SCROL
Research Summary

Cambodia

SCROL
Safety for Children and their Rights OnLine

NATIONALE POSTCODE LOTERIJ

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Understanding Parents and Caregivers' Roles in Preventing and Responding to Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC)

This research study explores the crucial role of parents and caregivers in preventing and responding to Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) in Cambodia. As part of Terre des Hommes Netherlands' (TdH NL) broader Safety for Children and their Rights OnLine (SCROL) programme, which spans Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines, this study examines how parental involvement affects children's vulnerability or resilience to OSEC. Collaborating with local partners, the research investigates parenting norms, digital challenges, and children's vulnerabilities, with special attention to marginalised groups.

Context

While technology has enhanced daily life, it has also increased children's digital exploitation risks. Children now use the Internet from an earlier age, matching adult usage rates (UNICEF, 2017). The problem's scope is considerable: in 2020, there were 21.7 million global cases of Online Child Sexual Exploitation, with girls aged 3-13 being 76% of victims (UNICEF, 2021). Cambodia faces particular challenges, with CSAM cases increasing by 490% during 2017-2018 (Cambodian National Council for Children, 2019). Around 160,000 Cambodian children aged 12-17 have experienced online exploitation, with 9% receiving requests for sexual images (ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF, Disrupting Harm in Cambodia, 2022). Family circumstances worsen this vulnerability: resource-limited parents may use physical and emotional violence, while over 16,000 children live in residential care despite having living parents (Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2017).
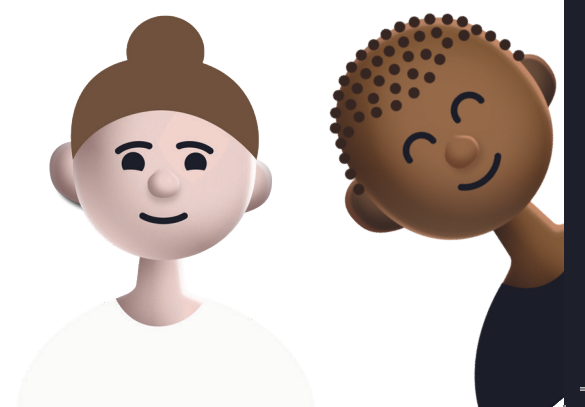
Research Objectives

1. To assess parents' and caregivers' capacity and engagement in addressing OSEC in Cambodia.
2. To understand how parenting and care norms and practices can impact children and young people's (CYP) risk or resilience to OSEC.
3. To understand what services, programmes, and support are available to parents and caregivers in relation to child protection generally and OSEC in particular.

Research Methodology

The research employed qualitative methods for data collection. After reviewing literature and national documents on OSEC, researchers conducted 15 Focus Group Discussions with children (ages 9-17) and parents, plus 22 Key Informant Interviews with stakeholders. The study, conducted in Phnom Penh, included 116 participants. Child-friendly tools like emoji cards facilitated participation, while trauma-informed protocols ensured ethical standards. The study received approval from Cambodia's Ministry of Health National Ethics Committee.

Limitations

- **Geographical bias:** The study focused on urban areas, excluding rural areas with different digital access and awareness levels.
- **Sample Constraints:** Study participants were predominantly children from NGO programmes (e.g., AusCam).
- **Sensitivity:** Parents may have underreported disciplinary practices due to social stigma.

Key Findings

Children's Experiences

- 60% of children encounter violent or sexual content online. Most seek help from peers rather than parents, fearing punishment.
- Internet usage among children has increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- LGBTQIA+ youth and OSEC victims experience significant trauma and isolation.

> "I have another experience on Telegram. There are Telegram group chats of sexual content or gangster content. For Messenger, there are group charts of sexual content, and even if I left, there are people who still add me afterwards. Some people called me to add to these types of group chats. I changed my privacy settings to protect my privacy and safety. I have a gay friend, and he got added to a group chat where there is 18+ content for gay people. People cannot be trusted nowadays."
>
> **- a 17-year-old girl**

Parental Capacity

- While 90% of parents use smartphones, most lack the skills to monitor apps or privacy settings.
- Positive parenting training (e.g., Ministry of Women's Affairs' toolkit) improves parent-child communication.
- Digital-age parenting presents challenges, as low digital literacy and socio-economic inequalities leave children more vulnerable online.
- Parents of children with intersectional vulnerabilities show awareness of OSEC and want to protect their children.

> "My role will be to stay home, look after the kids, educate them, and when they grow up, they should not do inappropriate things or go to other peoples' houses. And if they go, do not steal something."
>
> **- a mother**

Community Dynamics

- Teachers and monks are trusted advisors, though local authorities lack OSEC expertise.
- NGOs like AusCam and ChildFund offer counselling, and chatbots (e.g., Neary).
- Government systems need improvement to better support parents and caregivers in preventing and addressing OSEC.

Policy Related Issues

- Cambodia's draft Cybercrime Law lacks provisions against CSAM possession, and reporting systems remain underutilised.
- Sex education and digital literacy are absent from the school curriculum

Protective Factors

> *"First, I locked my profiles on my social media platforms. Second, I don't share passwords with others because they may use them for personal benefit. Third, I don't accept strangers' connections on social media platforms."*
>
> **- 14-year-old boy**

- Opportunities for children and young people to learn about online safety and communicate with their peers about online experiences and risks.

- Open and positive communication style by caregivers with children and youth.

- Community initiatives supported by influential leaders, including Buddhist monks and local authorities, to promote positive parenting.

Risks
Factors

> *"I do not know even one percent of what they know about [technology] because I started earning money when I was a teenager and did not study much."*
>
> **- a father**

- Caregivers have low digital literacy, which impairs their understanding of the issue and discourages their children to talk to them about online safety.

- Parents with the most vulnerable socio-economic background i.e. living in informal settlements find it difficult to understand and digest traditional awareness raising campaigns, hence increasing risks for out-of-school children.

- The persistence of harmful social norms such as the use of corporal punishment, stigma, and taboo around sexuality and OSEC.

> *"Yes, my parents advised me not to play games too much. When I told them that I had received s exual content messages, they did not believe me."*
>
> **- 14-year-old boy**

Recommendations

For Parents & Caregivers
- Attend digital literacy workshops; use non-violent discipline.
- Allowing children some independence can help prevent feelings of rebellion and foster trust
- It is equally important for parents to stay actively involved in their children's lives, both online and offline

For Communities
- Launch OSEC awareness campaigns via schools and religious leaders.
- Key community members are particularly important in reaching and supporting parents and children.
- To effectively help parents prevent OSEC, community members need to collaborate and network by establishing partnerships.
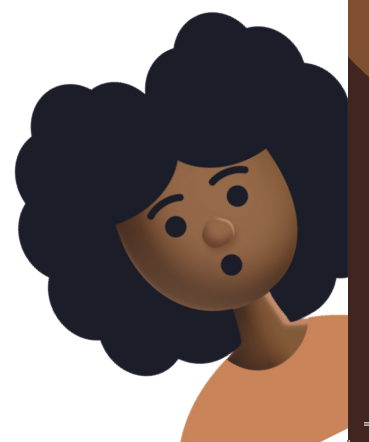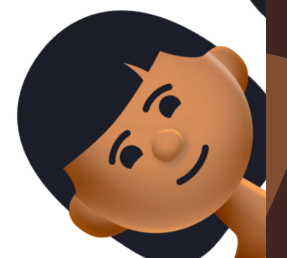
For NGOs
- Expand hotlines (e.g., ChildSafe) and partner with tech firms for safer platforms.
- NGOs should prioritise raising awareness about OSEC across target communities.
- NGOs can collaborate with religious leaders and organisations to align child protection with moral and ethical values.

For Government
- Pass the Cybercrime Law; integrate OSEC into school curricula.
- The government should proactively raise awareness about online threats, including OSEC.
- Developing clear referral pathways to these services is essential to improving accessibility for victims and families seeking help.

Recommendations for further research

Future research should expand to remote communities with limited awareness of OSEC, include children not involved in NGO programmes, and examine other forms of child exploitation.

Any Questions?

Contact us!

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