

Call for input: Addressing the vulnerabilities of children to sale and sexual exploitation in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals

Context

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse sits within a wider framework of harms, including violence against children, child abuse, gender-based violence, human trafficking and modern slavery, online harm, financial exploitation, etc. Abuse that is facilitated by technology is an issue of growing concern as access to the internet grows significantly globallyⁱ, with a third of users thought to be under 18ⁱⁱ. It is critical to identify vulnerabilities and good practices that help ensure safety in the digital space, if we are to ever reach Sustainable Development Goals 8.7 (end modern slavery, trafficking, and child labour) and 16.2 (protect children from abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and violence) by 2030.

To support this effort, WeProtect Global Alliance (‘the Alliance’) brings together governments, the private sector, civil society, and international organisations to break down complex problems, develop policies and practical approaches to make the digital world safe and positive for children. Government and law enforcement cannot tackle this crime without widespread support and engagement. It is only through working as a broad coalition with the private sector and civil society that we can ensure all children are safe from online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Alliance publishes a biennial Global Threat Assessment that provides governments and key stakeholders with the latest information regarding emerging threats and promising approaches. Earlier Global Threat Assessments (2019 and 2018) had already highlighted that technology had generated paradigm shifts in both the victim’s online exposure and the offenders’ ability to share child sexual abuse material securely, and to interact anonymously with children and other offenders online. The 2021 Global Threat Assessment highlighted that the nature of harms continues to grow and diversify, further complexifying cases and responses.

As part of the Global Threat Assessment, the Alliance partnered with Economist Impact to undertake a global study of childhood experience of 18 to 20 years old to estimate childhood exposure to online sexual harms and their risk factors. The findings revealed that 54% of respondents had experienced at least one online sexual harm during childhoodⁱⁱⁱ and 34% were asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with^{iv}. The statistics showed that child online sexual harm is happening across the world and that, although girls are more at risk, nearly half of boys had experienced at least one online sexual harm^v. Moreover, respondents who identified as transgender/non-binary, LGBTQ+ and/or disabled were more likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood^{vi} and respondents who identified as disabled were more likely to be targeted by an adult they knew^{vii}.

The report revealed that two-third of respondents who received sexually explicit material online as children received it through a private messaging service, most commonly on their personal mobile device^{viii}.

The COVID-19 pandemic also created the ‘perfect storm’ of conditions that fuelled the rise of online child sexual exploitation and abuse across the globe. For many established offenders, lockdowns provided more opportunities to contact children^{ix}. NCMEC reported experiencing a 106% increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation to its global Cyber Tip line during the pandemic.^x

In addition to these global challenges, we have highlighted some of the other key policy issues that have significance to child online safety below. This is not an exhaustive list but gives examples of key policy and practice challenges that need to be prioritised. In addition to these, we have set out key recommendations that we believe must be taken forward in order to better protect children from exploitation and abuse online across the world.

The need to balance privacy with child protection

The European Commission’s proposal for a temporary derogation to the e-Privacy Directive^{xi} and the Electronic Communications Code^{xii} in 2021 led to a controversy that shone a light on the challenges inherent in balancing privacy with child protection.

Indeed, the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), reported a 47% decrease from 2020 to 2021 in the number of reports made available to European Union (EU) countries. For the same period, it also highlighted a 57% decrease in the number of files contained within EU reports^{xiii}. According to NCMEC, the decrease in the EU is directly tied to the companies that stopped scanning for child sexual abuse material in the EU due to the e-Privacy Directive.

This revealed the need for consensus on the proportionate use of innovative technology by private companies to proactively identify children at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation and abuse^{xiv}.

The challenging rise of ‘self-generated’ material

Recently the volume of ‘self-generated’ material has spiked dramatically. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) received 68,000 reports of ‘self-generated’ sexual material in 2020, a 77% increase from 2019. Overall, ‘self-generated’ content accounted for 44% of all reports actioned by the IWF in 2020^{xv}. This escalation has been partly attributed to the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic: children spending more time online, and reduced opportunities to commit ‘in-person’ abuse fuelling online offending and demand for imagery^{xvi}.

According to the IWF, girls in early adolescence were far more likely to appear in such imagery with 95% of ‘self-produced’ sexual content reported to the organisation in 2020 featured girls aged 11-13^{xvii}. Another worrying trend, which has also been exacerbated by the poverty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is ‘self-generation’ in exchange for payment. Indeed, all acts of commercially motivated ‘self-production’ are almost certainly harmful to the child, and the material produced is most likely illegal. Harm caused by ‘self-generated’ material extends to harassment, further sharing and victim-blaming^{xviii}.

In a survey by Thorn, 60% of children blamed the victim when ‘self-generated’ material was re-shared, while 55% of caregivers also believed the victim was mostly or exclusively to blame for resharing^{xix}. Such attitudes undermine disclosure and reporting by fuelling stigmas that prevent children from coming forward. Reporting initiatives and technology solutions may curb the rise in ‘self-generated’ material, but prevention demands a more nuanced approach.

Emerging good practices exist. The [Report Remove](#) campaign, for example, was launched in the UK in 2020 to enable children to anonymously report ‘self-generated’ material and request for it to be taken down^{xx}. Such initiatives reduce barriers to disclosure. However, such solutions also have implications for children’s right to privacy, which will need to be carefully considered to support wide uptake and effective deployment.

Given that sharing ‘self-produced’ sexual images is not uncommon and does not always cause harm, excessive focus on potential negative outcomes risks “providing advice that will be dismissed as it doesn’t correspond with the common experiences of young people”^{xxi}. Education will be key to protecting children from becoming victims of coercion, and from the potential negative consequences of ‘voluntary self-production.’ Educational initiatives can also help to promote healthy sexual development and understanding of consent^{xxii}.

Framing child sexual exploitation and abuse online as a form of human trafficking

Cases of trafficking increasingly have an online or technology facilitated element. According to Europol, traffickers are moving their business model online^{xxiii}, which is likely to have been exacerbated by the COVID19 global pandemic^{xxiv}. With traffickers utilising technology to recruit, control and exploit child victims, it is important to understand the implications of technology on this crime.

Many countries’ domestic laws on child abuse material were drafted in a time when the internet did not exist or was in its infancy. Equally, the internationally agreed trafficking definition, known as the ‘Palermo Protocol,’ was drafted in 2000 and makes no mention of the internet in its text^{xxv}. Law is still evolving in this area and how these online-facilitated crimes are defined may vary across domestic legal instruments. This poses a challenge to policymakers, legislators, and practitioners as the way in which a particular type or form of abuse is framed and defined can have significant implications for the response to it and to its victims^{xxvi}. There is increased need to improve legal clarity on this issue, and to conduct further research and data analysis to scope the specific gaps, challenges, and good practice (especially analysing restitution, compensation, sentencing and victim support).

Recommendations

In its endeavour to develop detailed and practical recommendations to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse online, the Alliance has outlined concrete recommendations in terms of legislation, criminal justice, victim support, technology and given recommendations at societal and research level in its 2021 [Global Threat Assessment](#) as outlines hereunder:

CROSS-CUTTING: Governments, the private sector, and civil society must commit sufficient funding to tackle the threat.					
Policy/legislation	Criminal justice	Victim support services	Technology	Societal	Research and insight
Governments must <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criminalise all offences relating to child sexual exploitation and abuse. • Invest in strengthening child protection systems. • Consider other legislative options (i.e. internet regulation). 	Governments must: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in deterrence and rehabilitation. • Fund specialist police units to cultivate threat expertise. • Invest in building international policing capabilities. • Governments and police agencies must develop consistent approaches for the investigation of cross-border crimes. 	Policymakers must work with industry to set standards to reduce online harm. Governments must invest in victim support services. All stakeholders must safely engage survivors of child sexual abuse to inform the design of effective services, policies and support.	Online service providers must take a 'Safety by Design' approach for services aimed at children. Online service providers should publish regular transparency reports. Developers of online safety technologies should continue innovating to enhance the detection of child sexual abuse online.	Governments must incorporate online safety into school curricula. All stakeholders involved in the response must educate communities on the risk and impact of child sexual abuse.	Governments, NGOs and online service providers must invest in research to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understand pathways into offending. • Better understand the drivers behind child 'self-generated' sexual material. • Understand risk and protective factors for children. • Improve the evidence picture for 'Global South' countries.

Moreover, the global threat assessment continues to encourage countries to use the [Model National Response](#) (MNR) as a guidance to develop the capabilities needed for effective child protection. This critical framework was launched in 2015 and has been used as a guidance that enable a country – regardless of its starting point – to identify any gaps in capabilities and commence planning to fill those gaps. Using the MNR has assisted countries in identifying actions that contribute to the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal targets, primarily 16.2 - End all forms of violence against and torture of children. It could also assist with delivery against targets 8.7 and 5.2.

Th Alliance has also developed a [Global Strategic Response](#) to reflect the need for a coordinated multi- sector, multi-agency and multi-layered response to safeguard children both online and offline from child sexual exploitation and encourage global collaboration around this issue.

About WePROTECT Global Alliance

WePROTECT Global Alliance (WPGA) is the largest and most diverse global movement dedicated to putting online-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation on the global agenda and mobilising a worldwide campaign to end it. As of March 2022, 98 countries are members, along with 55 companies and 65 civil society organisations and nine international institutions.

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ⁱ [WeProtect-Global-Alliance-Trafficking-Roundtable-Outcomes-Briefing-2021.pdf](#)

ⁱⁱ [GKO Summary Report.pdf \(unicef-irc.org\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)

^{iv} [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)

^v [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)

^{vi} [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)

^{vii} [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)

- viii [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)
- ix [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)
- x [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)
- xi <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32002L0058&from=EN>
- xii [20-11-10 opinion combatting child abuse en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)
- xiii [We Are in Danger of Losing the Global Battle for Child Safety \(missingkids.org\)](#)
- xiv [Technology-privacy-and-rights-roundtable-outcomes-briefing.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)
- xv WF Annual Report: Self-generated child sexual abuse (IWF, 2021) Accessed from [Self-generated Child Sexual Abuse Online - IWF](#)
- xvi PA Consulting engagement with Internet Watch Foundation, 01/03/2021
- xvii WF Annual Report: Self-generated child sexual abuse (IWF, 2021) Accessed from [Self-generated Child Sexual Abuse Online - IWF](#)
- xviii [Global-Threat-Assessment-2021.pdf \(weprotect.org\)](#)
- xix [08112020_SG-CSAM AttitudesExperiences-Report_2019.pdf \(hubspotusercontent00.net\)](#)
- xx The Internet: Investigation Report (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2020) Accessed from: [The Internet: Investigation Report \(iicsa.org.uk\)](#)
- xxi EU Kids Online 2020: Survey Results from 19 Countries (EU Kids Online, 2020) Accessed from: [EU-Kids-Online-2020-10Feb2020.pdf \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)
- xxii PA Consulting Engagement with SafeBAE, 02/03
- xxiii European Commission, Strategy on Combatting Trafficking of Human Beings [Fighting trafficking in human beings: A new strategy \(europa.eu\)](#)
- xxiv [2021-04_IJM - COVID 19 OSEC Brief.pdf](#)
- xxv [WeProtect-Global-Alliance-Trafficking-Roundtable-Outcomes-Briefing-2021.pdf](#)
- xxvi [WeProtect-Global-Alliance-Trafficking-Roundtable-Outcomes-Briefing-2021.pdf](#)