From Risky Connection to Inclusive Protection

Intersectionality and Online Sexual Exploitation of Children

2026

Acknowledgements and Imprint

full report   **accessible version**

Table of Contents

Introduction

Introduction

Children's lives are increasingly shaped by digital spaces. Phones, social media, messaging apps, and online games offer opportunities to learn, connect, and express identity. At the same time, these spaces can expose children to **online child sexual exploitation (OCSE)**, particularly when guidance, emotional support, and protection systems are weak or inaccessible (UNICEF, 2021; Livingstone et al., 2017). OCSE refers to situations in which digital technologies are used to facilitate the sexual exploitation or abuse of children, including online grooming, coercion, sexual extortion, and the creation, sharing, or threat of sharing sexual images or content involving children (ECPAT International, 2016). Online risks do not affect all children in the same way. Children's experiences online are shaped by who they are, where they live, and the social, cultural, and economic environments around them (Livingstone et al., 2017).

Factors such as gender, mental health, disability, ethnicity, place of residence, socio-economic status, schooling, and access to supportive adults interact with one another to shape both vulnerability and protection online. These factors do not operate independently. Instead, they overlap and combine in ways that influence how children access the internet, the risks they encounter, and the support available to them when something goes wrong (Alper et al., 2018). Understanding these intersections is essential for developing prevention and response efforts that reflect children's real lives and avoid one-size-fits-all solutions.

Intersectionality helps explain how different aspects of identity overlap and interact in children's lives, shaping their experiences in ways that cannot be understood by looking at one factor on its own (Crenshaw, 1991). In some situations, these intersections can increase vulnerability; in others, they can offer protection or resilience. Often, they do both at the same time, depending on the context.

This report is part of the **VOICE IDENTITY** project. It focuses on understanding OCSE through an intersectional lens. Drawing on participatory research with children, alongside insights from caregivers and professionals, it examines how different aspects of children's identities and life circumstances intersect to shape both risk and protection online. By comparing experiences from Bangladesh, Bolivia, and the Netherlands, the report shows how similar online risks can be experienced very differently depending on how disability, sexuality, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity intersect with social norms and systems of support in children's lives.

The report first introduces key identity factors that emerged from the research and explores how they intersect in practice. It then presents country-specific insights illustrated through children's experiences, before bringing these findings together in a cross-cutting analysis of power and protection. The report concludes by reflecting on what an intersectional understanding of OCSE means for more inclusive and effective prevention and response efforts.

Intersectional Factors

Intersectional Factors

To understand how online sexual exploitation affects children differently, it is important to look closely at the factors that shape their everyday lives. Through the VOICE IDENTITY study, we identified a set of key factors that consistently influenced children's online experiences, risks, and access to protection across the three country contexts. These factors do not act in isolation. Instead, they overlap and interact, shaping both vulnerability and resilience in different ways.

In this section, each factor is explored in a short box. Each box explains what the factor means, summarises what existing research tells us about its link to online sexual exploitation, and highlights how it appeared in the VOICE IDENTITY findings from Bangladesh, Bolivia, and the Netherlands. Together, these boxes build a clearer picture of how different aspects of identity and context contribute to risk and protection.

The report introduces three fictionalised characters inspired by the study findings: **Rafi** from Bangladesh, **Kantuta** from Bolivia, and **Sam** from the Netherlands. These characters are not intended to represent all children. They are inspired by the stories, experiences, and insights shared by children in the three case studies and help illustrate how intersecting identities and contexts shape online experiences. As each box is introduced, we learn more about them. New aspects of their identities are gradually added, showing how risk and protection are complex and shift depending on context, rather than being fixed or determined by any single factor.

The boxes are ordered to move from more individual characteristics, such as age and gender, to factors that are more relational or contextual, such as place of residence, socio-economic status, and schooling. Not every factor is equally central for every character. Where a factor strongly shapes a character's experience, this is explored in more detail; where it is less central, it is mentioned more briefly. This reflects the reality that intersectionality looks different for each child.

This approach allows the report to show how online sexual exploitation risks are shaped by the interaction between identity, environment, and systems, and why effective prevention and response must be sensitive to children's diverse and changing realities.

Definition of age

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below the age of eighteen years, unless the national law that is applicable to the child states an earlier age of majority (United Nations, 2004). Age thresholds can vary per country, and these differences can be a barrier to cross-border cooperation in investigating online child sexual exploitation.

How age influences OCSE

Age is a significant factor in shaping children's exposure to online risks, but it does not function as a straightforward indicator of safety. Research consistently shows that early and mid-adolescence are periods of heightened vulnerability to OCSE (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Whittle et al., 2013). Compared to younger children, adolescents tend to spend more time online, engage more actively in online communication, and are more likely to interact with unknown contacts or encounter sexualised content, increasing opportunities for exploitation (Livingstone et al., 2017).

At the same time, age-related developmental changes can weaken protective factors. As children grow older, they are often granted greater autonomy online and experience reduced monitoring and emotional support from caregivers (Livingstone et al., 2017). This shift frequently occurs before children have developed sufficient digital skills, risk awareness or confidence to navigate online spaces safely. In Europe, for example, nearly half of 14-year-olds do not meet basic digital skills benchmarks, highlighting the gap between increased online independence and preparedness (European Commission, 2024). Evidence further suggests that older adolescents are more likely to experience more severe forms of sexual abuse and report higher levels of trauma symptoms, likely reflecting cumulative exposure and longer periods of risk over time (Jouriles et al., 2025).

Although most social media platforms formally restrict access to users aged 13 and above, these age limits are inconsistently enforced and rarely reflect children's developmental readiness or the realities of their online lives. In response to concerns about online harm, some countries have proposed or introduced social media bans or blanket age-based restrictions for younger adolescents (Champion et al., 2025). However, evidence suggests that such bans risk oversimplifying age-related vulnerability and shifting responsibility onto children, while doing little to address underlying drivers of risk. Crucially, entering online spaces at a later age does not automatically reduce vulnerability (Whittle et al., 2013; Livingstone & Smith, 2014).

What our study found

Across the three country studies, children reported first accessing online platforms at an average age ranging from approximately 11.8 to 13.8 years. This places initial online engagement squarely within early adolescence, a period already identified in the literature as one of heightened vulnerability to online sexual exploitation. While some children began using online platforms later than their peers, later entry was not associated with better safety.

Children who went online later often did so with limited digital skills, low awareness of online risks and little prior guidance. In Bolivia and Bangladesh, for example, some caregivers believed that restricting internet use during adolescence was protective. In practice, this meant that when adolescents eventually accessed online platforms, often through peers' devices, they did so with very little knowledge of how to recognise or respond to online risks.

Across contexts, increasing age was commonly associated with reduced supervision, based on the assumption that older children were more capable of managing online interactions independently. This reduction in oversight was rarely accompanied by increased support or skills-building. Overall, the findings challenge the idea that age alone protects children from OCSE, highlighting the importance of timely access to age-appropriate guidance, digital skills and sustained adult support.

Let's look at our three friends to see how age shapes their experiences online. We have already met Rafi, Kantuta and Sam, and learned a bit about where they live and when they first started using the internet. Now we can look more closely at how their age influences the way they access online spaces, the support they receive, and the risks they may face.

Rafi, 14 (Bangladesh): In Bangladesh, internet access is not a given, and many children do not own their own devices. Rafi, for example, is 14 years old. His family does not have a smartphone for him to use on his own. His father owns a basic smartphone, which he mainly uses to call relatives. Occasionally, Rafi is allowed to borrow the phone. Rafi learned about Facebook, one of the most widely used social media platforms in Bangladesh, from a friend. Using his father's phone, he created an account and began connecting with family members, classmates and others he did not know personally. Rafi enjoys chatting with his Facebook contacts, but he has never discussed his online activities with his parents. They have limited experience with social media and do not feel confident advising him about online risks. Although Rafi is 14 and perceived as "old enough" to manage online, his later entry into social media, combined with minimal guidance, leaves him vulnerable.
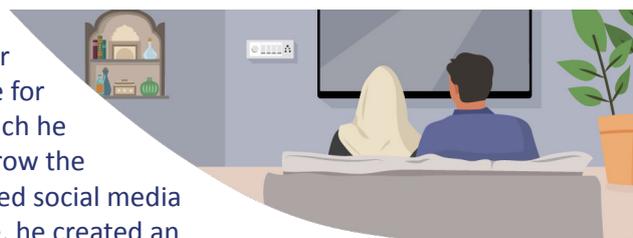
Kantuta, 15 (Bolivia): In Bolivia, families often believe that delaying internet use during adolescence is protective. Kantuta is 15 years old and was discouraged from using the internet when she was younger. When she first accessed social media at around age 14, it was through a shared family phone. Because her parents limited her access rather than building her digital skills, Kantuta entered online spaces with little understanding of how to recognise risks or seek support. As she grew older, restrictions eased, but guidance did not increase, meaning that greater autonomy did not come with stronger protection.

Sam, 14 (Netherlands): In the Netherlands, internet access is widespread and often begins at a young age. Sam is 14 and started using online platforms at around age 11. Over time, their online access has increased, and so has their independence. As Sam has grown older, their caregivers have become less involved in their online activities, assuming that age brings competence. However, this reduction in supervision has not been matched by ongoing conversations or support about online risks, extending Sam's overall window of exposure to potential harm.

Definition of gender

Sex and gender are often used as if they mean the same thing, but they describe different aspects of a child's life. Sex refers to the biological traits assigned at birth (male, female, or intersex) (World Health Organization, 2023). Gender refers to the social roles, expectations, and identities linked to being a girl, a boy, or another gender identity. These expectations influence how children are treated, the freedoms they have, and what adults assume about their behaviour or safety (Feeny & Crivello, 2015).

How gender influences OCSE

Previous studies consistently demonstrate that girls face greater surveillance, blame, and restrictions online, limiting their privacy and increasing vulnerability to grooming, coercion, and sexual extortion (Whittle et al., 2013). Boys are often socialised to appear strong or sexually experienced, which contributes to underreporting and adult assumptions that they can handle themselves (Moynihan et al., 2018). Gender-diverse children face higher levels of harassment, stigma, and fear of being outed, which increases their exposure to risk while reducing help-seeking (Craig & McInroy, 2014). These findings strongly reflect what children, caregivers and experts told us in our study.

What our study found

Our study found that gender strongly shaped how children accessed the internet, the types of risks they faced, and whether they felt able to ask for help. In Bolivia and Bangladesh, where social norms advantage boys, girls described having very limited privacy online, with parents or relatives monitoring them closely. Boys often reported more freedom, but much less support. Several boys said that adults rarely checked how they felt or what they encountered online. In the Netherlands, gender-diverse children explained that while the internet offered affirmation and connection, they avoided reporting harm because they feared being outed. Caregivers in all three countries often reinforced these patterns by describing girls as vulnerable, boys as independent, and gender-diverse children as outside their knowledge.

Let's look at our three friends to see how gender shapes their experiences online. We have already met Rafi, Kantuta, and Sam, and learned a bit about where they live and how old they are. Now we can look at how each of them understands their gender, and how this affects the way they use the internet and the risks they face.

If we look at gender, Rafi identifies as a boy, Kantuta as a girl, and Sam doesn't feel comfortable with either of those categories and identifies as non-binary. Their gender, combined with other parts of who they are, influences what they can do online, how adults treat them, and how safe they feel seeking help when something goes wrong.

Rafi, boy (Bangladesh): In Rafi's home, access to the shared family phone follows traditional gender roles. As a boy, Rafi is usually allowed more time on the device, while his sister is expected to help with household chores and therefore has much less access to the online world. Even though Rafi's sister is older, Rafi enjoys more freedom to explore online spaces, and his parents trust him more simply because he is a boy. This trust is partly shaped by expectations that boys are strong, resilient, and able to protect themselves. However, this greater freedom also means that adults rarely check in on what he encounters online or how he feels.

Kantuta, girl (Bolivia): Kantuta has limited and closely supervised access to a shared family phone, largely because she is a girl and considered in need of protection. Her parents closely monitor when and how she goes online, worrying about her safety and reputation. Unlike her brothers, she is expected to spend more time at home helping with household tasks and is rarely allowed to use the phone independently. While this supervision is intended to protect her, it also means Kantuta has little privacy online and few opportunities to build confidence or skills in navigating digital spaces on her own.

Sam, non-binary (Netherlands): Sam is exploring their gender identity. Sensing they are different from most of their friends in real life, they use the internet to find information, role models, peers, and a sense of belonging. Until recently, Sam had relatively unrestricted access to online spaces, because their parents treated them like a boy. After Sam shared that they identify as non-binary, their parents, while loving and caring, began to question Sam's online activity more closely. They believe Sam is too young to be thinking about this and worry that early internet access made Sam too impressionable. As a result, Sam's online use is now more closely monitored. Because Sam has few offline friends who understand their gender identity, online spaces remain an important source of connection and support. However, increased reliance on these spaces means Sam sometimes shares personal feelings with people they do not know well, which can increase vulnerability.

Definition of sexuality

Sexuality refers to a person's feelings of attraction, romantic or sexual interests, and the ways they understand or explore these experiences (UNESCO, 2018). For many adolescents, the internet becomes an early and important place to learn about sexuality, relationships, and identity, especially when such topics are not discussed openly at home or school.

How sexuality influences OCSE

Previous research shows that young people often turn to online spaces to seek information and connection related to sexuality when offline environments are restrictive, stigmatising or silent on these issues (Cronesberry & Ward, 2025). LGBTQIA+ children, in particular, face heightened risks online, including harassment, sexual pressure and targeted manipulation. These risks are amplified when children fear rejection, discrimination or being outed, which can discourage them from seeking help or reporting harm (UNICEF, 2021). When sexuality is associated with shame or secrecy, children may lack access to reliable information and supportive guidance, increasing their vulnerability to OCSE (Albury & Byron, 2016).

What our study found

Across the studies, sexuality emerged as a sensitive and often private aspect of children's lives, closely linked to how and why they used online spaces. In the Netherlands, LGBTQIA+ children consistently described using the internet to explore questions about sexuality because offline spaces felt unsafe, judgemental or entirely silent on the topic. Online platforms provided access to information, role models and communities that were not available to them offline. At the same time, this reliance on online spaces also created risk. Many children described feeling isolated and unable to talk openly with caregivers or peers about their sexuality. As a result, they turned to the internet not only for information, but also for emotional connection. This increased the likelihood of sharing personal information, engaging in intimate conversations with strangers or becoming vulnerable to grooming by adults who recognised their need for acceptance. Fear of being outed was used as a form of manipulation by perpetrators and reduced help-seeking, as children worried that disclosing online harm would expose their sexuality.

Let's look at our three friends to see how sexuality shapes their experiences online. We have already met Rafi and Sam, and learned a bit about their lives. Now we can look more closely at how each of them understands their sexuality, what questions they have, and how these private experiences influence the way they use the internet and the risks they face.

Sam, non-binary, attracted to boys (Netherlands): Sam is exploring their sexual orientation and has realised they are only attracted to boys. Online communities are one of the few places where they feel comfortable learning about this. Their parents and friends do not know about Sam's attraction to boys, and Sam feels isolated offline, with few people they trust to talk to. As a result, the internet has become their main source of connection, and Sam sometimes shares personal feelings with people they meet online. In one interaction, someone threatened to reveal Sam's sexual orientation to others unless Sam continued the conversation. Fear of being outed made Sam feel trapped and unable to seek help, increasing their vulnerability to manipulation and unwanted contact.
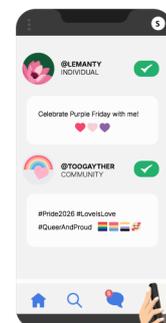
Rafi, boy, attracted to girls (Bangladesh): Rafi is beginning to think about what sex and relationships mean, but these topics are not discussed at home or at school. As a result, he turns to the internet to learn more about sexuality. Through Facebook, he encounters sexualised content, but that sparks curiosity. Rafi does not talk to his parents about what he sees or the people he chats with online, partly because they are unfamiliar with social media and partly because sexuality is considered a sensitive topic. This silence leaves Rafi to navigate questions about sex and boundaries on his own, increasing his vulnerability to misinformation, pressure or manipulation.

Kantuta, girl, attracted to boys (Bolivia): Kantuta's family does not talk to her about sexuality. Her parents believe that learning about sex is inappropriate for a girl her age and avoid discussing these topics altogether. As a result, Kantuta turns to the internet to look for information and answers to questions she does not feel able to ask offline. However, because her online activity is closely monitored and she has little privacy, she fears being judged or punished if her searches are discovered. This leaves her with few safe ways to learn about her body, relationships, or consent, increasing both confusion and vulnerability online.

Definition of ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural characteristics such as language, heritage, traditions, and a sense of belonging to a particular community (Baumann, 2004). Related terms include indigeneity, belonging to a group with distinct cultural, historical, and territorial identities (UN, 2009), and caste, which refers to inherited social hierarchies that influence status, opportunity, and discrimination in many South Asian contexts (Thorat, 2010). These identities shape how children are treated, what resources they can access, and how safely they can participate online (UNICEF, 2021).

### How ethnicity influences OCSE

Research shows that ethnic minority and Indigenous children often face limited digital access and lower digital literacy due to structural inequalities, rural marginalisation and under-resourced schools (Intahchomphoo, 2018). These disparities can increase their exposure to OSEC by limiting their ability to navigate online spaces safely. Studies also indicate that Indigenous and minority children are more likely to experience online discrimination (Carlson & Fraze, 2018). Lack of culturally relevant resources and stigma in reporting mechanisms further discourage help-seeking. These patterns closely reflect what children and caregivers shared in our study.

What our study found

Our study showed that ethnicity, specifically having an indigenous identity in Bolivia, played a significant role in shaping children's online access, digital skills, and vulnerability to OSEC. Indigenous children in Bolivia reported limited connectivity, fewer devices at home, and very limited privacy online, which reduced their ability to learn about safety or report concerns. Because many Indigenous communities received little to no school-based digital education, children often entered online spaces without guidance, making it harder to recognise grooming or unwanted contact. In our sample in Bangladesh and the Netherlands, ethnicity was not highlighted as much as in Bolivia.

Let's look at our friend, Katuta, to see how ethnicity shapes her experiences online. We already met Kantuta and learned a bit about her. Kantuta comes from an indigenous community and this influences her online experiences.

Kantuta, Indigenous Aymara girl (Bolivia): Kantuta belongs to an Aymara Indigenous community who live high up in the Andes mountains. Most online information is not available in the Aymara language, which makes it harder for her to understand content and even harder for her parents to guide her: they speak little to no Spanish. At home, the family shares one phone, and her parents supervise her closely because, as a girl, she is expected to behave "properly" and avoid anything that could be seen as inappropriate. Many Indigenous girls in our study described similar experiences: wanting to learn and connect online, but facing language barriers, limited cultural relevance of online content, and parents who could not support them because of linguistic and digital gaps. These factors left indigenous children like Kantuta with little privacy, limited guidance, and a higher risk of coming across harmful situations without knowing how to respond or report.

Translator

ENGLISH ⇄ AYMARA

Online sexual exploitation of children

???
??
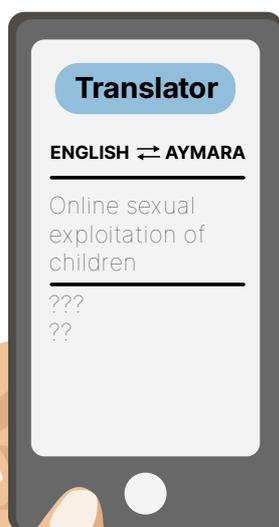
Definition of education

Education refers to a broad, lifelong and personal process through which individuals develop understanding, judgment, values and character. It describes the overall development of a person rather than the sum of what they have been taught. Schooling represents the teaching component of education. It refers to the institutional form of training in which learners are taught specific skills and undergo socialisation processes through organised instruction and authoritative guidance (Richmond, 1975).

How education influences OCSE

Previous research shows that children who are excluded from school or who experience weak school support are more exposed to possible exploitation, including online sexual exploitation (Lloyd, 2025). Social isolation and unsupervised online exploration associated with school non-attendance raise the likelihood of online exploitation (Whittle et al., 2013). Loneliness experienced due to isolation predicts vulnerability to grooming (Wright, 2017). Indigenous children living in remote areas face barriers to education and digital participation that reflect structural exclusion (Ministerio de Educación, 2022). Their online engagement occurs through family-shared mobile phones.

What our study found

Bangladesh, the intersection of gender and disability significantly shaped children's experiences of exclusion and risk. Girls with disabilities were less likely to be enrolled in or attend school, and even those who did attend experienced exclusion due to communication barriers and pervasive disability-related stigma. Rather than adapting teaching methods, teachers were reported to push children with disabilities out of mainstream classrooms.

In Bolivia, Aymara families often live in remote rural areas with limited infrastructure, including roads, schools, and internet access. Limited access to education and technology encourages children to view digital pathways as potential routes to opportunity and connection. At the same time, schools play an important empowering role and are often the first place families seek advice or support. There is widespread caution and distrust towards state services, shaped by historical marginalisation, discrimination, and previous negative experiences with authorities. Government institutions are often perceived as distant, unresponsive, or punitive rather than supportive. As a result, families tend to rely on schools or trusted community actors before approaching formal child protection or social services.

In the Netherlands, all children were enrolled in or attended school. Children seeking information about gender, sexuality, exploration of their identity and connection to supportive peers were particularly likely to use online platforms to do so. This was largely due to the limited availability of these supports in school environments. Although schools may lack a sense of community, they were the most common source of support. The majority of respondents (58%) felt they could get support from their school if they experienced or suspected online sexual exploitation. From these same participants however, only 30% were actually using their school to receive support, with most respondents receiving more support from parents, friends, and online safety tools. Despite the availability and awareness of school resources to support children, many children preferred other methods to safeguard themselves against online sexual exploitation.

Let's look at our friends, to see how their access to education shapes their experiences online.

Kantuta, enrolled in remote school (Bolivia): Kantuta lives in the Andes mountains far away from a public school. However, school is very important in her life, acting as an empowering role. Each day she walks to school along rough paths with few, if any roads. The weather sometimes makes the journey even more difficult. The school itself doesn't have any computers or reliable internet access. Kantuta uses the family shared mobile phone at home to explore the world outside of her small rural community.

Rafi, enrolled in an inclusive school (Bangladesh): Luckily, because Rafi comes from an upper-middle-class family, which is why he can access special education. Rafi's sister also has a disability, but unlike him, she never started school.
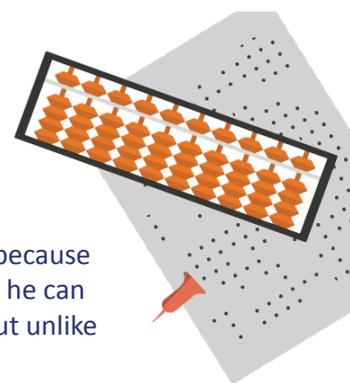
Sam, enrolled in school but lacking community (Netherlands): Sam lives in a small city close to their school. It's just a quick bike ride. For Sam, school has both a positive and a negative effect on them. Although school acts as a support system they do lack a sense of community with their other peers. The support is inconsistent as some of Sam's teachers show a lack of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community. Sam feels more at home in digital spaces while they are still figuring out how to find the same comfort in the offline world. When classes are over, Sam retreats into the online world. Whether chatting, creating, or just observing, the internet has become their favourite place to unwind and connect.

Definition of ability

Disability is recognised as an evolving concept, and persons with disabilities are recognized as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with environmental and social barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations, 2006). Various types of functional things that children with disabilities might encounter include problems in seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care and communication (Loeb et al., 2017).

How having a disability influences OCSE

Research consistently shows that children with disabilities face a substantially higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation than children without disabilities, with studies estimating that their risk is more than twice as high (Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2024). In online environments, this heightened vulnerability is shaped by a combination of individual, social and structural factors. Children with disabilities may rely more heavily on digital spaces for communication, learning and social connection, particularly when offline environments are inaccessible or exclusionary. At the same time, they may experience social isolation, difficulties in assessing risk or verifying others' intentions, and challenges related to understanding consent and maintaining boundaries, all of which can increase vulnerability to online grooming and exploitation (Lusky-Weisrose, 2024).

Disability also intersects with gender in ways that shape online risk. Boys with severe physical or sensory disabilities may experience reduced supervision due to gendered expectations around independence, while girls with disabilities may face restricted access to education and digital skills, limiting their ability to recognise or respond to online risks (Álvarez-Guerrero et al., 2024). Although digital spaces can provide important opportunities for inclusion and participation, increased accessibility can also expand exposure to harm when guidance, supervision and safety mechanisms are not accessible or tailored to children with different disabilities.

What our study found

Children with disabilities described the internet as both a space of opportunity and a space of risk. Many emphasised its importance for learning, communication and participation, particularly when offline environments were inaccessible or exclusionary. Overall, 69% of children with disabilities reported feeling somewhat safe online, while 8% felt somewhat unsafe and 23% felt very unsafe.

Experiences and risks differed by type of disability. Children with visual impairments (CwVI) relied heavily on digital tools for education and communication, often more so than their peers with full vision. However, their reliance on names, voice and text rather than visual cues made it harder to verify identities, increasing vulnerability to impersonation and unwanted contact. Children with hearing impairments (CwHI) often described spending long periods online, where communication felt easier and more accessible than offline interactions. At the same time, higher levels of isolation and low self-esteem reported by some CwHI emerged as risk factors for grooming and exploitation. Across disability groups, the internet carried strong symbolic value as a space of independence and inclusion. While this increased participation, it also expanded exposure to unsolicited contact and reduced opportunities for protective supervision.

Let's look at our friend, Rafi, to see how having a disability shapes his experiences online. We already met Rafi and learned a bit about him. Rafi has a visual impairment, and this influences his online experiences.

Rafi, visual impairment (Bangladesh): Rafi has a visual impairment, which can make moving around independently difficult and sometimes leaves him feeling isolated. Online spaces feel like a doorway to the world, allowing him to connect and participate on an equal footing with his peers. As a 14-year-old boy, his parents trust him and give him largely unrestricted access to the internet. However, because he cannot always see profile pictures clearly, Rafi relies on names and text to judge who he is talking to. This makes it easier for others to pretend to be someone they are not, increasing the risk that interactions can escalate before Rafi realises something is wrong.

Friend requests

Mansh Elik

Confirm   Delete

18
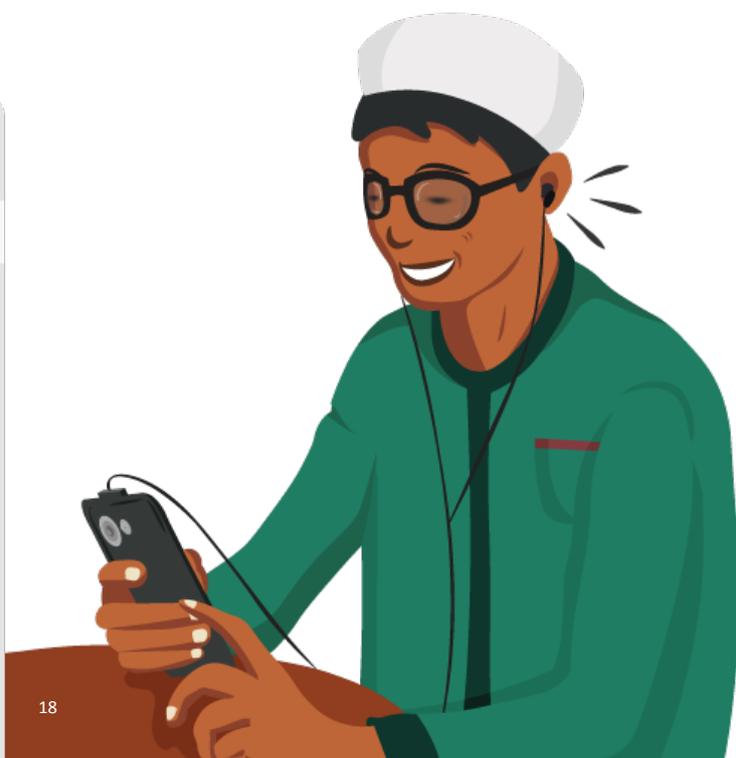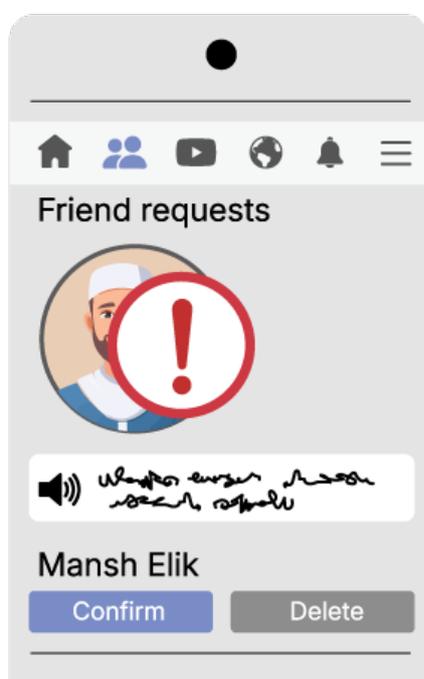
Definition of place of residency

Place of residence refers to the geographical, social, and infrastructural context in which a child lives. It shapes access to connectivity, education, services, community support, and protection systems, all of which influence how children engage with online spaces. Urban areas are typically characterised by higher connectivity, greater mobility, and increased exposure to digital environments, while rural areas often involve smaller, close-knit communities with more limited infrastructure and services (Belanche et al., 2021; Pateman, 2011). These differences affect not only children's exposure to online risks, but also the capacity of their environments to prevent, recognise, and respond to online sexual exploitation.

How place of residence influences OCSE

Place of residence shapes children's vulnerability to online sexual exploitation through differences in connectivity, supervision, digital literacy and access to protection. Research shows that urban children tend to face higher exposure to online risks due to constant connectivity, anonymity and reduced adult supervision, while children in rural or remote settings often have fewer opportunities to develop digital skills or access support and child protection services once they go online (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013). Studies further indicate that opportunities to prevent and respond to online sexual exploitation are often more limited in rural areas due to fewer resources for oversight, prevention and response (Vilks, 2019). In some contexts, place of residence also intersects with proximity to migration and trafficking routes, with research showing that children in economically marginalised areas may be recruited online into cross-border trafficking and exploitation linked to labour migration (UNODC, 2024).

What our study found

Across the three countries, place of residence influenced both children's exposure to online spaces and the availability of protection. In urban settings, children experienced high levels of connectivity and spent long periods online, often with limited adult supervision due to caregivers' work demands or assumptions of safety.

In rural Bolivian Aymara communities, children's internet access was limited, costly, and usually mediated through shared mobile phones. When children in these rural settings did go online, they often lacked digital skills, privacy, and trusted adults or services to turn to if something felt unsafe. Overall, the study shows that while urban contexts tended to increase exposure, rural contexts were marked by fewer opportunities for prevention and response once children were online.

Let's look at our friends to see how their place of residency shapes their experiences online.

Rafi, living in a busy urban city (Bangladesh): Rafi grew up in Dhaka, a sprawling city with almost 37 million residents. His parents came to the city for work. Here constant connectivity is part of daily life. Rafi spends long periods online while his parents put in long hours at their jobs. Urban life gives him access to information and connection and makes it possible for him to go to one of the few schools that accept CwVI, but also increases exposure to strangers and harmful content. With limited opportunities for adults to intervene early or provide guidance, Rafi navigates online risk alone.

Kantuta, living in a rural Indigenous community (Bolivia): Kantuta lives in a remote Aymara community in rural Bolivia, where connectivity and services are extremely limited. Mobile signal is weak and unreliable, and there is limited access to Wi-Fi in the community. The rural location also means that support services are far away. Gender-based violence and child protection services are located several hours from the community, making them difficult to reach in practice. This physical distance leaves Kantuta highly isolated: if something unsafe happens online, there are very few realistic options for seeking help or protection.

Sam, living in a small town (Netherlands): Sam lives in a well-connected town with early access to personal devices and high-speed internet. They often have WiFi access and getting online never concerns Sam- the online world is available 24/7. While this enables exploration, creativity, and connection, particularly around identity, it also means Sam spends substantial time online alone. Living outside a large city like Amsterdam, Sam has fewer visible examples of people with diverse gender identities and sexualities in everyday life. As a result, online communities become a primary source of belonging, information, and validation. This reliance increases the likelihood of sharing personal information with people they do not know well, alongside hesitancy to seek help if something goes wrong, especially when disclosure could risk misunderstanding or judgement offline.

Definition of religion

Religion refers to a system of belief and practice in which people direct their highest values and commitments toward powerful entities (Ferré, 1970). Religion can be expressed in various ways such as rituals, symbols and myths (Kirkland, 1976). Examples of religions are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism (Hackett et al., 2025).

How religion influences OCSE

Religion can shape how families and communities understand childhood, sexuality and appropriate behaviour, affecting how online risks are discussed. Research shows that in more conservative religious contexts, sexuality is often framed through moral norms emphasising abstinence, purity or avoidance, rather than open dialogue or skills-based guidance (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009). This can limit children's access to accurate information about relationships, consent and online risks.

Studies also suggest that strong religious norms can intensify stigma around sexual topics, particularly for children who feel they deviate from expected norms. This stigma may discourage children from asking questions, disclosing concerns or seeking help after negative online experiences (Li & Cohen, 2013). Research with adolescents has further shown that environments characterised by silence or shame around sexuality are associated with higher levels of secrecy and reliance on peers or online sources for information, which can increase vulnerability to manipulation and exploitation (Albury & Byron, 2016). Importantly, religion does not increase risk in itself. Rather, vulnerability emerges when religious norms intersect with limited communication, early digital access and a lack of trusted support, reducing children's capacity to recognise risk and seek protection.

What our study found

Across the studies, religion emerged as an important contextual factor shaping children's online experiences, particularly in relation to support, safety and help-seeking. In the Netherlands, children who identified as religious, especially Christian, often reported having fewer trusted peers with whom they could talk openly about personal or online experiences. Many described feeling socially isolated and less supported to stay safe online compared to non-religious children, despite often accessing online spaces at an earlier age. Discussions about sexuality and online risks were frequently described as taboo, limiting opportunities to ask questions or seek help.

Similar patterns emerged in Bangladesh, though shaped by a different religious and cultural context. Muslim caregivers often described sexuality as a sensitive or inappropriate topic for discussion with children, including in relation to online spaces. As a result, children reported turning to the internet to learn about sex and relationships without adult guidance. This silence around sexuality reduced opportunities for preventive conversations about online risks and left children less prepared to recognise or respond to sexualised content, pressure or exploitation.

Let's look at our friend, Rafi, to see how religion shapes his experiences online. We already met Rafi and learned a bit about him. Rafi is Muslim and this influences his online experiences.

Rafi, 16, Muslim (Bangladesh): One day, Rafi was curious about sexuality and searched online to understand different types of relationships. When his mother later discovered that he had seen a video of two boys kissing, she scolded him and warned him that "Allah will punish you."[1] This made Rafi feel guilty because his mother told him he should not be seeing this as a Muslim boy. After this, he was too afraid to ask questions or explore safely online.
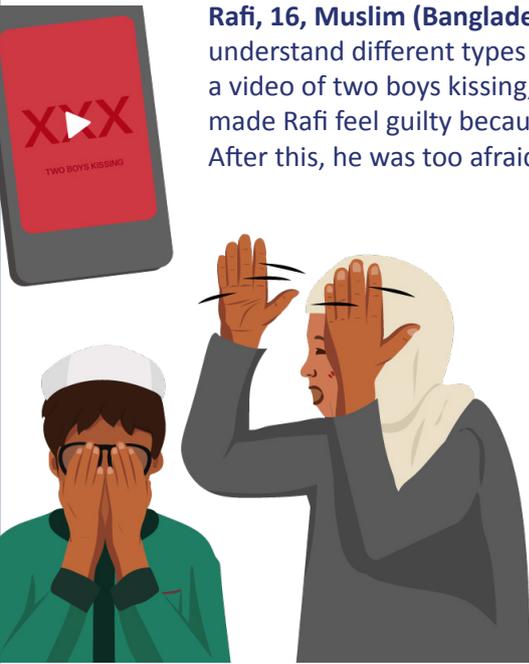
1. Mother of Bangladesh boy

Definition of socio-economic status

Socio-economic status (SES) refers to the social and economic conditions that shape a family's access to resources, opportunities, and support. It often includes income, type of employment, education level, and living conditions (Contoyannis & Jones, 2004). For children, SES strongly influences access to technology, digital skills, supervision, and privacy, factors that directly affect their online safety.

How SES influences OCSE

Global evidence shows that SES influences children's exposure to both digital opportunities and online risks. Lower-income households often have limited connectivity, shared devices, and reduced digital literacy, which heightens vulnerability online (Livingstone et al., 2015). Studies also show that wealthier families tend to provide earlier access to personal devices but may underestimate the need for online safety guidance or supervision. SES, therefore, shapes both types of exposure and types of protection, aligning closely with the patterns observed in our study.

What our study found

In Bolivia, participants came from lower-income Aymara Indigenous families who described sharing devices with several relatives and having very little privacy when they went online. Many accessed the internet through basic phones, and poor connectivity further restricted what they could do. Limited parental support, either because parents worked long hours or because they did not speak Spanish and could not navigate online platforms, made it harder for children to recognise grooming or respond safely to unwanted contact.

In Bangladesh, most participants came from working-class households and were recruited through schools, which already indicates that they were socio-economically better off than many children with disabilities who are excluded from education. This relative advantage meant greater access to digital devices and the ability to afford some forms of disability-related support. While increased access created opportunities to learn and connect, it also resulted in long periods spent online without supervision, as parents were often working outside the home.

In the Netherlands, children generally lived in high-income households and often had their own devices from an early age and unlimited access to the internet. This gave them considerable independence online, but it also meant they explored digital spaces largely on their own, with less frequent involvement or guidance from adults.

**Let's look at our friends, to see how their socio-economic status shapes their experiences online.**

Kantuta, low-income indigenous family (Bolivia): Kantuta comes from a low-income Indigenous family in Bolivia whose livelihood is largely based on traditional, land-based activities. Her parents work long days to sustain the household, and Kantuta often helps with domestic and livelihood tasks, leaving little time or guidance when she goes online. Limited household resources mean shared devices, minimal privacy, and very restricted spending on data, which shapes how cautiously and intermittently she can use digital spaces. Many Indigenous girls in the study described similar conditions, where poverty, crowded living arrangements, and limited adult support increased isolation online and made promises of a "better life" more persuasive, heightening risks of manipulation, recruitment, or trafficking.

Rafi, middle-class urban family (Bangladesh): Rafi lives in a working-class urban household in Dhaka. His family owns a shared smartphone that he uses whenever his father is out driving or his mother is working on tailoring orders. As a boy in a middle-income but time-poor household, Rafi often spends long stretches online without adult supervision. In our study, children in similar economic situations described using the internet extensively while their parents worked long hours, with limited guidance on recognising unsafe interactions.

Sam, higher-income family (Netherlands): Sam comes from a higher-income family in the Netherlands, which has meant early access to personal devices, unlimited internet, and private online spaces. This level of material security gives Sam a high degree of digital independence, often without close adult oversight, as parents are busy and assume safety.
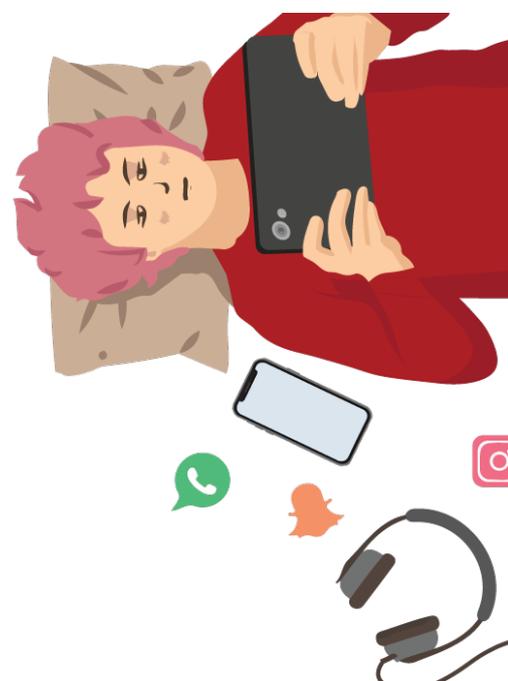
How Intersecting Identities Shape Power and Children's Capacity to Stay Safe Online

Children's risk of online sexual exploitation is shaped by the intersection of multiple identities and their context. Characteristics such as gender, disability, age, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic position, and place of residence do not act separately or simply add up. Instead, they combine to shape children's access to online spaces, their control within them, and their ability to respond safely when something feels wrong. Intersectional research shows that these overlapping characteristics produce different experiences of power, risk, and protection that cannot be understood by examining identity factors in isolation (Crenshaw, 1991; Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017).

These intersections affect not only children's exposure to online environments, but also their power within them. Power here refers to a child's ability to make choices, set boundaries, be believed, and access support without fear of punishment, stigma, or exclusion. For example, children who rely on shared devices, depend on adults for internet access, or live in contexts shaped by strong gender norms, ableism, or heteronormativity often have limited control over their online lives. Their digital activities may be closely monitored, misinterpreted, or judged through moral or social lenses, which can restrict their ability to explore, seek help, or speak openly when something feels unsafe. As a result, the same online interaction can carry very different risks depending on how a child's identities intersect within their social and cultural context (Alper et al., 2018).

To make these power differences more tangible, the idea of a "battery" is helpful. The battery represents a child's power to prevent, interrupt, and respond to online sexual exploitation (Terre des Hommes Netherlands, 2023). This power is charged or drained by a child's access to resources and support, including access to devices, education, money, and privacy; the presence of trusted caregivers, peers, or teachers who are able and willing to help; a child's confidence and sense of agency; and whether schools and services are available, responsive, and safe to approach.

The experiences of Rafi, Kantuta, and Sam show how intersecting identities shape how full or depleted this battery is in the context of children's lived realities.

Rafi's power to stay safe online is shaped by both empowering and vulnerable intersections. On the charging side, his access to technology and schooling enables connection and learning. Being a boy living in a context where boys are often given more online freedom grants him a degree of social acceptance for engaging in online activities. This is in stark contrast to the freedom his sister is given, as she needs to help more in the household. However, his battery is drained by the intersection of a disability and limited adult digital guidance, which significantly reduces his ability to assess risks and seek informed support. Furthermore, his late entry into social media and his family's limited experience with online platforms mean he has minimal knowledge and support to navigate the full scope of online risks.

Kantuta starts with a lower power battery due to systemic and contextual factors. While her connection to her family and community in her Indigenous context could be a source of resilience and protection, this is countered by multiple vulnerabilities. Her Indigenous identity, rural location, and economic constraints restrict her connectivity, limit her privacy, and can lead to language barriers, leaving her with fewer secure and accessible options to respond if harm occurs. Additionally, her parents' belief that delaying internet use is protective meant she entered online spaces with little understanding of how to recognise or seek support for risks. Cultural norms and gender expectations in her community restrict open discussion about sexuality, which further contributes to her entering the online space without helpful information.

Sam benefits from a high-connectivity environment, with widespread internet access in the Netherlands and the availability of formal services providing a strong foundation for safety and support and initially charging their battery. However, the intersection of their sexuality and gender identity with inconsistent support at school makes the act of seeking adult help risky due to potential harassment, stigma, or fear of being 'outed.' This fear drains their power to respond effectively. Compounding this, the reduction in parental supervision as they got older, which was not matched by ongoing conversations about risk, could contribute to more exposure to potential harm.

In each case, the same online space offers very different levels of protection, depending on how identities and context shape children's power to act.

Thinking in terms of batteries also challenges the assumption that the internet automatically levels the playing field. While digital spaces can offer connection, identity exploration, and opportunity, they can also reproduce and intensify existing inequalities. Greater access can increase exposure, while limited access can reduce opportunities to build skills and support pathways. Whether online spaces become protective or harmful depends on how children's intersecting identities interact with the safety of their homes, schools, communities, and systems of support.

Seen through this lens, intersectionality shifts the focus away from "high-risk" children towards unequal distributions of power and protection. Some children have far less power available to them when harm occurs, not because of who they are, but because of how their identities intersect with the systems around them. Strengthening online safety therefore requires reinforcing the environments and systems that support children, alongside individual skills, so that all children can respond safely when risks arise.

Conclusion

Conclusion

This report shows that online child sexual exploitation cannot be understood through single identity factors. Children's experiences of risk and protection are shaped by how multiple aspects of identity and context intersect in their everyday lives. Age, gender, schooling, disability, place of residency, access to support and more factors combine in ways that influence children's power to stay safe online, often in complex and sometimes contradictory ways.

At the same time, this analysis does not capture all the factors that shape children's online experiences. Important dimensions such as language, mental health, race, body size, and other forms of marginalisation also affect how children access digital spaces, how they are treated by others, and how safely they can seek help. These factors were not always explored in depth in the boxes, but they remain critical for understanding children's lived realities.

Using an intersectional lens is not about singling out or labelling children based on their identities. It is about understanding how different combinations of circumstances shape the ways children experience risk and protection in their everyday lives. This approach shifts attention away from simplified assumptions about who is "at risk" and towards the roles that relationships, environments, and systems play in shaping children's ability to stay safe. Without this understanding, some children's experiences and needs remain unseen. When prevention and response efforts reflect children's diverse realities and ensure that no one is left behind, inclusion itself becomes a form of protection.

Reference List

Reference List

Adamczyk, A., & Pitt, C. (2009). Shaping attitudes about homosexuality: The role of religion and cultural context. Social Science Research, 38(2), 338-351.

Albury, K., & Byron, P. (2016). Safe on my phone? Same-sex attracted young people's negotiations of intimacy, visibility, and risk on digital hook-up apps. Social Media+ Society, 2(4), 2056305116672887.

Alper, M., Katz, V. S., & Clark, L. S. (2018). Researching children, intersectionality, and diversity in the digital age. In Children, Adolescents, and Media (pp. 129-136). Routledge.

Álvarez-Guerrero, G., Fry, D., Lu, M., & Gaitis, K. K. (2024). Online child exploitation and abuse of children and adolescent with disabilities: A systematic review. Disabilities, 4(2), 264-276. https://doi.org/10.3390/disabilities4020017

Awan, F., & Gauntlett, D. (2013). Remote living: Exploring online (and offline) experiences of young people living in rural areas. European journal of cultural studies, 16(1), 3-23.

Baumann, T. (2004). Defining ethnicity. The SAA archaeological record, 4(4), 12-14.

Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., & Rubio, M. Á. (2021). Local place identity: A comparison between residents of rural and urban communities. Journal of Rural Studies, 82, 242-252. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.01.003

Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2018). Social media mob: Being Indigenous online.

Champion, K. E., Birrell, L., Smout, S., Teesson, M., & Slade, T. (2025). Debate: Social media in children and young people–time for a ban? Beyond the ban– empowering parents and schools to keep adolescents safe on social media. Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 30(4), 411-413.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Craig, S. L., & McInroy, L. (2014). You can form a part of yourself online: The influence of new media on identity development and coming out for LGBTQ youth. Journal of gay & lesbian mental health, 18(1), 95-109.

Cronesberry, K., & Ward, L. (2025). Over 300 million children a year are victims of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. https://www.childlight.org/newsroom/over-300-million-children-a-year-are-victims-of-online-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.

Contoyannis, P., & Jones, A. M. (2004). Socio-economic status, health and lifestyle. Journal of health economics, 23(5), 965-995. ECPAT International. (2016). Terminology guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. ECPAT International. European Commission (2024). Lagging digital literacy among 14-year-olds across the EU, study finds. https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/lagging-digital-literacy-among-14-year-olds-across-the-eu-study-finds

Feeny, E., & Crivello, G. (2015, May). How gender shapes adolescence: Diverging paths and opportunities (Young Lives Policy Brief 22). Young Lives.

Ferré, F. (1970). The Definition of Religion. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 38(1), 3–16. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1461697

Hackett, C., Stonawski, M., Tong, Y., Kramer, S., Shi, A., & Fahmy, D. (2025). How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020. Pew Research Center. https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11

Intahchomphoo, C. (2018). Indigenous peoples, social media, and the digital divide: A systematic literature review. American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 42(4), 85-111.

Jouriles, E. N., Sitton, M. J., Chan, R., Reedy, M., Rosenfield, D., & McDonald, R. (2025). Caregiver emotional support and adolescent trauma symptoms after sexual abuse: Adolescent age matters. Child abuse & neglect, 17. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107801

Kirkland, R. (1976). Defining "religion".

Konstantoni, K., & Emejulu, A. (2017). When intersectionality met childhood studies: The dilemmas of a travelling concept. Children's Geographies, 15(1), 6-22.

Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., Dreier, M., Chaudron, S., & Lagae, K. (2015). How parents of young children manage digital devices at home: The role of income, education and parental style.

Livingstone, S., & Smith, P. K. (2014). Annual research review: Harms experienced by child users of online and mobile technologies: The nature, prevalence and management of sexual and aggressive risks in the digital age. Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, 55(6), 635-654.

Li, Y. J., & Cohen, A. B. (2013). Religion, sexuality, and family. In Religion, personality, and social behavior (pp. 213-229). Psychology Press.

Livingstone, S., Davidson, J., Bryce, J., Batool, S., Haughton, C., & Nandi, A. (2017). Children's online activities, risks and safety: a literature review by the UKCCIS evidence group.

Lloyd, J. (2025). The education experiences of young people experiencing child criminal and sexual exploitation. British Educational Research Journal, 51, 1201–1221. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4116

Loeb, M., Cappa, C., Crialesi, R., De Palma, E., Battisti, A., Nviiri, H., Mahmood, S., & Ahmed, S. (2017). UNICEF/ Washington Group on Disability Statistics Module on Child Functioning 1. Washington Group on Disability Statistics.

Lusky-Weisrose, E., Klebano, B., Friedman-Hauser, G., Ativan, I., & Katz, C. (2024). Online sexual abuse of children with disabilities: Analyzing reports of social workers' case files in Israel. Child abuse & neglect, 154. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106869

Ministerio de Educación. (2022). Informe nacional sobre acceso y uso de tecnologías digitales en Bolivia. La Paz: Gobierno Plurinacional de Bolivia.

Moynihan, M., Mitchell, K., Pitcher, C., Havaei, F., Ferguson, M., & Saewyc, E. (2018). A systematic review of the state of the literature on sexually exploited boys internationally. Child Abuse & Neglect, 76, 440-451.

Patemen, T. (2011). Rural and urban areas: Comparing lives using rural/urban classifications. Reg Trends, 43, 11-86. https://doi.org/10.1057/rt.2011.2

Richmond, W. K. (1975). Education and schooling (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429440472

Terre des Hommes Netherlands. (2023). The Place of Intersection. The Hague: Terre des Hommes Netherlands. https://int.terredeshommes.nl/uploads/0f868ee3-1710243264-place-of-intersection-report-1.pdf

Thorat, A. (2010). Ethnicity, caste and religion: Implications for poverty outcomes. Economic and Political Weekly, 47-53.

UNESCO. (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach (Rev. ed.). United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

United Nations. (2006). Conventions on the rights of persons with disabilities. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities

United Nations. (2009). State of the world's indigenous peoples. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). Ending online child sexual exploitation and abuse: Lessons learned and promising practices in low- and middle-income countries. UNICEF.

United Nations Office on Drugs. (2024). Global report on trafficking in persons 2024. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Vilks, A. (2019). Cybercrime and sexual exploitation of children in e-environment in the context of strengthening urban and rural Security. SHS Web Conferences, 68. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196801010

Wells, M., & Mitchel, K. J. (2013). Patterns of internet use and risk of online victimization for youth with and without disabilities. The Journal of Special Education, 48(3), 204-213. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466913479141

Whittle, H., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Beech, A., & Collings, G. (2013). A review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming. Aggression and Violent Behavior, 18(1), 135-146. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.11.008

World Health Organization. (2023). Gender and health. https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1

VOICE IDENTITY project 2026

Report 4: Intersectionality and Online Sexual Exploitation of Children

Terre des Hommes Netherlands

Down to Zero
Fighting sexual exploitation of children