Terre des Hommes Netherlands

SCROL
Safety for Children and their Rights OnLine

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

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

July 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACRONYMS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CBO	Community-based Organisation
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CYP	Children and Young People
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution and Trafficking
FGD(s)	Focus Group Discussions
IWF	Internet Watch Foundation
KII(s)	Key Informant Interviews
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or Questioning), and others
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (or Questioning), Intersex, Asexual, and others)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OCSE	Online Child Sexual Exploitation
PSG(s)	Parent Support Group
SCROL	Safety for Children and their Rights Online
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
TdH NL	Terre des Hommes Netherlands
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation

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OVERVIEW

1.1. Background

Since its inception, the internet has provided children and young people with new opportunities for connection, learning, and play. It has also introduced serious risks, especially related to online child sexual exploitation (OCSE). From gaming platforms to social media, children are increasingly exposed to harmful content, grooming, and sexual abuse.

To address these risks, Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) launched the Safety for Children and their Rights OnLine (SCROL) programme in 2022. The programme operates in communities across Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines and aims to build safer digital environments for children and to strengthen the role of parents and caregivers in OCSE prevention and response.

1.2 Objective

This qualitative, strengths-based study sought to understand how caregivers can protect children from OCSE and what support they need. The goal was to generate evidence for a more structured, strategic approach to caregiver engagement in SCROL programme countries.

1.3. Methodology

The research included:

A **review of global and national literature** on parenting and OCSE

Focus group discussions and key informant interviews with children and young people (CYP), caregivers, community members, and CSO/NGO actors

Fieldwork from October 2024 to January 2025 across the four countries
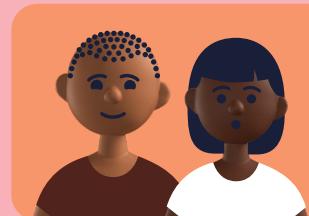
A total of
449
respondents participated in the study.

The data collection process was facilitated and supported by **Youth Advisory Boards** in each of the participating countries.

1.4 KEY FINDINGS

1. Children are **active online**, gaining **learning and connection**, but face **cyberbullying, grooming, and exploitation**.

2. Offline factors like **poverty, gender norms, and taboos** increase risks.

3. A **digital divide** leaves caregivers **lacking skills, confidence, and tools**, while fathers are less involved and boys' risks overlooked.

4. **Support programmes are scarce**, laws are weak, and reporting systems inconsistent.

5. **Children often self-protect** but fear blame, avoiding adults for help.

The findings offer rich insights into family dynamics, caregiver needs, and systemic influences on OCSE prevention and response. Children across all four countries—including those in rural areas, with disabilities, or of diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC)—are active digital users. They access the internet for learning, entertainment, and connection but are also exposed to online risks like cyberbullying, inappropriate content, grooming, and sexual exploitation.

These risks do not occur in isolation. Instead, they are shaped by children's offline realities such as poverty, gender norms, family separation, and cultural taboos around sexuality. A core challenge is the intergenerational digital divide: children often feel more confident online than their parents. This contributes to inconsistent perceptions of risk and safety and affects families' ability to:

- Identify the actual benefits and dangers of online activities
- Use safety tools like privacy settings and content filters effectively
- Balance independence with protection
- Discuss sensitive topics like OCSE, gender, and sexuality
- Report and respond to incidents of harm

Parents and caregivers want to keep children safe but often lack the knowledge, skills, or confidence to navigate digital risks. This challenge is increased for caregivers in lower-income households, remote areas, or those with limited education or digital familiarity.

Social and gender norms also influence responses. Fathers, potentially more digitally literate, are less involved in caregiving. Boys' vulnerabilities to OCSE are frequently overlooked, while caregivers of neurodiverse children or CYP who identify as LGBTQ+ report feeling especially isolated.

Community actors and NGOs play a vital role in training parents, delivering awareness initiatives, and supporting first-line responses. However, programming for caregivers remains limited. Few interventions target fathers, address behaviour change, or provide guidance on trauma-informed support and reporting systems. Structural gaps—such as weak OCSE laws and inconsistent reporting mechanisms—further hinder parents' ability to act.

Children, meanwhile, often take on the burden of self-protection. Many report using blocking tools or avoiding risky spaces but do not turn to adults due to fear of blame or misunderstanding. They want open, respectful conversations.

1.5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

Preventing and responding to OCSE requires coordinated action across all levels of society. Strong, open communication is not a standalone intervention. It is a thread that connects every level of OCSE prevention and response. Based on the study's findings, this report recommends the following:

1 **Strengthen positive parenting for the digital age**

Develop inclusive programmes that improve caregivers' digital literacy, build trust-based communication, and equip parents to recognise, respond to, and report OCSE. Engage fathers and caregivers of marginalised CYP, in particular, and promote peer support groups.

2 **Foster community-led support systems**

Mobilise trusted leaders, teachers, and social workers to reduce stigma, support family engagement, and provide culturally relevant tools and safe spaces for parent learning.

3 **Scale up NGO-led interventions**

Support NGOs to deliver behaviour-change programming, run inclusive awareness campaigns, and collaborate with survivor advocates and local influencers.

4 **Leverage the role of technology providers**

Demand tech platforms provide caregiver-facing tools such as parental controls, alert systems, and accessible OCSE resources that are developed in partnership with NGOs and governments.

5 **Strengthen legal and policy frameworks**

Advocate with governments to develop and enforce OCSE laws, regulate platforms, respond to emerging threats (e.g. sexual extortion, AI misuse), and fund accessible, gender-responsive support systems and reporting mechanisms.

6 **Expand the evidence base**

Prioritise research with grandparents, siblings, non-parent carers, and families from rural, low-income, or marginalised communities, including those caring for children with disabilities or of diverse SOGIESC.

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INTRODUCTION

2.1 About the SCROL Programme

The **Safety for Children and their Rights Online (SCROL) Programme** is implemented under the Thematic Programme - Sexual Exploitation of Children (SEC). It has been designed and implemented by TdH NL and has been running since 2022. The overall strategic objectives of the programme are to ensure children:

- Are protected from Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) in a safe family and community environment
- Are effectively protected by the legal system
- Have their agency respected by laws, policies, societal norms, and practices

The SCROL programme operates in the Philippines, Cambodia, Nepal, and Kenya, where Terre des Hommes Country Offices work with seven local partners to address online child sexual exploitation (OCSE).

2.2. The online landscape: opportunities and risks

Since its inception in 1989 as the *"World Wide Web,"* the internet has facilitated many positive opportunities for children and young people (CYP) around the world in the areas of learning, self-expression, online socialisation, and belonging (ECPAT International et al., 2024).
However, online spaces also pose unique risks to CYP globally which include:

- Cyberbullying (UNICEF, 2017)
- Grooming (Internet Watch Foundation, 2023)
- Self- or AI-generated sexual materials (UNICEF, 2017)
- Live-streamed child sexual abuse material (UNICEF, 2017)
- Financial sexual extortion (ECPAT International et al., 2024)

These abuses can be perpetrated by families, community members, or strangers around the world (UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2020) and violate children's right to protection from sexual abuse and exploitation. Technologies like the 'Dark Web' and non-traceable payment methods can make it difficult for law enforcement teams to trace perpetrators (UNICEF, 2017).

2.3. THE SCALE OF OCSE

The scale of the problem cannot be ignored:

In 2022, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) detected **child sexual abuse materials** in more than

1/4 of a million web pages.

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Potentially **harmful sexual interactions** occur on such popular social media platforms as **Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube** (UNICEF, 2021a; Down to Zero Alliance, 2022).

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The youngest identified **OCSE victim** in the Philippines was only **6 months old** (UNICEF Philippines, 2020).

95% of 12-17 year old Filipino children

are internet users; **20%** said that they had **experienced some form of online sexual exploitation and abuse** in 2021
(ECPAT et al., 2022c).

More than 1 in 10 Cambodian children

between the ages of 12 and 17 have experienced **some form of online sexual exploitation and abuse**
(ECPAT et al., 2022a).

In Kenya, 67% of children aged 12-17

use the internet, while **48% of their caregivers have never been online**, leaving many children without adult guidance and increasing their vulnerability to online abuse
(ECPAT et al., 2021).

2.4. The communication gap between CYP and caregivers

The VOICE research conducted by the Down to Zero Alliance showed that CYP often rely on their own instincts to navigate the digital world (ECPAT International et al., 2024). They struggle to talk to their caregivers about their online activity and risks and tend to filter what they tell their caregivers in fear of negative consequences.

Although CYP seek autonomy and feel empowered in navigating online spaces, they generally lack the guidance, knowledge, and tools to do so safely (ECPAT International et al., 2024). Parents and caregivers have insufficient knowledge and understanding of OCSE to fill in the gaps. CYP often have a higher digital literacy than parents, which leads many to distrust their parents' ability to help them navigate online spaces.

While parents expressed attitudes that were favourable to reporting potential cases and assisting victims, only a negligible proportion declared they took specific actions over the past year such as:

- Discussing OCSE with their children
- Checking privacy settings
- Reporting potential cases of exploitation (de Melo, 2024)

The evident need for increased investment in support services, knowledge, and skills on OCSE prevention among parents, communities, and CYP (ECPAT International et al., 2024) led to this multi-country research project.

2.5. Why this research was conducted

The overall objective of *"Understanding Parents and Caregivers Roles in Preventing and Responding to Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE)"* is to create an evidence base for TdH NL with the aim of developing a systematic and structured approach to working with parents and caregivers in the SCROL target countries: Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines.

The specific research objectives were to:

- Assess parents' and caregivers' capacity and engagement in addressing OCSE
- Develop an understanding of how parenting and care norms and practices influence CYP's risk of OCSE
- Understand what services, programmes, and supports are available to parents and caregivers in relation to child protection generally and OCSE in particular

The research findings indicate that children's online experience is highly individualised according to personal and family characteristics, social norms, and national priorities. Supporting children's online safety therefore requires the commitment, collaboration, and capacity of a variety of stakeholders.

2.6. A note on terminology

The terms "*parent*" and "*caregiver*" are used interchangeably in this report and refer to adults who have a primary role in caring for children who may or may not be their biological relatives. "*Parenting*" refers to the behaviours and practices of caregivers in supporting the growth and development of the children and young people for whom they care.

METHODOLOGY

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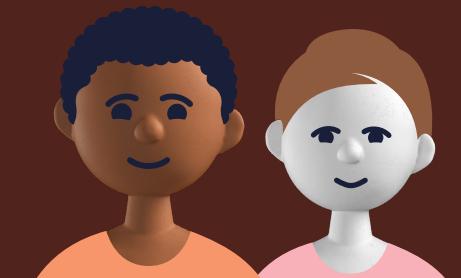
This report synthesises learning from:

- A **review of literature and documents** on parenting programmes both globally and in Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines
- **Primary research** conducted within those four countries
- A **contextual analysis** of cultural, social, and economic factors that influence parenting practices
- An **overview of how online harm is understood, experienced, and managed** by caregivers, children and young people (CYP), community members, and NGO professionals

3.1. An ethical, strengths-based, and family-centered approach

The research methodology incorporated a strengths-based and family-centered approach designed to identify the assets of parents and caregivers. Specific areas of interest included:

- CYP's and parents' personal capacity and social support networks

- CYP's relationships with their parents and caregivers
- The existence of and potential for parent support programmes and community support measures that prevent and respond to OCSE

The research was guided by comprehensive ethical and child safeguarding protocols and was conducted in accordance with:

- TdH NL's Integrity framework (Code of conduct, Safeguarding Policy, and Speak Up! Manual)
- UNICEF's Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis (2021b)

The internet is increasingly used by younger children. Therefore, this research included the participation of children as young as 9-12 years to capture and understand their online activity and their understanding of online risks.

The well-being of CYP has been an important consideration throughout the research process and has been supported by:

- Prioritising their well-being
- Using age-appropriate participatory activities for data collection
- Receiving appropriate consent from parents and caregivers
- Respecting the child's assent and ability to withdraw at any time
- Developing and contextualising a detailed safeguarding risk assessment and management plan applicable to relevant target areas in each study country
- Training national research teams on safeguarding
- Facilitating a complaint mechanism, with relevant follow-up and referrals, through the TdH NL Country Office's Integrity and Safeguarding Focal Points

3.2. A secondary literature review

The literature review was primarily guided by the following research question:

What works to facilitate the behaviour change of parents and caregivers in the prevention of OCSE at the family and community level?

The documentation set included international, regional, and national secondary research on parenting and parenting support programmes to prevent offline/online child sexual exploitation. The desk-based literature review used the Google Scholar search engine and the following search parameters:

- *"Parents/caregivers positive parenting programmes"*
- *"Supporting parents to prevent Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)"*
- *"Supporting parents to safeguard their children from Online Child Sexual Exploitation' (OCSE)"*

The search process also scanned for evidence of existing positive parenting interventions that focus on general child protection, violence prevention, and prevention of (offline) CSE and OCSE.Key resources included:

- TdH NL SCROL research reports
- Progress reports
- Country context information from Country Baseline Reports
- Reports on meetings and workshops

3.3. Qualitative primary research

The primary research was qualitative in nature and allowed research teams in the four focal countries to capture trends and gain understanding of the current capacity of parents and caregivers to prevent and respond to OCSE in different contexts and situations. The research tools were developed by the research lead and adapted for local languages and cultural contexts to capture the views and experiences of diverse stakeholders.

Data collection took place during the period of **October 2024 to January 2025** and aimed to be inclusive, participatory, trauma-informed, and unlikely to cause harm to participants. The methodology and tools for data collection were designed with equity in mind and considered intersecting factors such as:

- Gender
- Sexual identity and sexual expression
- Class
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Ability

The country research teams gathered qualitative data using semi-structured questionnaires and the following data collection methods:

1 **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with parents and caregivers** (sometimes in same-sex groups to respect the sensitive issue of OCSE and to ensure that gendered power dynamics did not inhibit the active participation of women).

2 **Participatory Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with CYP** (separated into four age groups: 9-12 years, 13-15 years, 16-17 years, and 18-24 years). Separate and mixed sessions were held as needed to ensure that participants could engage freely and share their perspectives without hesitation.

3 **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with community members and local/ national NGOs and CSOs** (qualitative, semi-structured interviews).

4 **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with vulnerable and marginalised groups**. (Vulnerable groups that were targeted include CYP who identify as LGBTQ+, live with intellectual disabilities, or have experienced OCSE and their parent).

The country research teams used various sampling techniques, including purposive and snowball sampling techniques, to identify and engage participants. The precise criteria for the selection of participants and site locations were decided by the national research teams in collaboration with the TdH NL Country Offices. The range of stakeholders who participated included:

- **Parents and caregivers**, including fathers, grandparents, and alternative caregivers/ guardians
- **Children and young people** aged 9-24 years, including those from marginalised groups
- **Community members**, including community and faith-based leaders, teachers, social workers, and child protection case managers
- **NGO representatives** with familiarity of the services and support available to parents and caregivers at local and/or national level

The data collection process was facilitated and supported by Youth Advisory Boards in each of the participating countries.

In total, **449 respondents** participated in the research. See Figure 1 below for a breakdown of participants by country and data collection approach.

Figure 1: Total respondents per country

Country	FGD (51 total)	KIIs (82 total)	Total Respondents
Cambodia	Parents/caregivers (5) CYP (10)	Parents/caregivers (6) CYP (6) Community/NGO (10)	116
Kenya	Parents/caregivers (5) CYP (6)	Parents/caregivers (13) Community/NGO (9)	111
Nepal	Parents/caregivers (5) CYP (6) Community (1)	Parents/caregivers (6) CYP (6) NGO (4)	112
Philippines	Parents/caregivers (5) CYP (8)	Parents/caregivers (6) CYP (6) Community/NGO (10)	110

All field research was conducted in local languages by national research teams who are familiar with the cultural context. National researchers completed weekly field diaries so that the research lead could track progress and provide support where necessary. The country research teams used qualitative data analysis software (mixture of Excel and Atlas).

Coding categories were developed around the research questions, and sub-questions (probes) were presented in the list research toolkit. The national research teams produced a Country Report, coding template, and analysis review and captured quotes that fed into this multi-country research study report.

STUDY CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS

Qualitative only
No quantitative data on scale or trends

Urban focus
Limited rural representation

Delays
Ethics review, clearance, translations

Kenya
No OCSE recommendations for sexual minorities

Caregiver gaps
Limited data from fathers, siblings, grandparents

Sample bias
Some groups in OCSE prevention programmes

Marginalised groups
Low participation due to stigma/fear

Global gaps
Few positive parenting programs on OCSE

Assumption risks
Families seen as protective, but some perpetrators

Starting point
Not fully representative or in-depth

3.4. Limitations of the research

The research study faced the following challenges and limitations:

- The study was entirely qualitative in nature and did not incorporate quantitative data, such as figures and statistics. This limits the ability to contribute to the knowledge base on the magnitude, trends, and patterns of OCSE in the study countries.
- The research was largely reflective of urban and semi-urban settings, which limits the generalizability of its findings, especially to rural areas.
- There were some time delays in the ethical review, clearance from the Research Ethics Committees, and translation of the research data.
- In Kenya, the research study faced some difficulty with the ethical clearance process with regards to the effect of OCSE on sexual minorities. Therefore, there are no recommendations formulated specifically for this group in Kenya.
- The data collection process was structured into two phases: the pre-holiday phase and the post-holiday phase.

- Limited interaction with male caregivers, siblings, grandparents, and other caregivers led to gaps in data and analysis related to these groups.
- In some areas, research focused on groups who had benefited from OCSE prevention programmes, which may not reflect the broader population.
- Research teams were only able to engage a limited number of marginalised groups; those stakeholders were generally reluctant to participate in the research due to discomfort, fear of stigma, or emotional distress.
- The global literature has significant gaps around positive parenting programmes that specifically seek to prevent OCSE.
- This study assumes that the family and immediate environment plays a protective role against OCSE. However, KIIs shared instances where family members perpetrated OCSE for financial gain.

This study is best understood as a starting point for TdH NL to develop a systematic and structured approach to working with parents and caregivers on OCSE. It cannot claim to be representative of the experiences of all parents and caregivers and CYP in the four study countries, nor can it provide in-depth analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

4.1. The prologue: what to know before reading

Globally, there remains a significant gap in programmes, services, and initiatives aimed at supporting parents and caregivers to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly online. Existing evidence is limited by several factors:

- It primarily derives from high-income contexts (UNICEF, 2021a).
- Most research and programming focus on offline abuse rather than the evolving risks of online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) (UNICEF, 2021a).
- The evidence base is relatively new, and most studies are small in scale (Scott & McNeish, 2017).
- Many programmes measure changes in knowledge or attitudes rather than actual behavioural outcomes in parents and children (UNICEF East Asia and Pacific, 2020).
- Evidence-informed theories of change remain underdeveloped across many initiatives.
- Participation and retention rates in parenting programmes tend to be low, particularly in resource-constrained settings.
- Few programmes have been fully evaluated to assess impact, identify gaps, or highlight opportunities for improvement.
- As a result, there is limited robust evidence to conclusively guide future OCSE prevention programming that delivers meaningful and sustained results.

Despite these limitations, global evidence demonstrates that **parenting support programmes**, particularly those that promote **positive parenting approaches**, can:

Equip and empower caregivers to improve parenting practices (UNICEF ECARO, 2018)

Enhance adolescent well-being and development (UNICEF ECARO, 2018)

Reduce instances of child sexual exploitation (CSE) (ENDCAN, 2022)

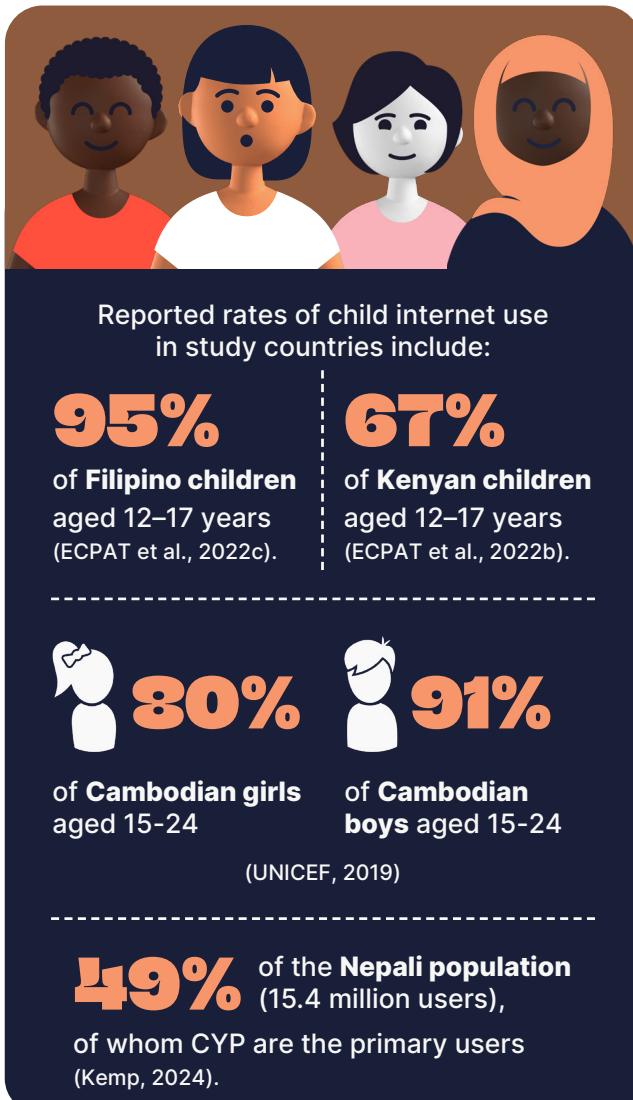Help **protect children** from violence, abuse, and neglect (ENDCAN, 2022)

Emerging trends suggest that the core content of evidence-based parenting programmes designed for violence prevention and offline child sexual abuse apply to the online environment and are adaptable across diverse cultural, social, and economic contexts (UNICEF, 2020).

4.2. The setting: children and the digital world

4.2.1. Increased exposure to online content

The vast majority of children spend significant time online for school and/or recreation. This includes children of diverse SOGIESC, those with disabilities, and those who are out of school or in rural areas.

Reported rates of child internet use in study countries include:

95% of **Filipino children** aged 12–17 years (ECPAT et al., 2022c).

67% of **Kenyan children** aged 12–17 years (ECPAT et al., 2022b).

80% of **Cambodian girls** aged 15-24

91% of **Cambodian boys** aged 15-24

(UNICEF, 2019)

49% of the **Nepali population** (15.4 million users), of whom CYP are the primary users (Kemp, 2024).

Findings highlight a significant increase in internet usage by CYP since COVID-19, a trend that has persisted post-pandemic. Many admitted to spending two to three hours during the day and three to four hours at night online. One Cambodian adolescent observed:

> "I think it has increased since before COVID-19, when we studied at school... Sometimes, we used the phone for something else during online class."
> - Adolescent, FGD, Cambodia

This surge in internet usage has heightened the risks of OCSE as more children engage with digital platforms for longer durations.

4.2.2. Diverse access to digital devices

Children's access to personal digital devices varies. Some CYP have their own devices that they use to access the internet. A 19-year-old young person with autism in Nepal, for example, owned a mobile phone that he used on platforms like TikTok and YouTube.

Others share devices with parents or other family members. Younger children (aged 9-11 years) typically used their parents' social media accounts to engage in online activities, including watching YouTube videos.

A few caregivers highlighted the challenges of limited internet connectivity, often relying on Piso WiFi or mobile data due to the absence of home WiFi.

Each of these diverse means of access offers unique limitations and benefits in terms of supervision and risk.

4.2.3. Online search for knowledge, entertainment, and connection

Increasingly, CYP use the internet for schoolwork and to find the knowledge and advice they need to make decisions.

For most CYP, particularly boys, gaming is integral to their social lives. In Nepal, boys who were avid online gamers went beyond simple entertainment. Some demonstrated entrepreneurial tendencies and earned money by selling their gaming accounts (like Free Fire) through intermediaries and gambling online via social media apps like Telegram and 1xBet.

Being online also offers CYP, especially those from marginalised groups, opportunities to socialise and to create a sense of belonging. For example:

- SOGIESC CYP from Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines connect with the SOGIESC community through Facebook.
- Many use apps like Tinder and Grindr to connect with peers or to look for friends and domestic partners.

Older CYP are especially active on social media platforms and frequently interact and form relationships with strangers on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat.

4.2.4. Gendered and age-related experience of risk

While online spaces can provide CYP with enjoyable social and recreational experiences, both boys and girls reported feeling unsafe when they are online. The concerns and the actual threats that they faced were different, however:

Girls
reported receiving explicit messages and expressed fears about potential offline encounters with offenders.

Boys
were more concerned about hackers and scammers accessing their accounts.

A younger female CYP reported:

> **"Mostly boys ask for photos and sometimes strangers too."**
> - A female participant, FGD with children 9-12 years, Kathmandu, Nepal

CYP take great responsibility for their own safety and employ various **strategies to cope with online risks** such as:

- **Avoiding or blocking** strangers or users who share inappropriate content
- **Limiting online exposure** (e.g. not sharing personal images or sexual content)
- Using **online safety tools** (e.g. locking profiles)
- Using **fake names and pseudonyms**, especially in online games

Girls tend to be more focused on managing their online interactions and note that it is important to not reveal personal information like real addresses or birthdays. A Cambodian girl shared how she addresses online risk:

> "I lock my social media profile, using a privacy setting, unfriend that person, unfollow the page, remove or ignore the post, or tell my parents about it."
>
> - Girl aged 15, FGD, Cambodia

Unfortunately, CYP can also fail to implement basic digital safety measures. A Cambodian girl recalled:

> "One time I didn't lock my profile, my Facebook account was hacked and got posted sexual contents on my account."
>
> - 15-year-old girl, FGD, Cambodia

Boys, on the other hand, choose to reduce risks by limiting their online presence, such as deactivating or locking their Facebook profiles, using fake names, or removing profile pictures.

Many younger boys and girls (aged 9-12) do not know how to make their social media posts private nor how to block connections. They believe playing online games with strangers is fine if they do not share images or videos.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

OPPORTUNITIES

- Increased learning opportunities
- Ability ro relax and find employment
- Bridge distance
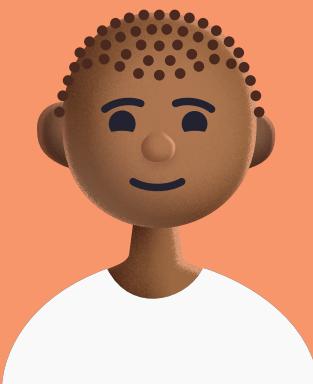
RISKS

- Decreased interest in critical activities
- Decreased social engagement and satisfaction
- Increased risks of OCSE
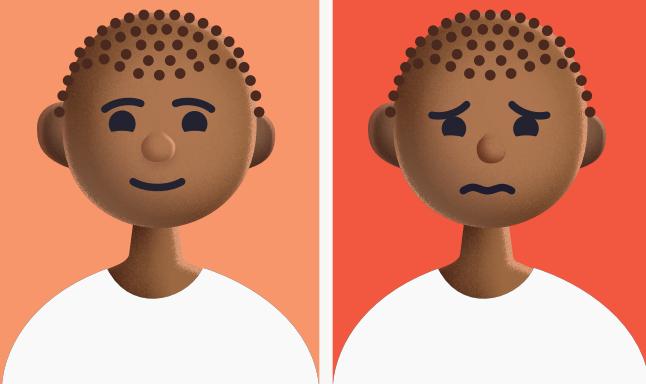
4.3. The conflict: opportunities versus risks

4.3.1. Opportunities: Access to education, entertainment, and community

Digital technology offers a variety of opportunities and strengths for children as well as their parents and caregivers in the realms of education, entertainment, and community.

4.3.1.1. Increased learning opportunities
CYP and parents and caregivers appreciate the internet's role in education, such as enabling students to communicate with classmates and conduct research. A 19-year-old young person

with autism in Nepal explained that online platforms like TikTok and YouTube suit his visual learning style, which allows him to engage more effectively with content.

Learning is not limited to schoolwork, however, and can extend into self-discovery. SOGIESC CYP from Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines reported that the internet played a pivotal role in helping them to understand their identity and preferences.

4.3.1.2. Ability to relax and find enjoyment
The benefits associated with being online leads many CYP to consider the online world their happy place:

> "I feel happy because it is relaxing for me to use TikTok."
> - Adolescent, FGD, Cambodia

There are parents and caregivers who recognise this and support their children's online activities. Some parents and caregivers in Nepal, for instance, indicated that they had set up social media accounts for their children. Others participated in gaming platforms. One father shared that playing Free Fire with his child helped strengthen their bond.

4.3.1.3. Bridge distance
An acknowledged benefit of the internet to both CYP and parents was its ability to support connection and community, even when people are geographically distant. A Kenyan adolescent stated:

> "I can't imagine a world without a smartphone. This will be like living in prison. All my social life is online so I need a digital phone all the time."
>
> **- Adolescent, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya**

Through social media, messaging apps, and video calls, parents were able to maintain constant communication, even in emergency situations or when they could not be physically present:

> **"Technology can help us stay connected with our children, even when we are busy."**
> - Parent, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya

Being online is uniquely important for CYP who are marginalised due to economic or social factors. In Nepal, a child who identifies with the SOGIESC community uses Facebook to connect with Nepal's SOGIESC community. She also mentioned that watching TikTok videos featuring SOGIESC individuals inspire her to embrace and express her identity more openly.

4.3.2. Risks: Threats to children's overall safety and well-being

While both CYP and parents and caregivers identified a variety of opportunities in the online space, they also cited a variety of threats. Interestingly, they emphasised different types of threats.

CYP focussed more on immediate risks, such as explicit or violent content and hacking or privacy violations. Parents and caregivers, while sharing those concerns, also perceived online threats as significant risks to children's physical, moral, behavioural, and emotional well-being.

4.3.2.1. Decreased interest in critical activities
Parents and caregivers express concerns about the impact of gaming and scrolling on children's engagement in critical activities such as school, home, and even basic self-care:

- One parent attributed her son's excessive use of mobile games and cell phones to his eventual disinterest in studying, which led him to drop out of school.
- Other parents and caregivers find it harder to involve their children in household chores when they are on their devices and have to keep reminding them to accomplish their assigned chores.
- Both parents and CYP shared that internet use negatively impacted children's physical health, including their eating and sleeping habits.

One adolescent boy who developed difficulty sleeping shared:

"When I was addicted to online games, I would play it for 12 hours."

- 14-year-old CYP with disability, KII, Cambodia

In Nepal, one parent reported that her 10-year-old developed a gaming addiction that escalated to the point where the child required medical intervention. When she confiscated his phone, the child became distressed and attempted suicide.

4.3.2.2. Decreased social engagement and satisfaction

Some parents noted that the digital age seemed to be diminishing children's creativity, making them increasingly dependent on technology and less capable of engaging in independent, critical thinking. They worried that excessive screen time not only reduced face-to-face interactions but also hampered children's ability to form and maintain meaningful personal connections and develop social skills:

"The internet has affected my bonding with my kids since they are always concentrating on the gadgets I bought them."
- Caregiver, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya

Additionally, being online exposes children to negative social experiences such as (cyber) bullying and threats of physical or sexual violence. A Nepali boy recounted:

"People use vulgar words against me while playing online games. I feel bad, but I just ignore such comments and continue with the game."

- 10-year-old boy, FGD, Nepal

Negative social interactions can be especially relevant for children associated with marginalised groups. SOGIESC CYP from Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines reported receiving many hate comments online, particularly targeting their gender and identity:

"I believe the LGBTQIA+ community is more vulnerable to risks online. When looking through the comments on a recent gay couple's marriage, most of them were unbearable. Queer groups face much more online bullying, hate speech, and similar issues than straight people. For instance, if a major news platform simply posts a photo of a rainbow flag as its thumbnail without any caption, you can immediately see the number of hateful comments that follow."
- CYP who identifies with SOGIESC, KII, Nepal

4.3.2.3. Increased risks of experiencing OCSE

One of the most common concerns for CYP and parents and caregivers was exposure to or engagement in sexual content and interactions. Many CYP across all study countries reported encountering sexual content on popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, Messenger, Ome.TV, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.

Many children expressed discomfort at seeing inappropriate sexual content and pornographic videos online that either randomly appeared on their feed, were shared by their online friends, or were encountered while gaming. One boy who games recalls:

"It's fun, but you never know who's on the other side... We've seen things online that no one prepares you for. It messes with your head."

- Boy, FGD, Nepal

In Nepal, many boys admitted encountering pornography online and worried about its impact. One boy observed:

"If we have our phone, we will get to watch content related to that thing [Sexual content]. But if we have no phone... When we had no phone, we used to go outdoors to play with our friends, and we would not get time to think about such things."

- 10-year-old boy, FGD, Nepal

There is also a threat of encountering sexual videos with edited faces (deepfake) and online actors pretending to be someone they are not. One Filipino girl recalled:

"There are many scammers who pretend to be 13 years old but are actually much older. I didn't experience this myself, but I know someone who did. They claimed to be a certain age, but then the person revealed they were actually in their 20s while saying they were just 13."

- Girl participant, FGD, Philippines
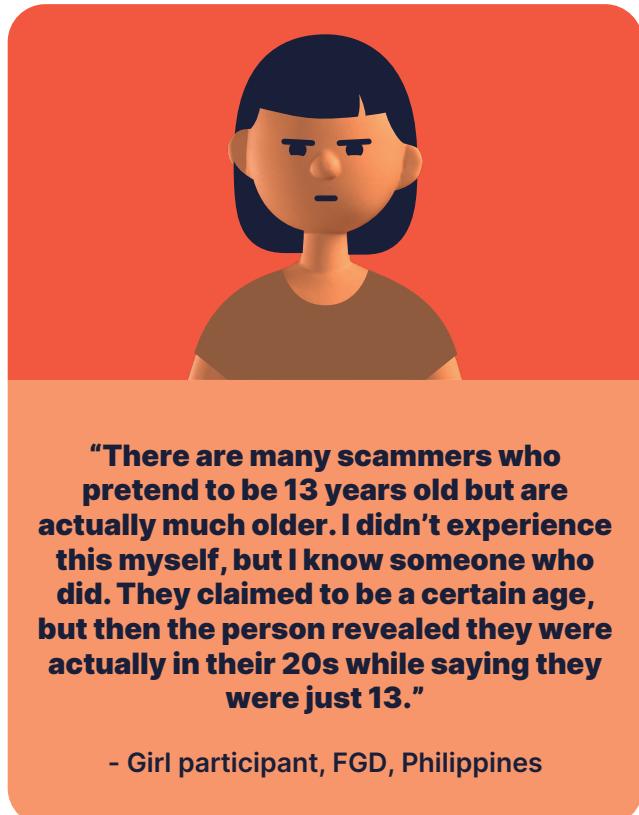
Parents and caregivers also express concern that being online provides a place where children may become active, rather than passive, participants in OCSE. One caregiver stated:

"My worry is that my child can take nude pictures and send them. That is my worry. Internet never forgets.... They sometimes steal the phone when you are busy. They can be asked to share photos or remove their tops or bras, or panty to attract them."
- Female aregiver, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya

4.3.2.4. Perpetrators of OCSE

Just as there are diverse forms of OCSE, there is also a diverse range of OCSE perpetrators. The perpetrators of OCSE cited by CYP and parents and caregivers included:

- Close family
- Community members
- Complete strangers

Many CYP, especially girls, shared instances of being lured by strangers, often from other countries, through fake profiles and dating apps such as Grindr. These platforms often lack robust verification mechanisms, which enable minors to access adult spaces.

One child experienced OCSE after a break-up with a romantic partner:

> "I broke up with him, we agreed, but I didn't know he had the photos, then he chatted and threatened me, and asked me to send him inappropriate pictures or else he would send the video to my sibling."
> - OCSE victim, KII, Cambodia

Parents in the Philippines expressed high levels of concern about cases where perpetrators/facilitators of OCSE included family members, even parents themselves:

> "Having training about the internet (safety) is important, especially regarding online sexual exploitation. It is disappointing to hear and hard to swallow that there are perpetrators who are parents; even their own children will be sold online. It's hair-raising, but it's eye opening."
> - Parent, FGD, Philippines

4.3.2.5. Long-term impacts of experiencing OCSE

OCSE is a deeply personal violation. It is little surprise then, that connecting with victims of OCSE and their caregivers proved to be sensitive and challenging across all study countries. It required a trauma-informed victim interviewing process supported by private locations. Especially where perpetrators were biological parents, the victims cited serious and lasting impacts such as:

- emotional distress
- community stigma
- financial struggles
- strained family and social relationships
- lack of sense of safety

These impacts were not limited to victims but extended to parents and caregivers. Some parents had physical reactions to their children's experiences:

> "It has affected me so badly; I was only getting better now. I was sick, my husband felt ill."
> - Caregiver of victim of OCSE, Cambodia

Others expressed guilt that they had not been able to prevent the exploitation:

> "I thought by having my daughter staying at home, nothing bad can happen to her, but I did not know she was sexually exploited online while she was at home."
> - Father of victim of OCSE, KII, Cambodia

Still others felt shame on behalf of their family's reputation in the community and in the sight of their ancestors:

4.4. The characters: different children face different challenges

4.4.1. Intersectionality and risk

OCSE is a complex and multi-faceted issue. Addressing it requires an equally nuanced framework. The intersectional approach offers a way to understand and respond to the ways different factors–such as gender, age, disability, and sexual identity–intersect to shape individual identities, power relations, and hierarchies. This approach enhances awareness of the unique needs, interests, capacities, and experiences of diverse individuals, families, and communities and helps uncover dynamics that can shape their vulnerability to and capacity to prevent OCSE.

4.4.1.1. Younger CYP have more limits and supervision

A key aspect to consider in an intersectional approach is age and its influence on CYP's online activity and risks. One aged-related risk factor is awareness: younger (9–12-year-old) children tend to be less aware of online safety measures than older CYP. It is also easier to restrict and supervise screen time for younger children, especially if they only use their parents' devices.

4.4.1.2. Gender and SOGIESC both conceal and increase risk

The intersectional approach acknowledges that all children, regardless of any personal characteristic, are vulnerable to OCSE. However, boys and sexual minority CYP have unique risk factors. (See table: Risk factors of boys and sexual minority CYP.)

Figure 2: Risk factors of boys and sexual minority CYP

Boys	• Increased interest in accessing pornographic materials online • Less disclosure • Less help-seeking behaviour when abuse occurs • Gendered views of parents that view boys as needing less protection from CSE/OCSE and grant them more freedom than girls (Scott & McNeish, 2023) (Data from Nepal)
Sexual minority CYP	• Feeling isolated (including from their parents) and fearful (including of disclosing abuse) • Lacking information and safe, age-appropriate ways to explore their gender identity • Being susceptible to seeking support in high-risk adult online environments (e.g. adult dating sites) (Filipino CYP who identify as SOGIESC and other primary and secondary sources) • Experiencing gender norms that stereotypes and hyper-sexualise SOGIESC identities • Experiencing harassment and homophobia

Young people who identify as SOGIESC face additional levels of risk. Being harassed or the victim of homophobia may push them towards secrecy. This makes it easier for perpetrators, who are known to intentionally target LGBTQ+ CYP, to facilitate OCSE and harder for parents to detect it (UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2020). One NGO representative noted:

> **"LGBTQ youth, particularly gay individuals, may be more vulnerable to OCSE because of their online presence."**
> - NGO representative, KII, Philippines

> **"It can be challenging to them especially when they don't know how to take control of their online space, somebody who interacts with them online can take advantage of this."**
> - Teacher of CYP with mild intellectual disability, KII, Kisumu, Kenya

4.4.1.3. Disability poses unrecognised risks

A factor that makes CYP particularly vulnerable is disability. Unfortunatley, the online sexual abuse of CYP with disabilities has been largely invisible. There are many gaps in knowledge about how disability, especially intellectual disability, impacts their risk of abuse and exploitation (Stalker et al., 2015).

CYP with disabilities widely vary in their digital knowledge and skills. Some have limited digital knowledge:

In Cambodia, on the other hand, the mothers of CYP with intellectual disabilities admitted to knowing less about technology or the internet than their children. This poses unique risks when CYP (such as those with autism) have digital skills that exceed their social and communication skills.

These risks increase when CYP with disabilities lack appropriate parental supervision Respondents in Kenya reported that children with intellectual disabilities have limited supervision and are at higher risk due to caregivers' absence, as they are busy working or looking for ways to sustain them:

> **"Having a disabled child is not easy, their needs are more than normal children...So, I have to work hard, in most cases I am never at home... By the time I get home I am very tired and everyone has gone to sleep. I don't get time with my child at all."**
> **- Parent, Kibera Slum, Nairobi, Kenya**

Access to supervision is not necessarily enough to ensure online safety, however. Parents in Nepal emphasised that traditional verbal and written methods of OCSE education and prevention, which may be effective for neurotypical children, are often insufficient for those with autism or other intellectual disabilities.

The lack of educational resources is not restricted to CYP and families. There is also a lack of awareness of OCSE among practitioners who support CYP with intellectual disabilities. Cultural taboos and stigma, including society's refusal to see those with disabilities as sexual beings, can increase risk (Scott & McNeish, 2017).

Sometimes, even parents of CYP with disability do not associate an intellectual disability with higher risk. A key informant with mild intellectual disability in the Philippines, for example, borrowed his mother's device and visited internet cafés to play computer games without supervision. He reported no negative online experiences and showed limited awareness of online risks or threats.

4.4.1.4. Socio-economic factors heighten risk

CYP's risk of OCSE is influenced by many factors beyond personal characteristics. Many community actors identify socio-economic factors as drivers of OCSE including:

- **Parents' labour demands**, which can limit parents' ability to supervise their children's online activities or engage in training programmes
- **Reduced internet literacy and legal awareness** among parents, especially in rural areas
- **Lack of targeted support** for marginalised groups, such as out-of-school CYP

In some cases, parents and caregivers have pressured children into OCSE for economic reasons:

> **"There are cases where parents themselves are involved, like coercing their children into sending pictures to foreigners in exchange for money."**
> **- Teacher, KII, Philippines**

4.4.1.5. Online and offline risks influence each other

Online and in-person risks can be mutually reinforcing, or can at least be perceived to be so. Both parents and CYP, for example, expressed concern that watching pornography online could lead to risky sexual behaviours offline.

In Nepal, an NGO case manager shared a tragic story that highlighted how online activity can result in offline risks of exploitation and abuse:

"She met a stranger on Facebook who manipulated her by calling her loving names and pretending to show affection. Eventually, the girl was sold into a brothel at age 16. The trafficker used fake profiles to target vulnerable minors, particularly girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds and sold them into Indian brothels. In Pokhara, girls from poorer backgrounds are often manipulated into relationships with foreign tourists and later married and taken abroad."

- NGO informant, KII, Nepal

Evidence from police respondents in Nepal illustrates the mutually reinforcing (and continuing) effect of online and offline risks related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Offline risks of COVID-19 sent CYP online for education and socialisation.
- CYP's increased online presence increased online threats, including OCSE.
- A noticeable rise in post-pandemic child elopements and marriages post-pandemic has been associated with online dating relationships formed during the pandemic.

Rise in early marriages and elopments tied to online dating during lockdown.

More time online led to more risks including sexual exploitation.

COVID-19 pushed CYP online for school and social life.

1

2

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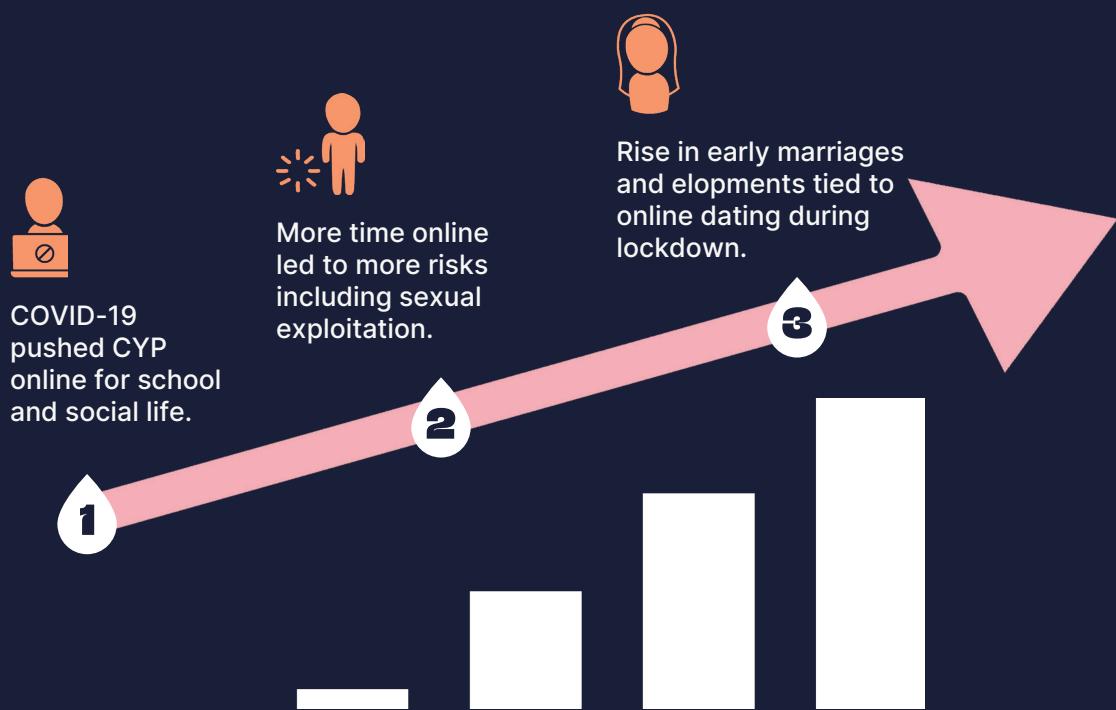
OFFLINE WORLD

ONLINE WORLD
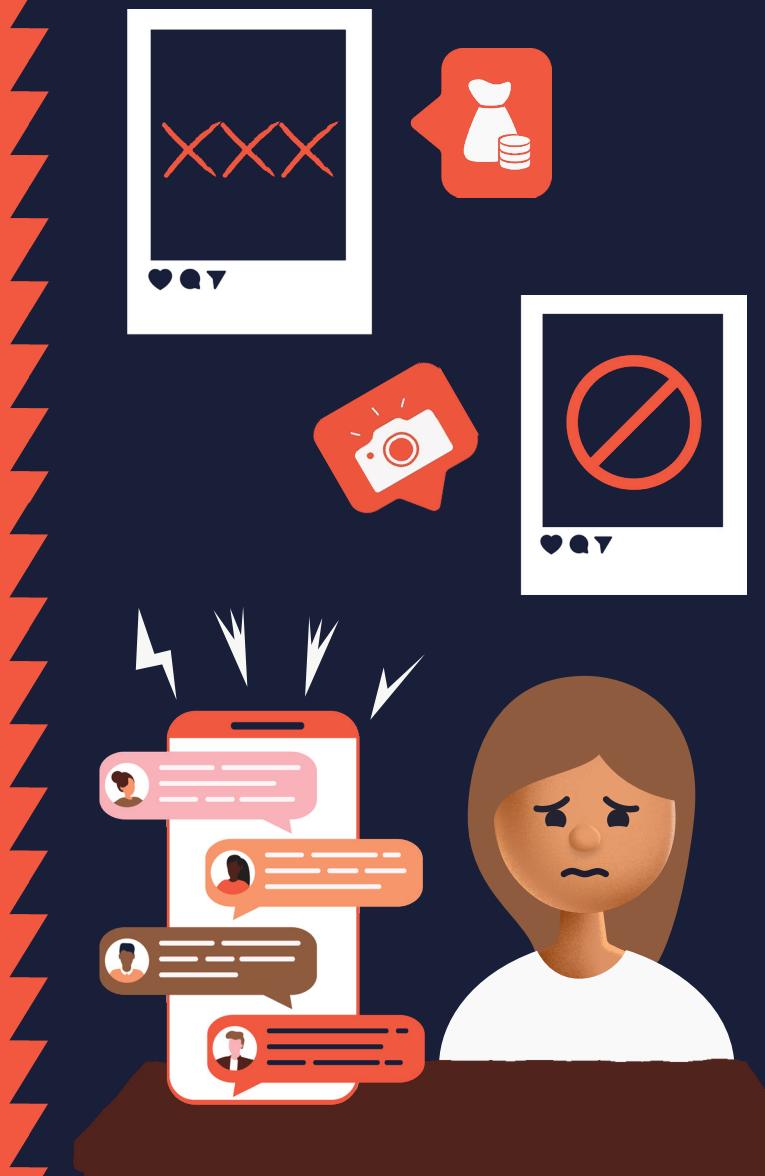
4.4.2. Family dynamics and technology use are interconnected

Another offline factor that influences online risk is the CYP's family environment. The rapid rise in internet connectivity is influencing parenting styles, dynamics, and practices (UNICEF, 2017) and transforming intergenerational relations. These changing family dynamics bring both opportunities and challenges.

4.4.2.1. Parenting Styles Shaped by Trust, Control, and the Continued Use of Corporal Punishment

The behaviour, beliefs, and parenting style of parents and caregivers play a central role in shaping family dynamics. Parenting expectations and practices vary across and within countries, rural-urban environments, groups, extended families and in relation to specific issues and children (UNICEF, 2018).

Parents and caregivers in the study reported having reasonably good relationships with their children which relies on a nonviolent (positive parenting) approach[1] that is grounded in:

- Open communication
- Positive discipline
- Close relationships

In Nepal, for example, some parents in the FGDs agreed on the importance of fostering trusting relationships with their children. They encouraged CYPs to participate in outdoor activities as a way of promoting physical activity, reducing screen time, and encouraging new hobbies. A father in Cambodia shared a similar perspective:

> **"We should not argue and should do good deeds to show that we are good to our children… Play around with them and be their friend."**
> - Father, FGD, Cambodia

Many parents, however, predominantly demonstrated authoritarian parenting attitudes and practices, including harsh verbal discipline and corporal punishment (especially for young children). They generally believed that it is disrespectful for children to try reasoning with or talking back to their parents. One KII in Cambodia shared:

> **"I still see most of them use harsh words on their children when they do wrong and do not try to comfort and ask them to share their feelings. They just blame their children and make them confess. But the children still keep on lying. And in some families, they use violence, and even for smaller children around 2-3 years old."**
> - KII, Cambodia

Some girls reported having limited communication with their parents, and the communication they did have was often shaped by conservative views that restricted their mobility and freedom. CYP often do not view caregivers as a primary source of protection from OCSE, instead turning to peers or other sources for advice and support.

A grandmother in Cambodia emphasised the risks of such communication styles. She associated her use of violent punishment with her granddaughter's decision to flee the home. The granddaughter ultimately became a victim of OCSE.

The mix of positive parenting and corporal punishment reflects a complex dynamic, where cultural values like respect, obedience, and discipline intersect with a desire to nurture and communicate openly.

4.4.2.2. Technology use, family (dis)connection, and OCSE intersect

Family connection and communication can both be limited and fostered by technology. On one hand, increased time online can significantly reduce the time parents and caregivers and CYP spend together, which increases OCSE risk:

- CYP may be physically present but using the internet/smartphones to engage with their virtual community more than their immediate one.
- Parents and caregivers may rely on gadgets to occupy their children ("*digital babysitting*") at the expense of face-to-face interaction and oversight.
- Parents and caregivers may themselves model poor digital habits by spending excessive time online rather than engaging with their children.

A member of a local authority in Cambodia observed:

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1   Note: These groups of parents and caregivers, particularly in the Philippines and Cambodia, have been exposed to positive parenting programmes and services implemented by NGOs, which may have influenced their parenting styles.

> **"Sometimes, parents have to be aware of their behaviours on their children such as not checking the children behaviour at home and only using the phones around their children."**
> - Member of local authority, FGD, Cambodia

Despite the drawbacks, some families, especially those who are physically separated, find that technology helps support their communication and connectedness even amid busy schedules and across long distances.

4.4.2.3. Migration and family separation increase OCSE risk

The physical separation of families can drive an increased risk of OCSE. For example, the ongoing migration of millions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) each year has transformed close-knit Filipino families into "*transnational families*," families that are geographically separated but maintain socio-cultural connections (Alampay et al., 2017).

Family separation, whether from parental migration or other causes, leads to a unique dynamic in which families rely on the internet for connection and communication while parents lack the ability to supervise and influence CYP's daily online activity.

> **"I work here in Kisumu, but my children are in Busia with their grandparents. I only visit them once in a while. So, when they access online contents, it is maybe from their friends because I myself cannot even afford to give them digital phones or computer, how do I tell?"**
> - Mother, FGD, Kisumu, Kenya

NGO case managers highlight that abusers and groomers frequently use online platforms to target CYP, particularly girls, with migrant parents and lure them into trafficking.

On the other hand, research shows that daughters tend to communicate more with their overseas parents than sons, leading to greater parental involvement and awareness of their daughters' lives (Alampay et al., 2017). This suggests that sons of migrant workers may receive less guidance, creating a gendered impact of family separation.

4.4.2.4. Technology shifts the balance of power within families

Across both separated and cohabiting households, technological dynamics are shifting power toward those with stronger digital skills, which are often held by CYP. This can create new sources of intergenerational conflict as CYP and parents battle for respect, authority, and independence. (Byrne, et al., 2016)

CYP clearly desire more control over their online lives. One girl suggested that parents need not be involved on platforms like Instagram or Snapchat. A boy similarly emphasised the importance of privacy in teenagers' romantic relationships, online gaming, and social circles.

Parents, on the other hand, often try to manage risks by delaying the age at which they allow their children access to the internet/mobile phones and limiting time online (Byrne, et al., 2016). One Filipino parent asserted:

> **"It's essential not to give children unrestricted access to the internet; they need clear limitations. We can't know for sure what they might be viewing or doing online."**
> - Parent/caregiver, FGD, Philippines

Some parents check their child's browsing history or examine their devices when they are asleep to monitor online interactions. It is unclear whether children are aware of their parents' actions. One Kenyan mother explained:

> **"I always look at what they browse, especially on my computer, by going through their recent browsing history. If they delete, I check recently deleted items."**
> - Mother, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya

These examples illustrate a growing tension between parents' desire for control and safety and children's desire for privacy and autonomy.

4.4.3. The "*intergenerational digital divide*" increases OCSE risks

Generational differences around technology extend into the way adults and CYP approach and use technology. This is called the "*intergenerational digital divide.*"

4.4.3.1. Parents often lag behind CYP in digital literacy

Some parents and caregivers confidently navigate online platforms for personal and professional purposes. Most, however, report basic to moderate skills and mostly use smartphones and social media and messaging apps for communication and entertainment:

> **"I can use the phone but not computer. I use the phone for WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook."**
> - Female caregiver, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya

In Kenya, a lack of access to smartphones hinders some parents and caregivers from engaging fully in digital spaces.

CYP recognise their parents' digital limitations and sometimes feel that parents cannot protect them from something they do not understand. The Voice Project Report noted that children perceive their caregivers as lacking in knowledge of the internet (ECPAT International et al., 2024), a belief that is not without foundation. A social worker in Kenya notes:

> **"Most parents have little knowledge... It is the children who teach them how to use the smartphone."**
> - Social worker, KII, Kisumu, Kenya

Despite their relatively weaker digital literacy, parents generally recognise the importance of safeguarding their children from online risks. Some parents, especially those who had been exposed to digital training and positive parenting initiatives and programmes, understand risks such as online blackmail, the use of generative AI to modify pictures for the purposes of exploitation ("*photo morphing*"), and the dangers of befriending strangers online:

> **"I know OCSE involves people luring children into bad activities online, like sending inappropriate photos or asking for private details."**
> - Caregiver, KII, Nairobi, Kenya

Some parents, especially those exposed to positive parenting and digital literacy programmes, also take practical steps to support their children's online safety such as:

- Promoting healthy digital habits (e.g. helping children strike a balance between screen time and offline activities)
- Checking browsing history and monitoring children's social media accounts and online interactions
- Using parental controls and restricting internet access and activity
- Delaying the age at which children are allowed to access the internet and social media

One of the key strategies parents and caregivers mentioned is maintaining open communication. Some parents noted that they encourage their children to talk to them if they encounter inappropriate content online, ensuring that they feel comfortable seeking help to remove such material if necessary.

Unfortunately, there are significant barriers to the effectiveness of these strategies. In practice, it seems that very few parents actually initiate conversations about online safety and preventative measures with their children:

> **"I'm a bit reckless in this area. To be honest, I have never actually asked them about these things. You reminded me of this, and I have never really thought of this and never told my children about this."**
> **- Mother, FGD, Cambodia**

Parents' limited technical knowledge and understanding of privacy settings and safety features (relative to their children) create

additional barriers to effective digital protection. One father said:

> **"At my home, my children talk of TikTok, Snapchat and other social media chatting sites. I have no information what they do or see in those chats. I am unable to control or restrict them as I don't know if those sites are bad."**
> **- Father, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya**

Unregulated digital content and the use of informal languages such as "*sheng*"[2] to create digital content further widen the gap between parents and children. Slang, which is constantly evolving, makes it difficult for parents to understand what is meant by the digital content

> **"I always try my level best to see what my children are watching, however, there are some languages used especially sheng which might be abusive but I don't understand anything about what is being said."**
> **- Mother, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya**

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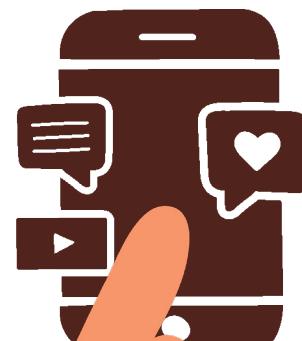
2   A language used by youth that mixes English, Swahili, and other Kenyan languages.

In addition, children sometimes take advantage of their parents' lack of digital literacy to avoid supervision. In Nepal, for example, most children in the FGDs mentioned using their parents' online accounts for communication and school updates while maintaining personal (often unsupervised) accounts on gaming platforms, Instagram, and Snapchat. A community member supported the CYP's statements:

> **"Children do not use apps like Facebook Messenger, which parents are familiar with and believe they can monitor to keep their children under control. Instead, they use other apps where messages or content are deleted immediately, leaving no trace for parents. This obscures their activities."**
> - FGD, Female community member, Nepal

Parents may feel confident in their supervision of their children's online use, yet in practice, they may lack accurate insight into their children's digital behaviours.

While parents are generally seen as the primary digital gatekeepers, community members acknowledge that child protection is a shared responsibility. However, the actors that children, families, and communities may perceive as resources on OCSE (e.g. teachers, parents, community leaders, peers) may themselves lack the skills, knowledge, and confidence to provide the needed support. A Cambodian community member observed:

> **"It's crucial to note that the majority of communities have a limited understanding of online platforms, which hinders their ability to recognize and prevent online exploitation."**
> - Community member, FGD, Cambodia

In the Philippines, parents and caregivers were generally unable to identify specific government or non-government programmes designed to protect children from online exploitation.

4.4.3.2. Teachers lack adequate training in OCSE

Schools are another entity that parents and children sometimes turn to for support on parenting advice and tools to prevent online risky behaviour and to keep their children safe online. Nearly half of the CYP in Cambodian FGDs reported that they would go to their teachers if they had concerns or experienced OCSE to seek advice and recommendations:
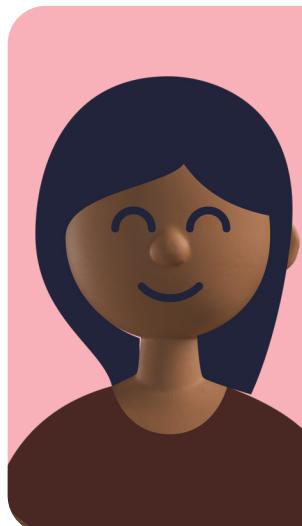
> **"We trust our teachers one hundred percent in advising us about the safety and security of using online platforms, and online sexual exploitation."**
>
> - Adolescent girl, FGD, Cambodia

Interestingly, teachers themselves suggest that they do not have the knowledge or capacity to keep children safe online and feel unprepared to handle sensitive disclosures due to limited training on OCSE and trauma-informed approaches:

> **"The disadvantages on our part is that we're not gadget experts, and we don't have enough training on using online platforms."**
> - Teacher, KII, Philippines

For example, bullying awareness campaigns are common, but OCSE-specific awareness initiatives are notably absent. Teachers often lack the specific knowledge to identify or address OCSE risks, such as grooming, sexual extortion, or exploitation through social media:

> **"We haven't gotten any OCSE-specific training, but we undergo child protection policy training. For OCSE, there's nothing specific yet."**
> - Teacher. KII, Nepal

4.4.3.3. Traditional and religious leaders' influence rarely includes OCSE

Local leaders, such as village elders and church leaders, often play an even larger role in the lives of parents and children than teachers. Such leaders often mediate local issues and serve as central figures in awareness campaigns, community mobilization, and guidance. In the Philippines, for example, parents and caregivers suggested that the right response to OSCE is to seek help from the barangay leaders (elected village officials).

However, many traditional and religious leaders focus on general moral teachings and lack the digital literacy needed to comprehend and address the complexities of online exploitation. A Kenyan community leader noted:

> **"Our village elders can intervene in general child safety issues, but they do not understand online risks or how to handle them."**
> - Community leader, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya

The absence of a structured framework to specifically address OCSE further hampers traditional and religious leaders' ability to respond adequately to disclosures.

In addition to a lack of OCSE-specific knowledge and frameworks, cultural and religious norms may often discourage open discussions about sensitive topics like OCSE. One adolescent girl in Kenya noted:

> **"African parents are not really open to giving sex education to their children."**
>
> - Adolescent girl, FGD, Cambodia

4.4.3.4. Government actors often lack digital literacy

Very few CYP report that they would approach police in their communities or social workers for support with OCSE.

Additionally, many social workers and community service providers require advanced digital literacy training in order to be able to navigate online safety tools effectively. One Kenyan NGO informant observed:

> **"Most of us know the basics, but we need more advanced training to handle the complexities of online risks."**
> - NGO informant, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya

4.4.3.5. Family and friends serve as primary OCSE support

Many CYP and parents and caregivers turn primarily to extended family and friends for help in all areas of life. Close friends and family provide important emotional support and stability, especially when parents are overwhelmed or unable to fulfil their responsibilities. It is not uncommon for older children to become caregivers, providing relief for parents and stability for their younger siblings. One girl shared:

> **"I take care of my siblings; when my parents are not around, I ensure they are fed, guided, and protected."**
>
> **- Female sibling, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya**

The type of support provided includes a sense of connection with their history and community. Family and friends serve as valued sources of cultural knowledge and stories:

> **"The grandparents' role is to talk to children on how the situation used to be long ago."**
>
> **- Mother, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya**

Due to the emotional closeness of these relationships, CYP and parents may also turn to friends and family for guidance and advice around OCSE. Unfortunately, these are not always the most reliable or knowledgeable sources for issues of online safety:

> **"What I can say is you don't expect grandparents to know how to advise on online contents because themselves they are old school and do not know much about technology."**
>
> **- NGO Director, KII, Kisumu, Kenya**

This indicates that family and friends provide important emotional support but may lack the ability to adequately prevent and respond to OCSE.

4.4.4. The influence of socio-cultural norms on OCSE

The influence of friends and families on CYP and parents and caregivers is closely connected to the norms and expectations of the wider community. These norms influence the type of support CYP and parents and caregivers receive, which then reinforces the acceptance of specific attitudes and actions. Societal norms (including gendered roles of parents and children) therefore significantly influence children's experience of OCSE prevention and response.

4.4.4.1. Gendered roles of parents

The role(s) each parent and caregiver plays is driven by societal norms and is often highly influenced by traditional views of gender. Mothers are typically the primary caregivers in the family and play a central role in providing emotional support, nurturing, and guidance. They typically spend more time with the children than fathers do, which can make it easier for CYP, particularly girls, to open up to them. A male caregiver in Kenya observed:

> "When children encounter challenges online, they mostly turn to their mothers or older siblings. As fathers are rarely approached because they believe that we are too strict or unavailable."
> - Male caregiver, KII, Nairobi, Kenya

Fathers often work long hours and see their role as providing for the family rather than directly nurturing their children. One father emphasised his role as disciplinarian:

> "I want to tell you about the difference between mother and father... I'm not at home much so the children don't know about my habit. Even when they are at home I need to scold them if they do anything bad. At home you need someone they fear, in case they go towards the wrong path. They're not really afraid of their mother and most of the time they use their mother's phone."
> - Father, FGD, Nepal

Gendered parenting roles influence the ways in which both CYP and parents approach online safety and access. Mothers in Nepal pointed out that fathers often had greater digital literacy and commanded more obedience from their children. They suggested that fathers might be better positioned to effectively address technological risks.

Fathers, on the other hand, believed that mothers should bear the primary responsibility for safeguarding children because of fathers' busy work schedules:

> "Normally, the roles are different. They put a strong emphasis on the mothers' role, even in training; mostly, only the mothers came to join, and the fathers thought their role was just earning money. They just know to go to work immediately after waking up, and only come back in the evening. They think raising children is their wife's responsibility, therefore, the mothers are responsible for all these, educating, sending them to schools and all. The fathers are not really involved much."
> - Community member, KII, Cambodia

Despite limitations on time, meaningful and quality interactions with fathers have a significant impact on CYP's development and behaviour.

Many children who do not have their own devices seem to recognize and capitalize on their parents' gendered roles and skills. They use their mothers' devices for entertainment but their fathers' phones for school assignments and educational purposes.

4.4.4.2. Gendered parenting
Just as parents tend to play gendered roles in the family, they also exhibit gendered parenting approaches.

Boys

Many parents reported that they were harsher with boys in terms of using corporal punishment because they saw them as:
- Disobedient
- Stubborn
- Resistant to rules

Girls

Parents reported being more protective over girls and stricter with them about dating and intimate relationships because girls:
- Require more emotional support than boys
- Are more vulnerable to OCSE than boys
- Require additional attention and protection than boys
- Need more protection and guidance than boys

These parental approaches reflect gender-based stereotypes which perceive girls as needing more care and nurturing than boys:

"We do not have to provide many things to boys, but for girls, we have to provide them with everything. The girls' needs are much more than the boys."
- Father, FGD, Cambodia

4.4.4.3. Gendered understandings of OCSE
Such gendered social norms influence CYP's digital safety in a variety of ways. Key informants in all study countries noted key differences in OCSE prevention and response for boys and girls:

- There are relatively fewer prevention and response services targeting boys and young men.
- Boys and young men tend to underreport OCSE.
- Parental supervision influences online behaviour differently for males and females (e.g. Nepali caregivers tend to restrict girls' internet use). (Body & Data, 2021)

Boys themselves tend to downplay their risk of OCSE, which they often associate more with girls. Instead, they focus mostly on:

- Scams
- Financial fraud
- Communicating with strangers when gaming

One boy noted:

"I got asked to register and played illegal online games, but I deleted that chat."

- 15-year-old boy, FGD, Cambodia

Gendered social norms not only increase the risk of OCSE but hinder effective response actions. For example, practitioners find sexual exploitation of boys harder to detect:

"*Prominent barriers to disclosing sexual abuse for boys and young men are identified, including discriminatory social attitudes, stereotypes, and expectations of 'masculine' behaviour. In line with gender stereotypes and societal perceptions, professionals' attitudes towards boys and young men are less protective than towards girls and young women.*" (Bernardo's, 2014)

4.4.4.4. Sexual norms limit open dialogue about OCSE

Beyond gender norms, social norms around sexuality can heighten the risk of OCSE. In many communities, especially in rural and marginalised communities, discussions about online risks and sexual exploitation remain stigmatised. This discourages open dialogue and limits understanding of OCSE among caregivers:

> **"They are not initially welcoming to discussions about OCSE because topics related to sexuality are still taboo in these communities. They don't want to associate with these discussions."**
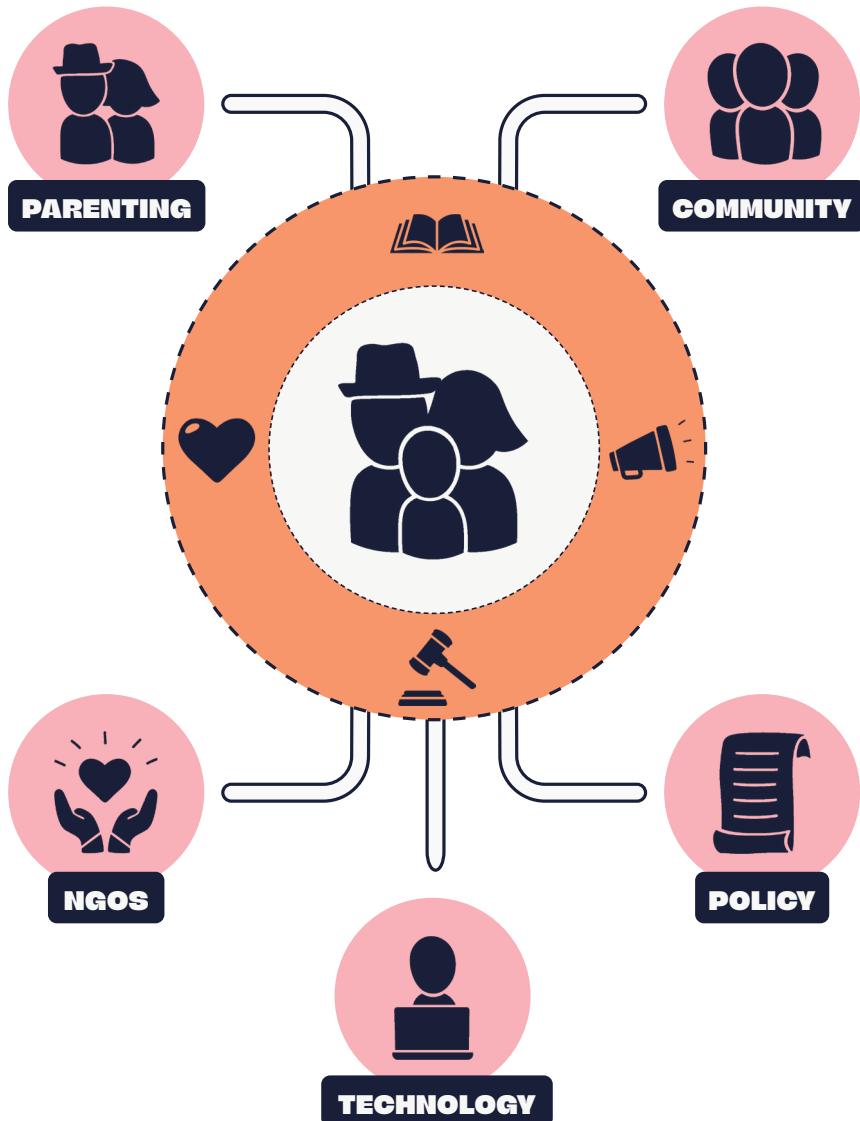> - NGO staff member, KII, Philippines

For these reasons, many parents and caregivers do not typically talk to their children about such topics. Nepali caregivers, for example, preferred that schools and NGO agencies take on this responsibility.

45

4.5. The resolution: everyone plays a role

Social norms influence and are influenced by larger systems. Systemic inequalities, such as poverty and lack of access to education or technology, often perpetuate OCSE vulnerabilities. Addressing these concerns requires a nuanced approach that is holistic, inclusive, and tailored to the needs of individuals and groups with respect to intersectional vulnerabilities. This requires the work of a wide range of actors across diverse disciplines.

The use of needs-based assessments helps identify specific vulnerabilities within households and communities and tailor interventions accordingly:

> **"We conduct needs assessments to ensure we are fair and deliberate in targeting families based on their specific vulnerabilities, like disability or economic hardships."**
> **- Social worker, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya**

Interventions that seek to keep CYP safe online fall into four main categories:

- **Awareness campaigns and advocacy**
- **Capacity-building programmes**
- **Community-based protection mechanisms**
- **Economic support interventions**

4.5.1. Multi-stakeholder coordination and collaboration

Multi-level collaboration, including the engagement of parents and CYP, is critical for long-term effectiveness and sustainability. One NGO staff member noted:

> **"We conduct co-creation activities where parents and children design materials to raise awareness about OCSE, ensuring they resonate with the community's understanding and needs."**
>
> **- NGO Staff, KII, Philippines**

KEEP CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE!

4.5.2. Barriers to reporting and responding to OCSE

Despite the existence of some multi-stakeholder interventions, many child victims of OCSE and their families suffer in silence rather than reporting their experiences to authorities. Key reasons include:

- Fear of hurting family members
- Fear of retaliation from community members (including perpetrators)
- Guilt around the crime
- Lack of faith in the safety and effectiveness of reporting and response mechanisms

These concerns are reflected in the following case of a Filipino child victim of OCSE:

The child's mother first noticed behavioural changes in her daughter, including symptoms of isolation, withdrawal and depression. Her mother noted:

"She doesn't laugh anymore and seems miserable. Sometimes, she overthinks in bed or just wants to be left alone."

- Parent of victim of OCSE, KII, Philippines

The child initially did not tell her family about her OCSE experience because she was scared that her family would get emotionally stressed and hurt. When the family learned about the girl's victimization, they felt upset and overwhelmed. They blamed themselves for the abuse and for the lack of supervision that led to the abuse. The girl received psychosocial support from an NGO, but the family did not report the OCSE case to the police for fear of retaliation from the perpetrator's criminal connection.
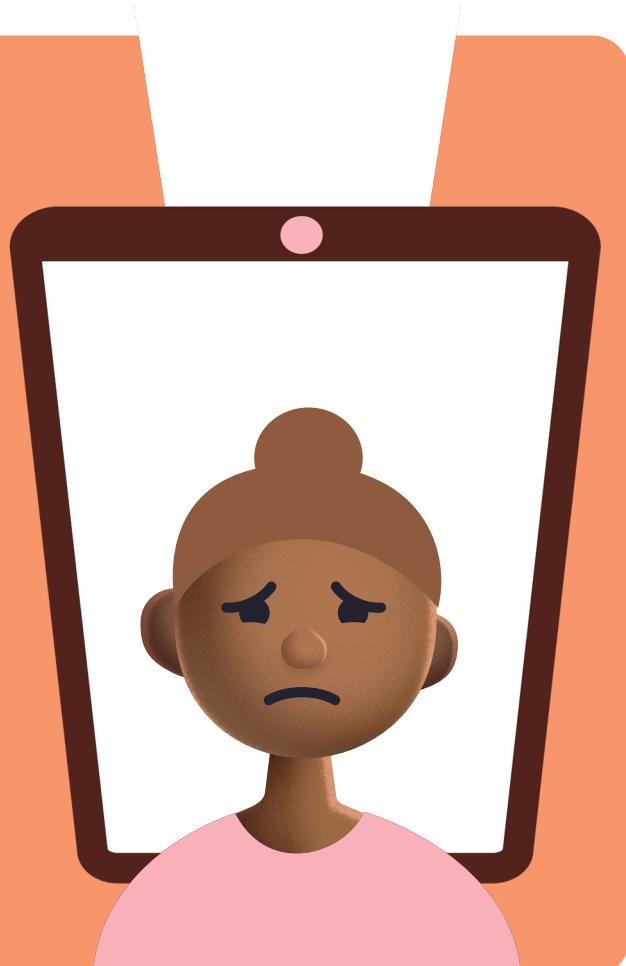
These and other social, relational, and structural barriers must be addressed in order to facilitate effective OCSE reporting and response.

4.5.2.1. Few parents and CYP can recognize OCSE

One of the key barriers to preventing and responding to OCSE is lack of understanding. Most parents and caregivers, especially those in rural areas, are not able to specify OCSE as a threat or identify the various forms of OCSE.

A Cambodian social worker observed:

"Generally, the parents are not aware of the negative impacts of using social media; they did not know what behaviour was considered OCSE; therefore, when they use a smartphone for a long time, parents/caregivers do not know the negative impact."
- Social worker, FGD, KII, Cambodia

Mothers of sexual minority CYP were not able to articulate OCSE and were only able to highlight risks such as scamming and too much time on the screen leading to bad eyesight. This highlights the potential gap in awareness among parents of child and youth with diverse SOGIESC around online grooming or exploitation. [See figure: Filipino parents' and older CYP's understanding of OCSE (with prompting).]

CYP also showed a low awareness of OCSE, despite their extensive internet use and relatively higher digital knowledge (as compared to their parents). Filipino CYP were not able to identify OCSE as an online safety issue without prompting. [See table: Filipino parents' and older CYP's understanding of OCSE (with prompting).

Figure 3: Filipino parents' and older CYP's understanding of OCSE (with prompting)

Parents and caregivers	• Recognised it as a *"bad way to earn money"* • Associated selling sexual images of children to foreigners and undressing online with treating children as a business opportunity • Described OCSE as meeting strangers online • considered OCSE as a result of drug abuse
CYP aged 16–17 years	• Parents posting their children on websites for financial gain • Online sexual activities with foreigners on Omegle's online video service • Live streaming inappropriate content on Bigo app for money • Viral spread of *"pornographic materials"* involving children • Sale of *"sex videos"* with mention of OnlyFans

Community members' (including children and families') understanding, perception, and attitudes toward OCSE are heavily shaped by cultural norms. Many community members believe that girls are more vulnerable online than boys.

Both CYP and teachers view certain inappropriate behaviours, such as explicit content sharing, as normal. Some Filipino teachers dismissed incidents involving risky online chats or children's interactions with foreigners as consensual or acceptable:

"There's this one instance where one of my students mentioned, *'Ma'am, she has a foreign boyfriend. He sends her money, and she is buying delicious food and snacks.'* We didn't really address it because it didn't seem like abuse or anything scandalous. We just thought, *'Oh well, maybe it's her choice."* - Teacher, KII, Philippines

4.5.2.2. Fear of negative family consequences

Lack of understanding is not the only barrier to reporting and responding to OCSE. Some older children reported that parental support helped them to resist engaging in risky online activities, but most CYP were reluctant to share about OCSE with their parents out of fear of:

- Anger
- Scolding
- Disbelief
- Blame
- Loss of devices

In practice, parental responses to OCSE incidents vary significantly. They ranged from taking little to no action against perpetrators to advocating for the harshest punishment possible, including death. Common responses include:

- Addressing the matter privately
- Confronting the perpetrator themselves
- Reporting the incident to counsellors or traditional or religious leaders
- Reporting suspected occurrences to the police
- Calling for more severe legal consequences, including capital punishment, for offenders

Some mothers, such as those of 13-15-year-olds in Nepal, stressed the need to respond to OCSE disclosures with support and understanding, as opposed to scolding or imposing restrictions. An OCSE victim in Cambodia reinforced that message:

> **"I did not tell them because I thought they would hit me, or stop loving me, but when this happened, they pity me, cry, and care about me."**
> **- OCSE victim, KII, Cambodia**

Some CYP (especially boys) who had experienced OCSE, however, said their parents did not believe them or even blamed them when they shared their experiences of OCSE:

> **"My parents advised me not to play games too much. When I told them that I had received sexual content messages, they did not believe me."**
> - 14-year-old boy, FGD, Cambodia

> **"I really can't talk to anyone because I hesitate, thinking they might judge me."**
> - Boy participant, FGD, Philippines

> **"So, maybe you get into such a site and then you tell your parents such a thing. Then they think it's you who was looking for it."**
> - Adolescent girl, FGD, Nairobi, Kenya

> **"Our parents blame us even when we are the victims."**
> - Girl, FGD, Nepal

Children who have experienced OCSE at the hands of their parents or caregivers face additional barriers to reporting. There have been cases in the Philippines where the offending parents have been incarcerated, leaving their children highly distressed and lacking parental care. Some OCSE victims become caregivers for their younger siblings. Others are sent to relatives, shelters, or other alternative care. These children may face the burden of stepping into adult responsibilities with minimal resources and emotional support.

4.5.2.3. Fear of social stigma

The tendency to hide problems and behaviour rather than seek help is common in societies with a prevailing culture of judgement, victim-blaming, taboo, and stigma. Some victims reported that they had experienced sexting and photo manipulation but had hesitated to report incidents because of fear of societal backlash or being blamed for their actions.

This fear of social impacts applies to most of CYP's support system. For example, students generally trust and respect teachers, but OCSE victims do not talk to them about online threats they are facing. They fear being stigmatized or blamed, particularly when the offender is a family member. This fear is validated by OCSE victims in the Philippines who reported being bullied in school when other students learned about their case.

In Kenya, boys prefer to keep online threats to themselves because of cultural norms wherein men who express vulnerability are considered weak:

"For me I look for a way to counter any online abuse including sexual abuse or just keep to myself. I cannot share with anyone. They might laugh or consider me as not being a man enough."

- 15-year-old boy, FGD, Kisumu, Kenya

The fear of judgement does not only affect CYP. Parents (particularly mothers) also avoid seeking support because they feel they are held accountable for their children's risky online behaviour and blamed for children falling victim to OCSE.

4.5.2.4. Current legal, policy, and systematic frameworks are inadequate

Some parents and caregivers may be willing to report but lack faith in the legal system. Weak law enforcement and inadequate victim confidentiality in police procedures serve as major obstacles to effective reporting and justice. One parent in Nairobi explained:

> "Our local authorities are supposed to persecute the culprits. But if they cannot handle rape cases that are clear and have full proof, how would they handle OCSE? I did not report to them and I can't. I resorted to just talking to my daughter and even asked her Sunday school teacher to talk to her."
>
> - Parent of an OCSE CYP victim, KII, Nairobi

In many communities, reporting and response mechanisms are non-existent or inadequate. This highlights a significant need for confidential, inclusive, and accessible mechanisms for OCSE.

4.5.3. Building capacity on OCSE prevention and response

The presence of these barriers shows that CYP, parents, communities, and social systems need capacity building on recognising, preventing, and responding to OCSE.

4.5.3.1. Strengthening children

There is a demonstrated need for targeted awareness programmes that educate CYPs about OCSE and broader online risks while addressing their unique challenges. Specific groups who may need tailored services include:

- Girls
- Boys
- Children with low levels of literacy and or economic security
- Children with diverse SOCIESC
- Children who are separated from their parents
- Children with disabilities, including intellectual Disabilities

CYP with diverse SOGIESC from Cambodia, Nepal and the Philippines emphasise the importance of inclusive and tailored approaches to online safety education and awareness campaigns. A CYP who identifies as LGBTQI+ emphasised the need for a non-judgemental attitude in the family and community:

> "All I want is to be accepted for who I am and not be judged or treated differently."
>
> - SOGIESC CYP, KII, Philippines

Investing in children's clubs, youth groups, and peer educators can strengthen CYP by:

- Raising their awareness about online safety and OCSE risks
- Empowering them to recognise exploitation and seek help
- Fostering trust and mutual understanding between children and caregivers

Existing models that seek to strengthen children's capacity to prevent and respond to OCSE include:

Tuchanuke

ChildFund International Kenya's online child protection project **Tuchanuke (meaning "*Let's Wise Up*"**). A key element is the participation of 1,200 young people ages 15 to 24 who are at most risk but also have the greatest potential to become online safety champions.

Childline Kenya

Childline Kenya's coordinated, nationwide referral system supports children to voice their concerns and connect with essential services.

Child clubs

Child clubs conduct peer-led sessions in schools and communities that empower children to advocate for their rights and promote safety.

4.5.3.2. Strengthening parents

CYP's capacity to appropriately address OCSE is closely related to their family situation, particularly the attitudes, skills, and behaviours of their parents and caregivers. Unfortunately, parents and caregivers often feel powerless and overwhelmed by the potential dangers children face and the vastness and complexity of the digital world. They want to be equipped with knowledge and tools to better protect their children from online harm and express a strong interest in acquiring additional learning and training on related topics (Parents Against Child Exploitation, 2024).

UNICEF's Parenting Guidance Note reinforces the importance of educating parents and caregivers so they feel more comfortable and informed about the digital world and can facilitate appropriate online boundaries (2020).

Programmes that foster informed and empowered caregivers can create a robust first line of defence against the risks posed by the digital environment. Fostering positive communication between parents, caregivers and CYPs about OCSE safety involves taking steps to:

- Build trust
- Enhance digital literacy
- Create open dialogue

Common programmes that have demonstrated benefits for parents and caregivers of CYP with intersectional vulnerabilities include:

- Caregiver support groups
- Community-led initiatives
- Partnerships with local organisations that have expertise in working with diverse groups (e.g. support groups for children with autism)

The evidence suggests that effective OSCE initiatives feature skill-building, community engagement, and capacity development for parents and caregivers that integrate best practices in:

- Positive parenting and open communication
- Gender-sensitive caregiving
- Behaviour change
- Children's rights
- Digital safety
- Holistic, tailored approaches that meets unique vulnerabilities
- Participatory approaches

A key informant in Cambodia emphasised the need for flexibility in programme activities and tailored interventions for fathers and male caregivers:

"The participation of fathers in the programme activities is usually low, they have less time, and had to go far away for economic activities, stayed out longer, and it is hard to form a schedule to fit their availability, so we have to adjust to after dinner time/weekend session especially for them to be able to join. Especially for busy parents, we have to be flexible with their time."

Some key examples include:

The MaPa Programme

The **MaPa Programme** (implemented by Parenting for Lifelong Health Philippines).

Digital Citizenship Modules

Plan International's Digital Citizenship Modules (in collaboration with Meta/Facebook), which teaches parents monitor and protect their children's online presence while respecting their privacy .

The Relational Safeguarding Model

The **Relational Safeguarding Model**, a strengths-based model that supports parents' well-being so they can support their children (Parents Against Child Exploitation, 2014).

Parenting in the Digital Age

Parenting in the Digital Age, a toolkit by **ChildSafeNet** and UNICEF Nepal that educates parents on OSCE-related offenses and promotes supportive digital parenting.

Comprehensive Training Sessions

Comprehensive training sessions for parents and caregivers in Nepal that accommodate diverse literacy levels by using simple, accessible language and visual aids to make the content easily understandable for all parents, regardless of their educational background.

4.5.3.2.1. Economic support

Simply creating programmes and interventions is not enough. People must engage with them if they are to effect positive change. NGOs often struggle to consistently engage parents in OCSE-related activities, particularly in rural and traditional communities where parents often prioritize economic survival over participation in parenting sessions (UNICEF, 2018). Economic support interventions can address underlying vulnerabilities that both limit parent engagement and contribute to OCSE risks. One NGO informant affirmed:

> "We train parents in small-scale businesses to help them sustain their families and reduce risks of exploitation."
> - NGO informant, FGD, Kilifi, Kenya

Examples of economic support that can support OSCE prevention and response include:

EEP

The **Empowerment Entrepreneur Programme (EEP)** in the Philippines, which supports parents' financial independence and reduces the drivers for exploitation .

Financial Assistance

Financial assistance (e.g. small cash transfers) that alleviates the immediate pressures on vulnerable households and creates safer environments for children.

Compensating Caregivers

Compensating caregivers who attend parenting programmes, which encourages more regular participation and reduces the impact of lost earnings.

4.5.3.2.2. OCSE-specific training

Another key need in interventions is a specific focus on OCSE. Many existing parenting programmes address online risks–like Family Development Sessions (FDS) under the Philippine 4Ps–teach effective parenting, child protection laws, and safe online practices but lack specific content on OCSE.

A more comprehensive approach can be seen in Cambodia. Local NGOs, such as Khemera and AusCam Freedom Project, have been running initiatives to raise awareness and build the capacity of local communities, including parents and caregivers, to protect their children from OCSE. An NGO informant describes the programming:

> *"We divided those into sessions; for the first learning, we taught them OCSE, how it happened, the format it came in, and how to solve and report the problem if they faced it. Another one, safe relationships, we have slides teaching them what is a safe relationship between parents and children. And for OCSE we study the root cause and try to link it with a safe relationship."*
>
> - NGO informant, KII, Cambodia
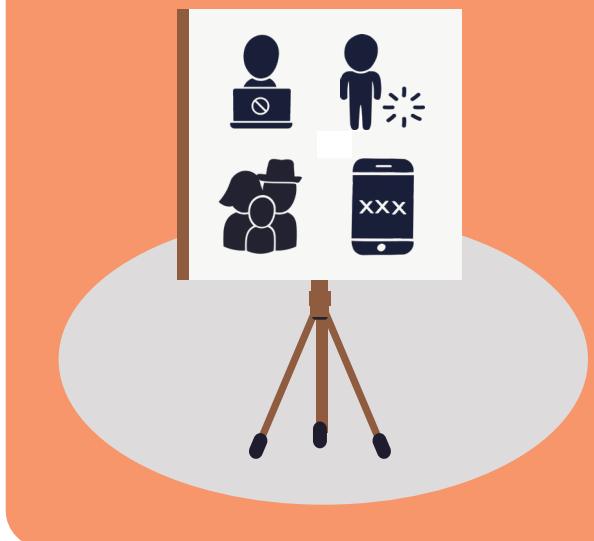
The Cambodian initiatives may serve as important good practice examples for future initiatives, as there is still a strong need to raise awareness and build the capacity of parents and caregivers to protect their children from OCSE.

4.5.3.2.3. Parent sensitisation forums

One approach to building the capacity of parents and givers is the implementation of parent sensitization forums. This cornerstone intervention is a continuation of the Government of Kenya and UNICEF-partnered pilot programme on Positive Parenting in Kilifi County. The forums focus on positive parenting, online safety skills, and digital literacy and are delivered through schools, community meetings, and church gatherings:

> **"We hold community awareness programmes during school PTA [Parents and Teachers Association] meetings or other community forums to educate parents on online child sexual exploitation and the legal provisions to prevent it."**
> **- CBO Director, FGD, Kenya**

One result of the programme is the National Positive Parenting Training Manual (Directorate of Social Development, 2023).

4.5.3.2.4. Positive parenting

It is little surprise that family dynamics influence OCSE risk and response: healthy parent-child relations are proven to strengthen CYP against all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Therefore, many NGOs have prioritised training programmes to support effective parenting in the digital age.

Save the Children's Integrated Community-based Parenting Programme (ICBP), for example, integrates theoretical knowledge with practical strategies to strengthen parents' application of children's rights, positive discipline, gender-sensitive parenting, and digital safety.
Part of parents' response to OCSE involves local authorities. Authorities are often the first point of contact for parents and caregivers seeking advice, so partnering with government bodies is crucial. Good practices may include:

- Designing and integrating positive parenting programmes into existing government programmes
- Partnering with central government and local authorities in supporting parents to prevent OCSE

Save the Children Cambodia provides a model for engaging governments, communities, and parents in positive parenting initiatives that seek to prevent OCSE:

"We work with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. We have our manual and module to work on, like ChildFund or UNICEF, but in Cambodia, we have been cooperating with the government, especially the Ministry of Women's Affairs, on positive parenting since 2017; we have supported them in creating toolkits with 12 chapters. There is a chapter that talks about online safety and how to protect children on online platforms."

- NGO Key informant, KII, Cambodia

POSITIVE PARENTING Toolkit
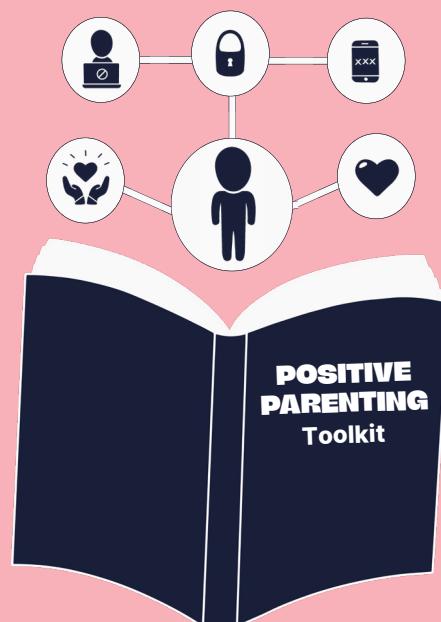
4.5.3.2.5. Awareness raising and advocacy

Where societal norms and systems stand in the way of effective OCSE prevention and response, advocacy is invaluable. Advocacy efforts work to dismantle barriers and break the cultural stigma around sexuality and OCSE. This work is essential because, as Plan International Philippines highlights, caregivers often avoid OCSE-related sessions out of fear of being judged or associated with abuse:

> **"Parents are hesitant to engage in discussions about OCSE because they feel it reflects poorly on them, but advocacy campaigns help to normalize these conversations and emphasize their importance."**
> - NGO Staff member, KII, Philippines

Awareness raising and advocacy encourages caregivers and community members to engage in preventive discussions and recognise their shared role in creating a safe environment for children. They often include digital literacy components to help parents identify and mitigate risks and foster open communication about internet use.

In rural areas where digital access is limited, radio programmes and community gatherings have proven to be key channels for spreading awareness:

> **"Information dissemination often happens through radio, which is a key channel for reaching remote families."**
> - Social Worker, FGD, Kisumu, Kenya

4.5.3.3. Strengthening communities

Such advocacy and awareness initiatives are helpful in strengthening community-based actors, who play a vital role in grassroots prevention and response. In the Philippines, for example, barangay officials are often the first point of contact for families seeking help. NGOs therefore support local structures, such as Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPCs), so they can:

- Strengthen trusted community actors' ability to provide accessible support networks
- Disseminate information
- Facilitate reporting systems

While community members generally recognise the need for collective action to address OCSE, the reach and impact of these efforts face many challenges. Collaborative, community-based OCSE campaigns can address these limitations and reinforce positive behaviour change across multiple touchpoints. (See table: Challenges and potential solutions for collective action to address OCSE.)

Figure 4: Challenges and potential solutions for collective action to address OCSE

CHALLENGES		SOLUTIONS
Limited knowledge and resources	1	Framing OCSE prevention as a community-wide effort
Cultural barriers	2	Reducing stigma around OCSE
Gaps in coordination and reach	3	Encouraging broader participation in OCSE prevention and response
Low participation by parents and caregivers	4	Integrating OCSE topics into regular community activities, such as Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA)
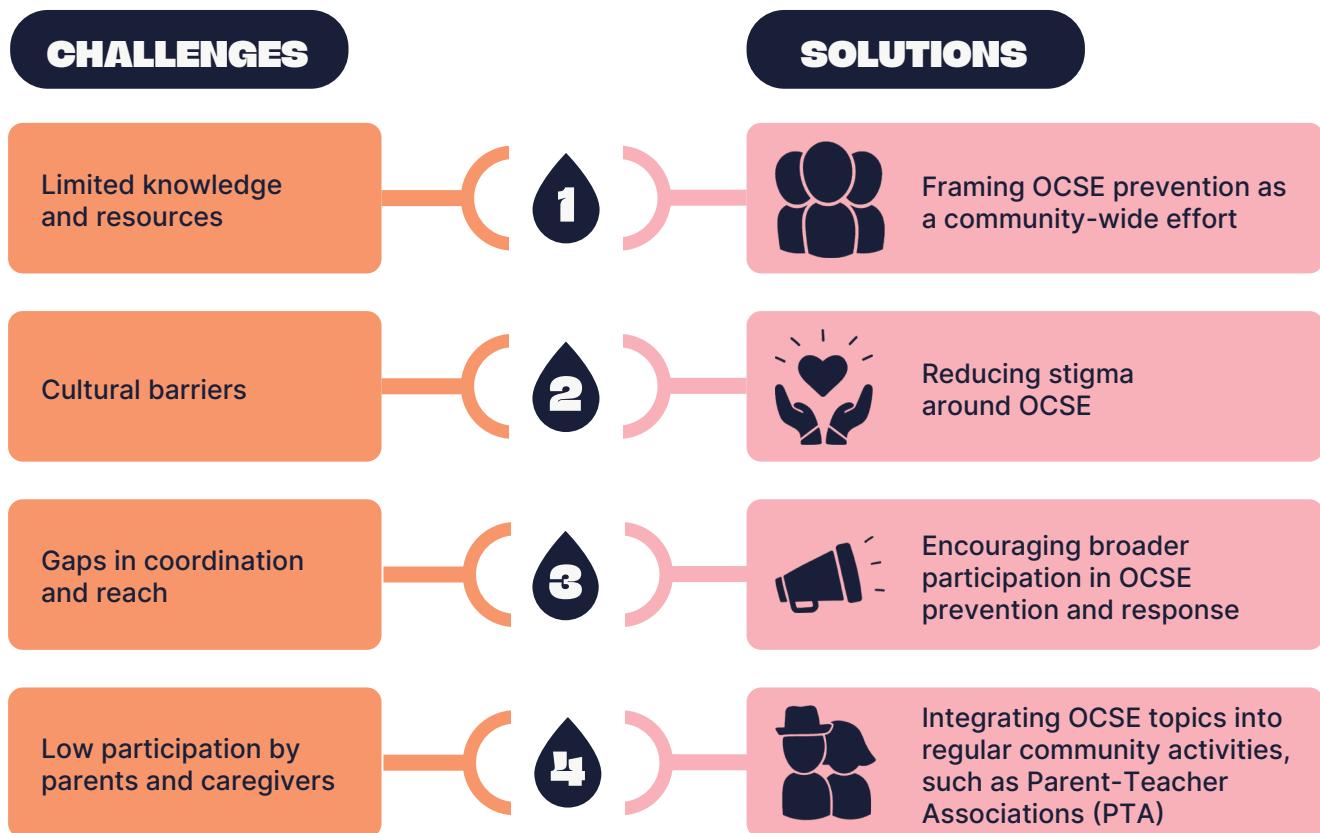
Some programmes have already begun addressing these challenges through localised, collaborative approaches. Good practice examples of community-based advocacy and training programmes include:

Save the Children & Plan International

Save the Children and Plan International, which leverage existing community structures like the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Programme (4Ps), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in schools, and barangay partnerships to enhance the scalability and accessibility of parenting support and digital literacy programming.

Villa Maria Center

Villa Maria Center, which integrates parenting efforts into advocacy campaigns, includes OCSE in community awareness and referral systems, and builds the mental health and livelihoods capacities of social workers and NGOs.

4.5.3.3.1. Community service providers

Community-strengthening initiatives also must consider the needs of community service providers. The capacity of such providers, particularly social workers, to deliver quality, child-friendly, trauma-informed services addressing intersectional vulnerabilities to OCSE faces numerous challenges including:

- Low numbers of staff
- High caseloads
- Limited financial and logistical support
- Inconsistent application of key principles and protocols such as confidentiality
- Lack of comprehensive and specialised training on sexual education, gender norms, inclusion, and OCSE

A key challenge is the lack of coordinated, consistent capacity building that applies within and across communities and countries. A social worker in the Philippines observed:

> "I participated in a training here in Naga, conducted by Bidlisiw . . . but not everyone has attended."
> - Social Worker, KII, Philippines

Despite the challenges, there is a growing understanding of OCSE and its complexities among providers. Childline Kenya trained community service providers, particularly social workers, to identify online risks and implement child-friendly, trauma-informed approaches. Service providers also maintain a moderate level of collaboration. In the Philippines, service providers rely heavily on established referral pathways between social workers, case workers, and law enforcement actors.

4.5.3.3.2. School-based approaches

To support community-level OCSE capacity, schools must be involved. All countries demonstrate some level of school-based approaches to protect children from risks such as bullying, cyberbullying, and physical or sexual abuse.

In the Philippines, for example, the Philippine National Police (PNP) conducted safety seminars in schools and trained teachers in a basic framework for addressing high-risk incidents. One teacher explained:

> "If we encounter a case of sexual harassment, we go directly to the MSWD. Our MSWD conducted an orientation about mental health awareness and sexual harassment... We are instructed not to do the interview [with sexual harassment victims] and go straight to MSWD."
> - Teacher, KII, Philippines

Teachers show a strong interest in learning more about OCSE, and some teachers have taken the initiative to integrate OCSE-related topics into their classes. However, most schools lack specific policies or guidance on preventing and responding to OCSE.

The inclusion of OCSE in parenting discussions and school curricula is increasingly recognised as necessary, although the number of known reports that come through teachers remains extremely low.

4.5.3.3.3. OCSE-specific training

The lack of OCSE-specific training for community-based actors is common, with a couple notable exceptions. Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs technical team has engaged in raising awareness about OCSE by creating and disseminating toolkits and media campaigns. OCSE is a new addition to the programme:

> **"When developing those tools, we did not include the OCSE topic in the first place. We started developing that in 2017, but after COVID-19, as students started studying online, the OCSE increased significantly, so we created a new chapter to include this."**
> - Government official, KII, Cambodia

ChildFund International Kenya has been running an online child protection project since 2021 known as Tuchanuke (meaning "Let's Wise Up") that brings together young people, parents and caregivers, and government officials to strengthen OCSE prevention and response in several (primarily urban) sub-counties in Kenya (2021).

4.5.3.3.4. OSCE reporting and response mechanisms

Being aware of OCSE is an important first step, but there must be a way to put that knowledge into practice to protect children. OCSE is consistently underreported, which can be linked to victims' lack of readily accessible, confidential, and trustworthy reporting and response mechanisms, including legal processes and potential outcomes:

- **Many community members do not know where or how to report OCSE**, although some suggested contacting the Municipal/ City Social Welfare and Development Office (M/ CSWDO), local authorities, or NGO networks.
- **Most CYP were unaware of how to report OCSE incidents**. However, CYP in Nepal, many

of whom had participated in school-based sessions on cyber safety, exhibited a greater awareness of available reporting mechanisms, such as contacting the Cyber Bureau in Kathmandu for cybercrimes.

Some NGOs have taken actions to strengthen OSCE reporting and response such as:

- Facilitating the development and awareness of accessible reporting and response mechanisms
- Training local social workers and case managers to handle reports and make appropriate referrals.

A key example is Childline Kenya's toll-free line that enables nationwide reporting of OCSE. Although the actual number of reports remains low, this is a critical channel both for reporting OCSE and supporting perpetrators' arrest and prosecution (n.d.). A CSO representative said:

> *"We work with child helplines from Childline Kenya to follow up on any reported cases. Their tollfree line has enabled arresting of perpetrators and even identifying survivors for psychosocial support."*
>
> - Teacher, KII, Philippines

CYP and parents affected by OCSE highlighted features that were important when responding to OCSE cases, primarily continuity of care and confidentiality. Currently, OCSE cases in Nepal are not handled by a single case manager, so survivors have to explain their case to every new service provider and risk being re-traumatised.

4.5.3.4. Strengthening legal, policy, and systematic frameworks

In addition to strengthening reporting mechanisms, strengthening broader government systems and frameworks is crucial to effective and sustainable OCSE prevention and response. Some parents and community members lack confidence in the ability of existing systems to adequately prevent and redress OCSE cases:

> "Just like the sexual offense act that protects against rape, we should have OCSE offense bill that protects against OCSE. Currently it is under cyber offense bill which does not have harsh prison punishment. When someone is imprisoned for 20 years plus, others will fear engaging in similar offenses."
>
> - NGO project manager, KII, Kilifi, Kenya

The robustness of legal, policy, and systematic frameworks varies across countries. Key OCSE-related policies include:

Cambodia

The Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to OCSE (2021-2025) includes key aspects on promoting positive parenting and preventing online and offline violence against children. The Child Online Protection Guidelines for the Digital Technology Industry (2023) encourages relevant ministries, development partners, NGOs/CSOs, local governments, and the private sector to create a safe and positive online experience for children.

Kenya

The draft amendment to the Children's Act (Draft Children's Bill, 2018), although not yet enacted, specifically mentions OCSE and Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) (Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children [OSAEC] and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials [CSAEM] Act, 2022). The Cyber Crime and Computer Misuse Act of 2018 explicitly addresses child pornography, cyber stalking and cyber bullying.

Nepal

The *Act Relating to Children*, 2018 mentions the role of parents but fails to provide specific guidelines or mechanisms to support them in effectively reporting or addressing violence against children.

Philippines

Local government units (LGUs) have passed localized ordinances, such as Daanbantayan's Resolution No. 382 and Bantayan's Resolution No. 873, that prohibit OCSE and the production, distribution, and access to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Materials (CSAEM).

5

SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Synthesis

The rapid spread of technology across Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines has created new opportunities and significant risks for children, parents, and caregivers. Both children and adults use online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and gaming apps to positively connect with peers, family, and educational content. However, the digital environment also exposes children to harms such as:

- Inappropriate and illegal content
- Cyberbullying
- Child, early, and forced marriage
- Online sexual exploitation (OCSE)

CYP's individual risks are shaped by the interplay between individual and family characteristics, digital access, social norms, and the intergenerational digital divide—the gap between children's and caregivers' technological skills, assumptions, and understanding. This contributes to inconsistent perceptions of risk and safety and affects families' ability to:

- Identify the actual benefits and dangers of online activities
- Use safety tools like privacy settings and content filters effectively
- Balance independence with protection
- Discuss sensitive topics like OCSE, gender, and sexuality
- Report and respond to incidents of harm

As a result, parents may monitor or restrict CYP's access to technology without discussion, and children may withhold concerns or violations out of fear of being blamed, stigmatised, or punished.

5.1.1. Gender, social norms, and unequal risk

Gendered parenting roles can place online monitoring expectations on mothers, even though fathers may be more digitally literate due to work-related exposure. Girls are seen as needing significant protection from online harms. The vulnerabilities of boys, however—exposure to sexual exploitation, pornography, and gaming addiction—are often overlooked due to stigma and social norms around masculinity.

Migration adds more complexity. Girls tend to stay connected to caregivers through social media, which can reduce their risk of OCSE. Boys who lack that connection may face higher risk of OCSE.

Children with diverse SOGIESC and those with intellectual or mental disabilities are at heightened risk of online and offline discrimination and abuse. Testimonies from parents highlighted an urgent need for community-based support and inclusive resources to improve overall awareness of and response to these specific risks.

5.1.2. Online and offline risks are interrelated

Digital risks are often extensions of offline vulnerabilities and vice versa. Children facing authoritarian parenting, family separation, or poverty may seek connection online, increasing their exposure to OCSE. At the same time, online behaviour (e.g. dating, sexting) can lead to real-world harms. These dynamics are mutually reinforcing and require holistic prevention approaches.

5.1.3. Inequities in protection and preparedness

Children across all contexts take on significant responsibility for their own safety, including blocking users, locking profiles, and seeking peer support. Some felt their parents lacked the digital skills or emotional understanding to help them address OCSE.

Parents and caregivers expressed the desire to protect their children online but reported feeling disempowered by a lack of digital literacy and discomfort discussing sexuality or exploitation. Many issued general warnings about online safety rather than initiating open conversations.

Key factors limiting parental capacity include:

- Inadequate digital literacy
- Prevailing cultural and gender norms
- Economic insecurity and migration
- Limited access to tools, services, and platforms
- Family dynamics and shared caregiving roles
- Caregivers' own internet habits and device use (modelling)
- Geographic disparities in connectivity and resources

Families in rural and low-income areas often have restricted access to connectivity, information, and services. In urban areas, although digital tools are more available, the pace of technological change may outpace parents' and caregivers' ability to monitor CYP or respond to violations.

5.1.4. Parents, caregivers, and communities need stronger support systems

Parents and community actors across countries called for practical, culturally relevant tools to strengthen child–caregiver relationships, particularly in the context of OCSE. This includes support to understand:

- Adolescent development
- Online grooming
- How to respond without blame
- How police, legal, and child protection systems work
- How to report violations
- How to access follow-up support

Stakeholders expressed a desire for positive parenting programmes, trauma-informed communication guidance, and auxiliary support, such as financial assistance and livelihoods support, to reduce the stressors that reduce parents' and communities' capacity to protect children online.

Although some such programmes exist, most focus on awareness raising rather than behaviour change and do not equip parents and caregivers with practical skills to act with confidence.

Support for fathers, grandfathers, and non-parent caregivers remains particularly limited. Community-based actors, including NGOs, religious and traditional leaders, teachers, and social workers, also play an essential role in delivering training and first-line support. However, they often lack adequate understanding of OCSE.

5.1.5. Policy and systems gaps persist

While legal frameworks addressing OCSE exist in all four countries, stakeholders highlighted weak enforcement, unclear guidelines for navigating legal processes, insufficient caregiver-friendly reporting platforms and support services, and a lack of trauma-informed responses.

Parents and caregivers wanted stronger school-based education and awareness on OCSE. Unfortunately, schools often lacked the required training or resources.

Ultimately, preventing and responding to OCSE requires a whole-of-community and whole-of-system approach—one that empowers parents and caregivers, addresses structural inequalities, and strengthens cross-sector coordination and collaboration.

5.2. Recommendations

1 Strengthen positive parenting for the digital age

2 Foster community-led support systems

3 Scale up CSO-led interventions.

4 Leverage the role of technology providers.

5 Strengthen legal and policy frameworks

6 Expand the evidence base

Preventing and responding to online child sexual exploitation (OCSE) requires coordinated action across parents and caregivers, communities, schools, digital platforms, NGOs, and governments. Drawing on research from Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines, these recommendations address the key gaps and opportunities identified.

A cross-cutting theme throughout the research is the central role of strategic, inclusive communication within families and across systems. From parenting programmes to community campaigns and policy frameworks, effective OCSE prevention must be rooted in strong communication that supports family dialogue, shifts social norms, and engages trusted messengers.

To build safer digital environments for children, the following six areas of strategic action are recommended:

5.2.1. Strengthen positive parenting for the digital age

Develop and expand evidence-based parenting programmes that promote safe, informed caregiving in a digital world:

- Support caregivers through accessible, inclusive parenting programmes that promote safety, connection, and confidence in the digital era.
- Improve digital literacy (e.g. parental controls, privacy settings, screen time) and build communication skills to discuss online safety and OCSE.
- Embed open, non-judgmental dialogue, positive discipline, and emotional connection in parenting interventions.
- Provide targeted support for parents of children with intellectual disabilities and those with diverse SOGIESC, including

communication strategies and digital risk awareness.

- Address gender norms by engaging fathers and male caregivers and raising awareness of boys' vulnerabilities (e.g. grooming, pornography, gaming addiction, underreporting).
- Equip caregivers to understand grooming, recognise signs of OCSE, and report concerns confidently.
- Promote caregiver modelling of balanced screen use and respectful online behaviour.
- Support transnational families through digital connection tools and caregiving by extended family (e.g. grandparents).
- Facilitate parent and caregiver support groups and networks that reduce isolation, build peer support, and strengthen collective voice.

5.2.2. Foster community-led support systems

Strengthen local networks and trusted community structures that support caregivers in protecting children online:

- Engage faith leaders, teachers, and community actors to reduce stigma, share information, and normalise discussion of OCSE.
- Equip community members with user-friendly materials (e.g. scripts, stories, visual tools) to help parents recognise signs, talk to children, and access support.
- Create safe community spaces for parent support groups where open discussion of challenges and solutions is encouraged.
- Equip schools with tools to involve parents in online safety (e.g. take-home resources, teacher–parent communication channels, and training for school staff).
- Strengthen social workers' capacity through OCSE training, parent and caregiver engagement tools, and referral systems.
- Address barriers such as high caseloads and under-resourcing.

5.2.3. Scale up CSO-led interventions

Enable civil society organisations to expand parent-focused OCSE responses:

- Develop and scale positive parenting programmes that combine digital literacy (especially around OCSE) and behaviour change to support implementation, not just knowledge gains.
- Implement public awareness campaigns that:
  – Model parent- and caregiver–child conversations about online safety.
  – Use relatable scenarios to tackle cultural taboos and shame.
  – Feature caregivers from diverse backgrounds, including fathers, rural families, and caregivers of neurodiverse children.
- Collaborate with local influencers, peer educators, and survivor voices to deliver culturally grounded, gender-sensitive messaging.
- Develop inclusive resources that address risks facing boys, neurodiverse children, and children with diverse SOGIESC.

5.2.4. Leverage the role of technology providers

Ensure tech platforms actively support caregiver roles in online safety:

- Provide intuitive parental control tools and alerts with built-in guidance for family conversations.
- Develop parent- and caregiver-facing platforms with practical resources, peer learning, and reporting guidance.
- Collaborate with tech platforms to disseminate OCSE prevention content–especially from NGOs, parents, or survivor advocates.
- Encourage tech companies to co-create

awareness campaigns with CSOs, reaching caregivers via SMS, in-app notifications, and local language formats.
- Facilitate government–tech collaboration to monitor and address OCSE, including data sharing and safer platform design.

5.2.5. Strengthen legal and policy frameworks

Align laws, policies, and public systems with caregiver needs and emerging digital threats:

- Implement and enforce OCSE policies, holding tech companies accountable and protecting child rights online.
- Address new risks such as sexual extortion, grooming, and the misuse of AI (e.g. deepfakes).
- Ensure child protection services are child-friendly, gender-responsive, and multilingual.
- Invest in public education for parents and caregivers using inclusive formats (e.g. SMS, social media, radio).

- Simplify reporting systems and ensure follow-up communication and psychosocial support.
- Allocate funding for parenting and digital safety programmes that reach diverse families.

5.2.6. Expand the evidence base

Fill knowledge gaps through inclusive research that targets underrepresented caregivers:

- Prioritise future studies involving rural families, low-income households, fathers, grandparents, siblings, and non-parent caregivers.
- Include parents of children who identify as SOGIESC or who have intellectual disabilities to inform more inclusive and context-specific interventions.

STOP
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