving knowledge of parental control software, privacy settings, monitoring children's digital footprint and setting appropriate screen time limits.

Mentoring and empowering parents to become **good role models in the digital age**, setting a good example by limiting their own screen time, being more present, engaging in offline activities and spending quality time with their children.

Ensuring that boys and young men's vulnerabilities to OCSE are not overlooked due to underreporting of sexual abuse and exploitation by boys as well as the harmful cultural and gender norms and toxic masculinity embedded in society.

Improving parents and caregivers' skills and knowledge of OCSE, its different forms and the grooming process to understand how children are being manipulated by perpetrators and how they become deliberately estranged from the family. Invest in parents and caregivers' knowledge, skills, and practices to address **stigma and taboo** around OCSE that inhibit parents seeking support.

Supporting inclusive targeted programmes for parents and caregivers of CYP with **intersectional vulnerabilities**, especially CYP who identify with SOGIESC* and CYP with intellectual disabilities, such as CYP with autism.

Improving parents and caregivers' knowledge and understanding on reporting incidences of OCSE, including how police, legal and child protection systems work.

Embedding positive parent-child communication, connection, and positive non-violent discipline and mentoring parents and caregivers to foster a positive, stable emotional bond with their CYP ensuring they feel safe to discuss online concerns without judgement, blame or anger.

Targeting **fathers and male caregivers** and addressing the traditional caregiving roles of men and engaging them as active parents and equitable partners in caregiving.

Facilitating and enabling the development of **Parent Support Groups (PSGs)** and advocacy networks which can provide parents with opportunities to problem solve, overcome barriers to protect their children online, reduce feelings of isolation and helplessness and empower parents to come together and give them a voice to influence change.

*SOGIESC : Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

Foster collaboration with communities to support parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE

- Raise awareness on the collective responsibility of community members to support parents and caregivers to create a safer digital environment, collaborating with community leaders, faith-based leaders, educators, and social workers to reduce societal stigmas and taboo about OCSE and blame associated with it. Support community members to equip parents and caregivers with accessible resources such as digital safety and knowledge and understanding of OCSE, practical tips for recognising and addressing potential threats, information on accessing reporting and support mechanisms and hosting secure community spaces for Parent Support Groups.
- Support schools to develop resources and guidelines for parents and caregivers on OCSE and keeping children safe online and strengthen online platforms for parents to connect with teachers about OCSE concerns and confidential reporting processes. Incorporate comprehensive teacher training on OCSE and ways to support parents and caregivers through digital citizenship education.
- Equip social workers and child protection case-managers with knowledge on OCSE and ways to support parents and caregivers through referral procedures, trauma informed responses and linking to existing child protection systems.



Foster collaboration with communities to support parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE



- Develop or strengthen evidence-based parenting support programmes to prevent and respond to OCSE, which improve parental knowledge of OCSE as well as encourage behaviour change by imparting positive parenting skills.
- Conduct comprehensive online safety awareness campaigns to educate and support parents and caregivers as well as the public about online risks, various forms of OCSE, and how to keep children safe online. These campaigns should highlight the legal provisions, reporting procedures, available support systems and response mechanisms for victims of OCSE, using accessible formats like social media posts, public service announcements, workshops, and interactive sessions.
- Develop inclusive awareness raising programmes, resources, and initiatives for parents and caregivers of CYP who identify as SOGIESC and parents of neuro-diverse CYP with intellectual disabilities such as autism to address their specific vulnerabilities to online risks. Also invest in targeted interventions for boys that are sensitive to the unique challenges they face, including underreporting of OCSE and exposure to pornography and gaming addiction.

Role of Government in supporting parents

- Strengthen legal and policy frameworks or enhance existing laws to protect children online and include specific provisions and guidelines for parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE. These should address emerging issues such as sextortion, online grooming, and the misuse of AI technologies, including deepfakes.
- Strengthen the capacity of police to support parents and caregivers to report OCSE cases and establish accessible services. Reporting platforms should be easy to navigate for parents and caregivers and available in multiple languages to accommodate diverse populations.
- Allocate sufficient resources to support parents and caregivers to combat OCSE, including investing in nationwide public awareness and education campaigns specifically for parents and caregivers with tailored content around positive parenting and child protection in the digital age.





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For further information contact :

Zoe de Melo

Thematic Programme Manager

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

z.demelo@tdh.nl

Terre des Hommes Netherlands is a global child protection organisation working in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. We protect children and prevent child exploitation, and empower children to make their voices count. We tackle issues at the roots by enabling systemic change with the support of grassroots level implementing partners. We ensure that children are at the centre of our initiatives.

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