

**PRESS BRIEFING - Launch: 20 April 2022**

**New report estimates that at least 2 million children in the Philippines were subjected to online sexual abuse and exploitation in the past year alone.**

**96% of 12-17 year olds in the Philippines are online. They all face the risk of online sexual abuse and exploitation.**

The ground-breaking *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* research found that 20% of internet-using children aged 12-17 children had experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse in the last year alone. If scaled to the population, the report estimates that as many as two million children<sup>1</sup> could be experiencing grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the Philippines. Experiences reported by children included grooming, being offered gifts or money in exchange for sexual acts, and being threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual acts.

Concerningly, *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* revealed that the online world has made it easier for offenders to target children for sexual abuse and exploitation. For example, 11% of the children surveyed said they had been offered money or gifts for sexual images in the past year, of which 53% of these children said that these offers came from someone they didn't know. Most children received these offers on social media (38%). Additionally, 15% of the children surveyed said they were asked to share sexual images of themselves in the past year. Of the children who received these requests, 49% said the most recent request came from someone they didn't know.

*Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* also found that the internet is being misused to facilitate the abuse of children by family members and/or someone the child already knows, often known as 'facilitating offenders'. One frontline worker interviewed said that in most of the cases of online child sexual exploitation and abuse she was aware of, family members had facilitated the abuse. She said, *"The survivors will say that they came from a loving family. The thing about online child sexual abuse and exploitation that I observed is that the bond between the victim and the perpetrator is stronger and more important than the exploitation that happened."*

The report found that children in the Philippines view their online and offline worlds as entwined, which can complicate their ability to identify risks of online abuse and exploitation and ability to report abuse. When children do experience abuse, *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* found that children did not know where to go or whom to tell about it. The report found that:

- 55% of children surveyed did not know how to report harmful content on social media.
- 44% said they did not know where to get help if they or a friend were subjected to sexual harassment or abuse.
- 13% of children surveyed said they had had sexual images of them shared without their permission within the last year. 36% did not know who had shared the images. 31% of children who had their sexual images shared without their permission did not tell anyone.
- 13% of children surveyed had been threatened or blackmailed to engage in sexual activities within the past year. None of these children reported what happened to any formal reporting mechanisms though over half of those children did disclose to friends or caregivers.

Currently the high number of cases makes it hard for authorities to keep up with those who are willing and able to report. Insufficient staff and training were the two main issues mentioned by government representatives when talking about the response to online child sexual exploitation and abuse. One social worker told us, *"We really lack manpower, so much so that one social worker may be responsible for around 300 cases of child survivors."*

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<sup>1</sup> *Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* research found that at least 20% of internet-using children aged 12-17 were victims of grave instances of online sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year alone. Scaled to the population, this represents an estimated 2,000,000 children.

Child victim and witness protection programmes are limited in the Philippines, which adds to the pressure for child victims to be held under care while they are going through the justice process. Removing child victims from harm, while the case is being processed, can leave the children with feelings of confusion, fear, guilt, shame, frustration and anger. One child said, *“I was scared not knowing where they were taking me. I was so upset, angry, at them because they just took me without proper explanation...I was not able to tell [my employers] that I will be absent from work. I was also not able to say goodbye to my family. My family was angry at me.”*

Nevertheless, young survivors described their lawyers and judicial staff in largely positive terms. One survivor said, *“All of them, even the lawyer, also the prosecutor, they were experts, they connected to us and treated us well. If there was a problem, I [would] go to them and they [would] help me understand.”*

Prevention is vital to tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse, and a proactive response will be required to handle the trend of increased reports of suspected online sexual exploitation and abuse in the Philippines submitted by social media platforms to the U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). Reports increased by 479% between 2017 and 2019.

*Disrupting Harm in the Philippines* highlights the need for further awareness and understanding of the issue to be established in the country; more resources to be allocated to those responding to the significant and urgent need to be provided; and legal processes in place to hold offenders to account.

#### **About *Disrupting Harm***

In early 2019, the [Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children](#), through its Safe Online initiative, invested \$7 million to develop *Disrupting Harm*, a holistic and innovative research project that aims to better understand how digital technology facilitates the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Safe Online brought together and funded three organisations – [ECPAT](#), [INTERPOL](#) and the [UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti](#) – to undertake new research in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. This type of holistic research and assessment is unique. The methodology developed for these assessments has been implemented across the 13 countries and can be used by other countries in the future.

Full report can be read here: <https://www.end-violence.org/disrupting-harm#country-reports>

#### **What is Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA)?**

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) refers to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the continuum of abuse or exploitation. OCSEA can occur fully online or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between offenders and children.