

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse – the nature, threats and magnitude of the problem

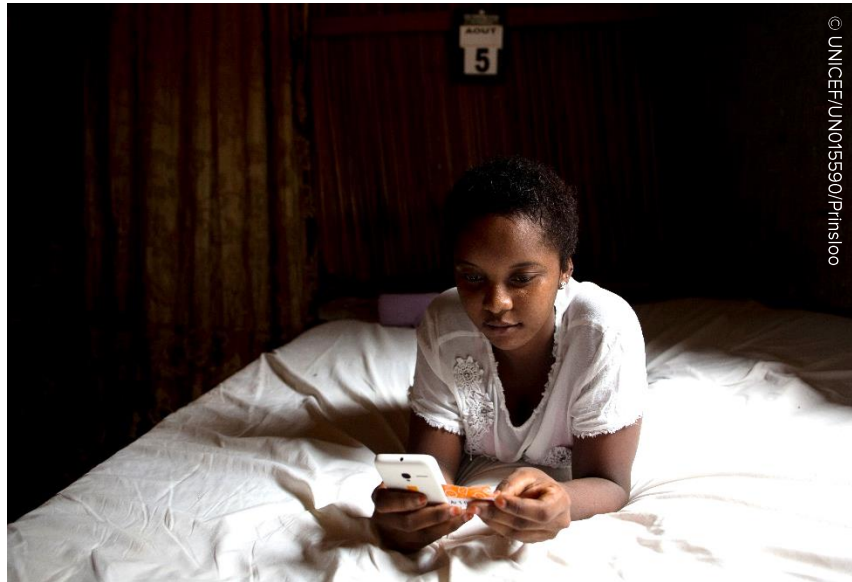
Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) is a grave and growing problem that requires urgent action. One out of every three Internet users worldwide is a child. Every day, nearly 200,000 children go online for the first time. Their lives are shaped by experiences and interactions that are happening in digital world – friendships, entertainment, learning – which are increasingly governed by commercial interests and engagement rules on platforms that have not been designed with children’s interest and safety in mind.

Any child can become a victim. Online violence can affect children from all social backgrounds and from any country. Online CSEA is one of the worst manifestations of the failures to ensure children’s safety online. It is a growing problem and it needs urgent, collective and global action. Online communities of child abusers are proliferating, and many children are coerced or extorted into producing sexualized images or engaging in sexual activities

via webcams. Online harm against children, including through the viewing of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), can be as severe in its impact as abuse committed offline. In some cases, online abuse can facilitate the transition to offline abuse. The photos and videos shared on online platforms can harm children for life, and have a direct impact on their development, health and ability to learn and fulfill their full potential.

The statistics are alarming. The numbers of violent and sexual images and videos of children uploaded, or live-streamed on the Internet and Dark Web, are increasing at an incredible speed. For example, the number of reported photos and images received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children grew nearly tenfold in three years, from 1.1 million in 2014 to 10.2 million by 2017. This number almost doubled in 2018, with 18.4 million reports received. Internet Watch Foundation also reports that in 2017 alone, online photos and videos with sexual abuse of children increased 37 percent when compared to 2016.

The Global Threat Assessment conducted by the WePROTECT Global Alliance cited that one of the many hidden Internet services dedicated to the abuse of infants and toddlers contained over





18,000 registered members. A similar forum was found to receive more than 23 million visits. Moreover, some studies show that younger children are at higher risk.

The International Survivors Survey conducted by the Canadian Center for Child Protection indicates that 56 percent of the abuse began before the age of 4, and 42 percent were abused for more than 10 years. Reports received by the Internet Watch Foundation show that in the United Kingdom, half of the reported online CSAM depicts the abuse of children under 10, and one-third of those images involve rape and sexual torture.

How does online CSEA happen? Three possible scenarios:

1. *An adult takes photos or films sexual acts* involving children with a camera or a smartphone and use them for self-pleasure, sells them for financial gain, shares them in online forums with other adults with a sexual interest in children, or uses them to blackmail the child in exchange for money or sexual favors.
2. *The sexual abuse of a child is live-streamed.* Adults with a sexual interest in children do not need to travel. They can sit in their house in front of a computer, tablet or mobile phone and abuse a child for their sexual pleasure. This affects mostly children living in poverty and in most cases, an adult well-known to the child facilitates the abuse in exchange for money.
3. *A child takes photos or makes videos with sexual content* and shares it via a mobile phone or the Internet with a peer or an adult. These self-generated images and videos are often used to intimidate or blackmail the child in exchange of money, favors, or to pressure them into producing more sexual photos or to have sex in real life. This is commonly referred to as grooming, sexting, sextortion, sexual harassment, and revenge porn.

