



DISRUPTING HARM

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ONLINE RISK AND HARM FOR CHILDREN IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

About this report

Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 60 per cent of its population under the age of 25.¹ The population of sub-Saharan Africa alone is projected to double by 2050.² Such a high number of young people is an opportunity for the continent's growth, and digital technology can help realize young people's potential.

Despite gaps in some parts of the continent, the number of young people across Africa who use the internet increases every year.³ This increase in internet availability is already having some positive impacts in terms of creating jobs and reducing poverty, which is necessary to meet the needs of a fast-growing population.⁴ At the same time, countries need to proactively mitigate the potential increase in exposure to online risk and harm that can result when countries transition from low to high connectivity.⁵

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that high-quality, comprehensive data and research, including research conducted with children, is needed to inform legislation, policy and practice intended to protect and support children in a digital world.⁶ But the African Union has noted a lack of empirical research, information and data in most African countries on this topic,⁷ making it difficult to respond in an evidence-informed manner.

In this report, we use household survey data from children and caregivers living in six countries in Eastern and Southern Africa to provide an overview of their internet access and an analysis of the types of harm they have encountered online. The six countries are Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Uganda.

The purpose of this report is to draw on the voices and experiences of children to provide a regional snapshot of the online harm landscape as a baseline, and urge regional and national bodies to continue mobilizing to address these harms in light of Africa's digital transformation.

The intent is not to compare countries in terms of who is doing better or worse, but to look for similarities and differences that can help us understand more about the causes and solutions for these issues and find opportunities for regional learning.

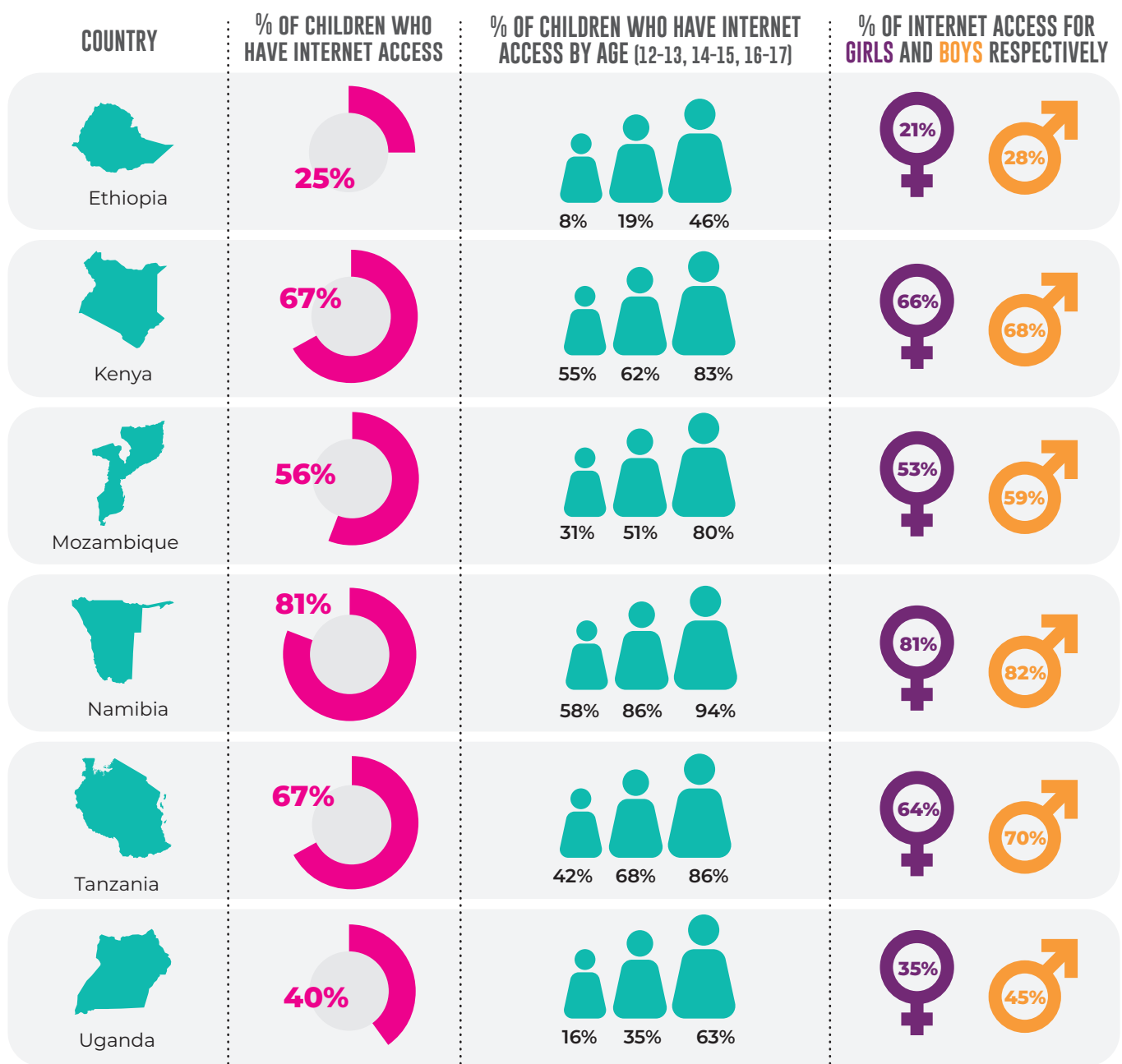


MORE CHILDREN IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA HAVE INTERNET ACCESS THAN EVER BEFORE, BUT USE IS STILL UNEVEN ACROSS COUNTRIES

Although the World Bank reports that 84 per cent of the sub-Saharan African population lives in areas where mobile internet services are available, only 22 per cent had used these services by the end of 2021. This usage rate is the lowest in the world.

However, Disrupting Harm data shows that in these six countries a significant proportion of children are already connected; on average,

over half of children aged 12–17 (or 56 per cent) had used the internet in the past three months. Internet access is uneven across countries; for instance, internet use for 12–17 year olds was as high as 81 per cent in Namibia and as low as 25 per cent in Ethiopia. However, due to the size of the respective populations, this still means that more children are going online regularly in Ethiopia than in Namibia.



Base: Total number of sampled households with children aged 12–17. ET = 5,938; KE = 1,879; MZ = 2,829; NA = 1,733; TZ = 1,857; and UG = 3,464.

Internet access appears to be strongly correlated with age; in all countries, children aged 16–17 were much more likely to go online than younger children. Gender differences in access were most pronounced in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Uganda where girls were significantly less likely to have access than boys. These three countries have the lowest internet access for children overall, which may indicate that countries in earlier stages of internet adoption may see larger gender differences until access becomes more mainstreamed.

While children in some of these countries are able to participate in and drive the digital

transformation of society, accessibility and affordability remain key constraints for others. The cost of connectivity is the main barrier to access that children face in Uganda and Ethiopia, the two countries with the lowest internet access among the six. Poor connection and lack of electricity were two other common barriers, highlighting the challenges around accessibility and affordability.⁹

More older children and those living in urban areas have internet access compared to younger children and those living in rural areas. Gender differences in access were generally small in these countries, although restrictive parenting tends to negatively affect girls' access more than for boys.⁹

TAKEAWAY

While efforts to improve accessibility and affordability are necessary, perceptions of internet use as being more valuable for boys than for girls and entrenched gender norms preventing girls' access need to be tackled.¹⁰ We will only reduce the digital divide if existing inequalities are also addressed, not only in terms of ethnicity, class, sex and gender but also inequalities in education, awareness of online risks and harms, ability and motivation to use technology, and the amount of content that exists for children from different backgrounds and who speak different languages.¹¹

DESPITE ITS MANY BENEFITS, THE INTERNET CAN BE USED TO HARM CHILDREN

As more children go online and enjoy the benefits of digital technology, it is critical to consider how the online environment presents risks to their safety and well-being. Common risks for children include exposure to illegal or age-inappropriate content, as well as harmful contact with and conduct by other people.

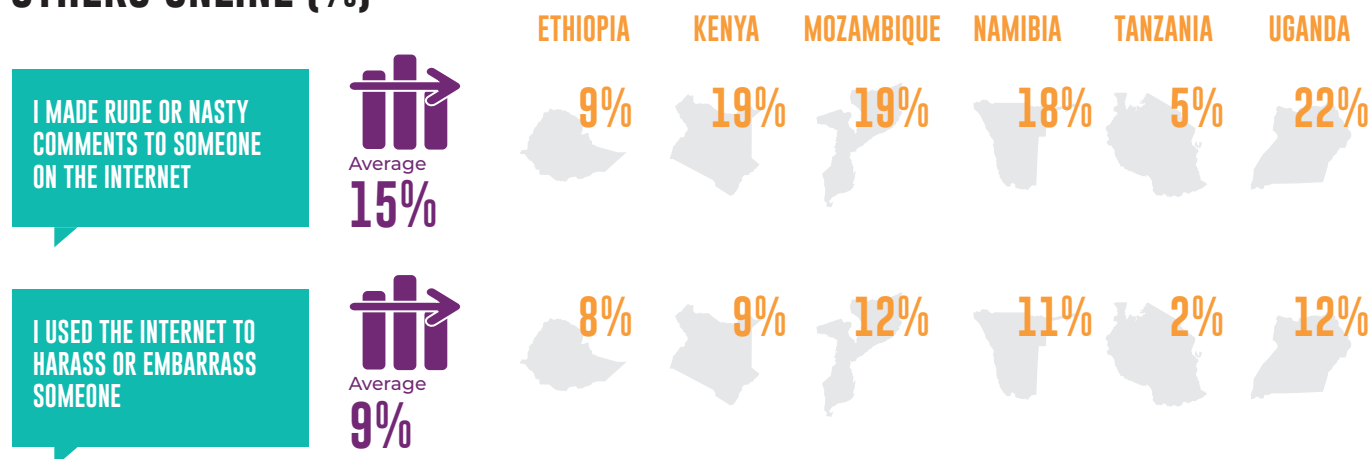
On average across these six countries, 9 per cent of children had felt threatened online by other children, 6 per cent had been made fun of online with the intention to hurt or embarrass, 6 per cent had false rumours spread about them online, and 9 per cent had received sexual comments online that made them feel uncomfortable.

However, children can be both victims and perpetrators of online harassment; our data show that using the internet to harass or embarrass someone is at least as common as being a victim of this. **On average in the past year, 9 per cent of internet-using children in these six countries had used the internet to harass or embarrass someone, and 15 per cent had made rude or nasty comments to someone online.**

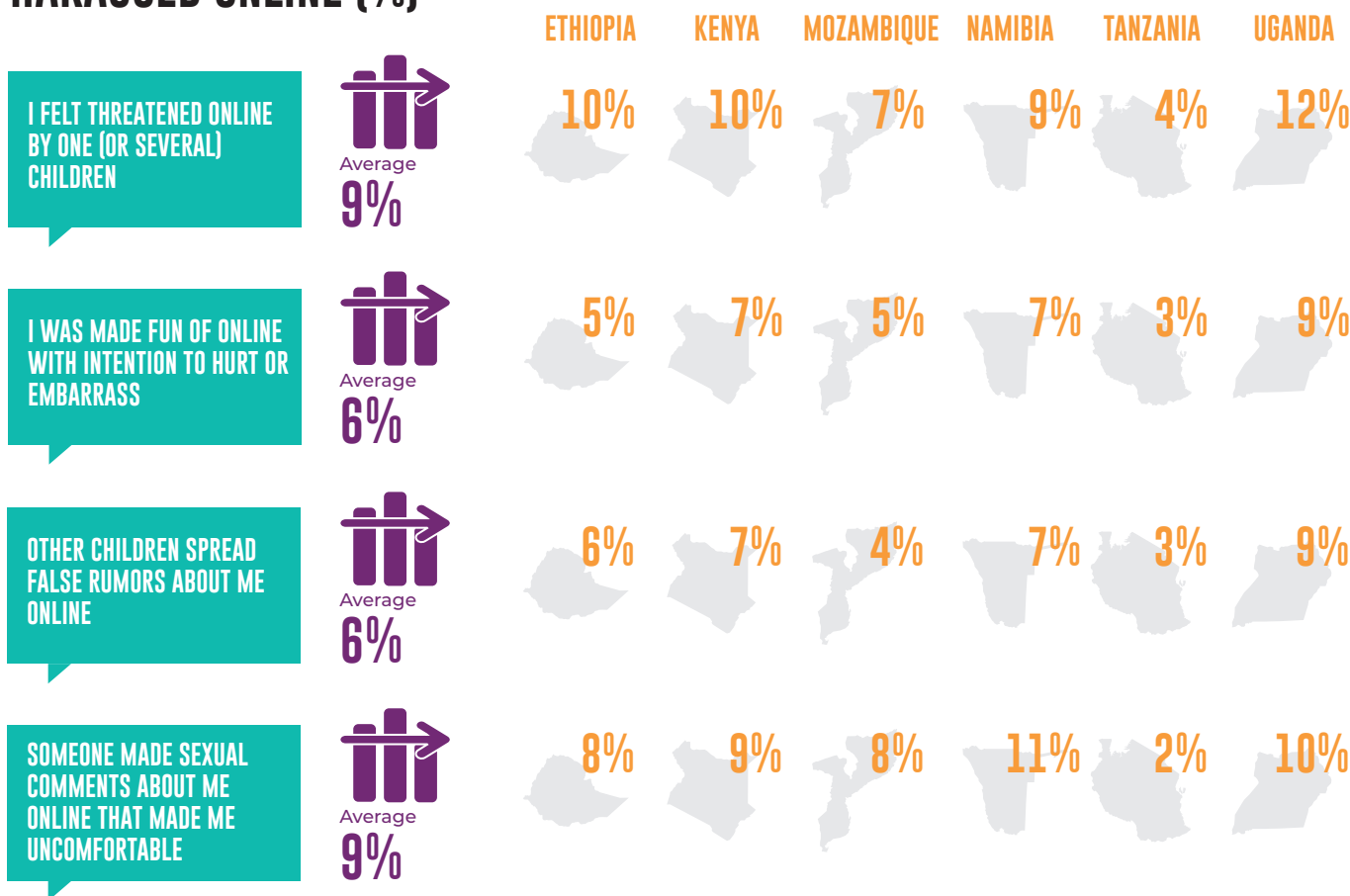
This reinforces the need to educate children about the consequences of online harassment and help them understand that this behaviour can have real implications for those who are targeted.



CHILDREN WHO HARASSED OTHERS ONLINE (%)



CHILDREN WHO WERE HARASSED ONLINE (%)



Base: Internet-using children aged 12–17. ET = 1,000; KE = 1,014; MZ = 999; NA = 994; TZ = 996; and UG = 1,016.

Beyond harmful conduct, the internet is also a space where children can encounter hateful and violent content, or unwanted sexual content. On average, 3 in 10 internet-using children in these six countries had been exposed to violent content online while 2 in 10 had been exposed to hate messages¹² in the past year alone.

Encountering sexual content when not expecting it was even more common, affecting almost 4 in 10 children on average. Most often this happened to children while using social media or through adverts and pop-ups.

ENCOUNTERING SEXUAL CONTENT WHEN NOT EXPECTING IT WAS EVEN MORE COMMON



Being sent unwanted sexual images by other people can be a particularly distressing experience. Our data show that as many as 2 in 10 children had received unwanted sexual images in the past year. An exception to this is Tanzania, where this issue is rare.

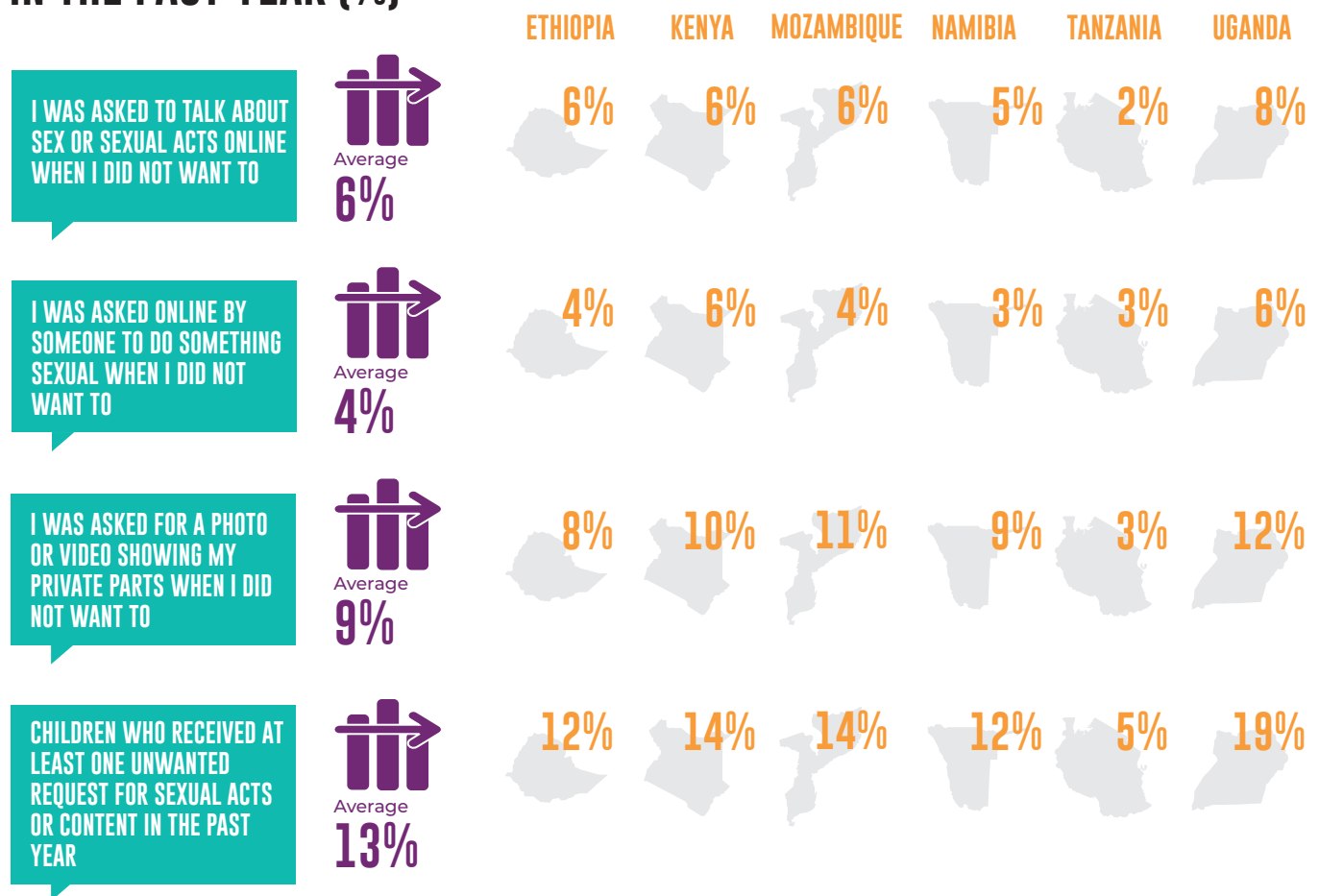
Children are also solicited for sexual content or contact online. This is less frequent than other online risks but can have more severe consequences. **On average, a little more than 1 in 10 children (13 per cent) in these six countries experienced at least one unwanted request for sexual acts or content in the past year.**

The most common experience was receiving unwanted requests for sexual images and videos. These requests can come from both adults and from other children. Indeed, some children reported that they had pressured others their age to send them sexual images or videos, a harmful act committed by 2–11 per cent of children surveyed depending on the country.

Exposure to hate messages or violent content in the past year (%)	Average	Ethiopia	Kenya	Mozambique	Namibia	Tanzania	Uganda
I received hate messages that attack certain groups or individuals online	22%	22%	25%	16%	24%	11%	33%
I saw gory or violent images online	30%	35%	26%	35%	27%	19%	37%

Exposure to sexual content in the past year (%)	Average	Ethiopia	Kenya	Mozambique	Namibia	Tanzania	Uganda
I saw sexual images or videos online when I was not expecting it	36%	27%	33%	44%	39%	25%	48%
I was sent sexual images when I did not want them	19%	19%	19%	26%	16%	5%	26%
I pressured someone my age to send me sexual pictures or videos	7%	11%	6%	7%	8%	2%	9%

UNWANTED SEXUAL SOLICITATION IN THE PAST YEAR (%)



Base: Internet-using children aged 12–17. ET = 1,000; KE = 1,014; MZ = 999; NA = 994; TZ = 996; and UG = 1,016.

TAKEAWAY

Technology companies (particularly social media companies) have a responsibility to keep children safe online. Preventing unexpected exposure to sexual images or videos, especially when this happens through search engines or adverts (in about 20 per cent of cases), is an area that is more feasible to address than others, and one in which the industry can do better. However, it is difficult for the industry to tackle online harassment, bullying and sexual solicitation on its own; long-term and collaborative efforts with governments, caregivers and educators are needed.

ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IS AFFECTING 1 IN 10 CHILDREN LIVING IN THE EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA REGION

One of the most severe types of harm that children encounter online is sexual exploitation and abuse. This can have long-lasting consequences for children and affect their mental health.

Our data shows that on average, **more than 1 in 10 internet-using children (11 per cent) in these six countries have experienced some form of online sexual abuse in the past year alone.** This affects a greater proportion of children in Uganda (18 per cent) but is less common in Tanzania (4 per cent).

The most common form of online sexual abuse in all six countries was children being offered money or gifts in return for sexual images and videos. This was followed by children having their sexual images shared with others without their consent. These are potentially related behaviours, and children who had been offered money or gifts in return for sexual images or videos were significantly more likely to also report that their images had been shared online without their consent.

MORE THAN 1 IN 10 (11%)

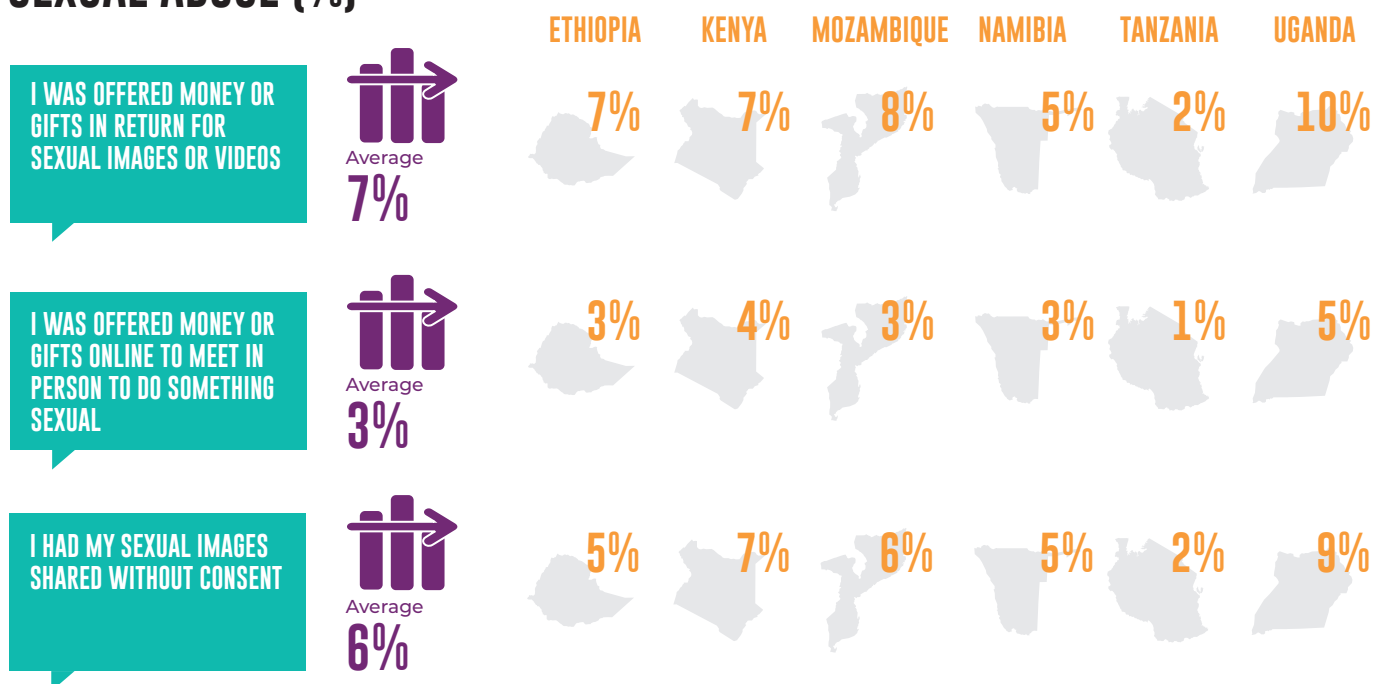


INTERNET-USING CHILDREN HAVE EXPERIENCED SOME FORM OF ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE PAST YEAR ALONE.



MOST COMMON FORM OF ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE EXPERIENCED WAS BEING OFFERED MONEY OR GIFTS FOR SEXUAL IMAGES

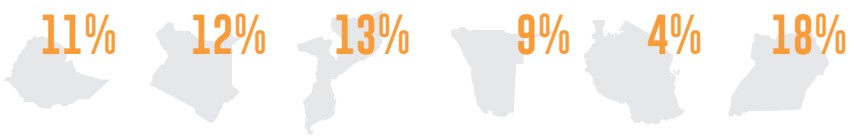
CHILDREN EXPERIENCING ONLINE SEXUAL ABUSE (%)



I WAS THREATENED OR BLACKMAILED ONLINE TO ENGAGE IN SEXUAL ACTIVITIES



CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCED AT LEAST ONE FORM OF CLEAR ONLINE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE IN THE PAST YEAR

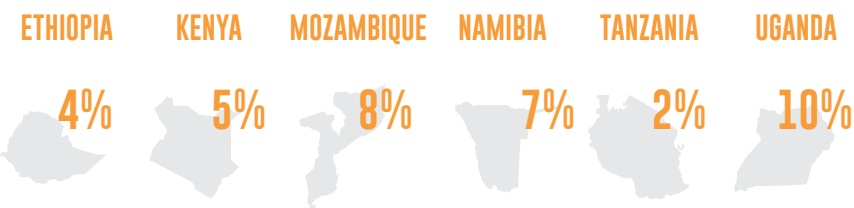


Base: Internet-using children aged 12–17. ET = 1,000; KE = 1,014; MZ = 999; NA = 994; TZ = 996; and UG = 1,016.

Critically, our data also reveals that between 2–10 per cent of children surveyed (aged 15–17) had accepted money or gifts in exchange for sending sexual images or videos.

CHILDREN ACCEPTING MONEY OR GIFTS FOR SEXUAL IMAGES (%)

IN THE PAST YEAR, HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU ACCEPTED MONEY OR GIFTS IN EXCHANGE FOR SENDING SEXUAL IMAGES OR VIDEOS OF YOURSELF?



Base: Internet-using children aged 15–17. ET = 751; KE = 557; MZ = 649; NA = 560; TZ = 595; and UG = 722.

TAKEAWAY

Many internet-using children are being harmed and abused sexually online. In fact, if the results are scaled to the population of children aged 12–17 years in the surveyed countries, over a million children in the region are estimated to be experiencing at least one of these forms of online harm every year. It should be noted that the household survey did not include vulnerable children such as children on the move or children in street situations, who may be more vulnerable. Moreover, online sexual abuse may have been underreported due to privacy concerns, shame or discomfort talking about sex and fear of stigma or self-discrimination.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE THE ONLINE SPACES WHERE CHILDREN MOST COMMONLY EXPERIENCE SEXUAL ABUSE

Along with the rise in internet access and use, the use of social media has proliferated among children and adolescents. Social media and instant messaging apps come with clear benefits such as allowing children to socialize and stay in touch with friends, to gain access to information, and to express themselves creatively.

On the other hand, Disrupting Harm data shows that social media platforms are the most common online space where children in these six countries experienced online sexual exploitation and abuse. Because social media is such a popular space for children, these findings suggest that perpetrators seek out children where they spend a lot of time.

In all six countries, the most common form of online harm that children experienced on social media was receiving unwanted sexual images, followed by receiving sexual comments that made them feel uncomfortable.

This mostly happened to children on Meta-owned platforms: in up to 65 per cent of cases,

IN ALL SIX COUNTRIES, THE MOST COMMON FORM OF ONLINE HARM WAS RECEIVING UNWANTED SEXUAL IMAGES



FOLLOWED BY RECEIVING SEXUAL COMMENTS THAT MADE THEM FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

children said it happened on Facebook, followed by WhatsApp (up to 30 per cent of cases) and Instagram (up to 10 per cent of cases). YouTube, Twitter and TikTok also featured in children's responses, but much less frequently.¹³

While this is likely a reflection of the relative popularity of these platforms, it also highlights that some companies need to do more to protect children online because they have a larger user base.

TAKEAWAY

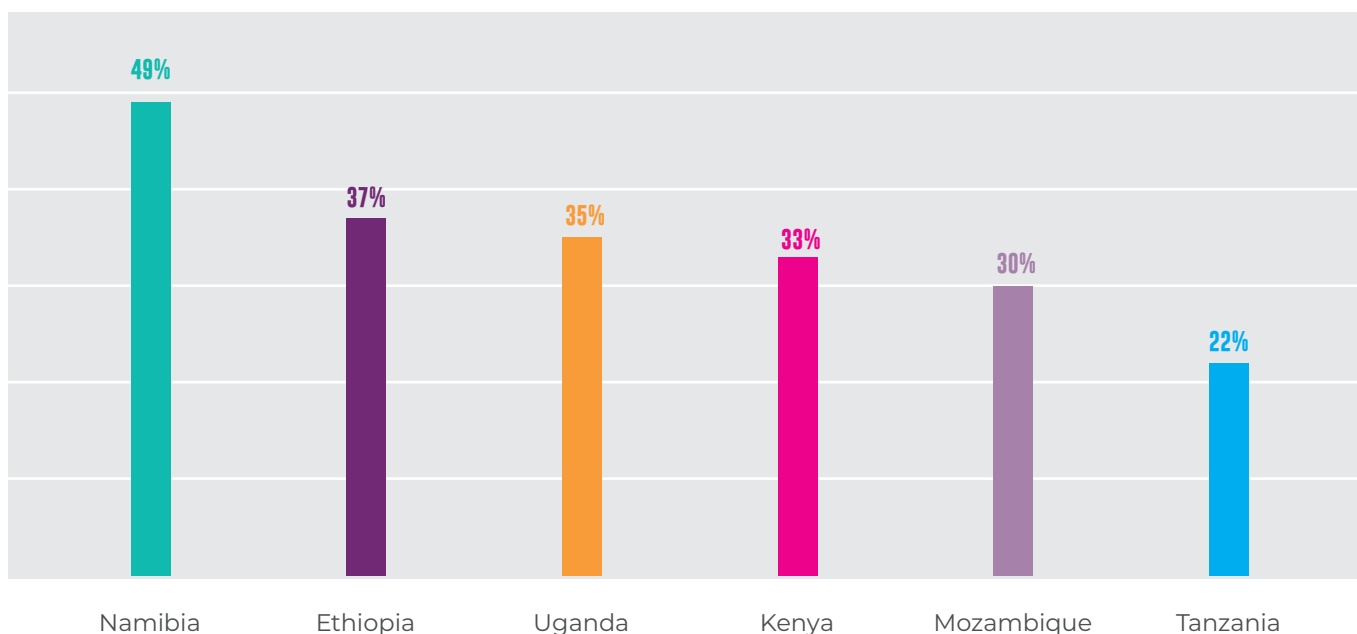
Technology companies together with internet service providers need to prioritize the safety of children in product design and ensure that children's best interests are considered in internal processes and procedures. Formal reporting mechanisms within social media and instant messaging platforms must be clear and accessible to children. Companies should be required to respond and provide support within a short time frame and transparently report to the public on how these cases are managed. This is particularly important for online platforms where a significant number of children experience sexual exploitation and abuse.

LIMITED ONLINE SAFETY EDUCATION REMAINS A PROBLEM

Knowing how to navigate the internet safely can help prevent online sexual abuse and exploitation. While the onus should not be on children to protect themselves, it is important that they learn how to avoid or reduce the risk of harm, and how to seek help or support if it happens.

Unfortunately, a majority of child internet users in these six countries have not received any information at all on how to stay safe online. Even for those who have received online safety education, it is difficult to determine if the education was evidence-informed and of high quality.

Proportion of children who have received any information on how to stay safe online, by country



Base: Internet-using children aged 12–17. ET = 1,000; KE = 1,014; MZ = 999; NA = 994; TZ = 996; and UG = 1,016

TAKEAWAY

There is a need to invest in developing online safety education programmes that are evidence-informed and evaluated for impact. This will help reduce current gaps in online safety skills among internet-using children (and caregivers). These programmes should cover basic digital safety skills such as how to block and report harmful content on social media, but also more advanced skills such as helping children recognize different forms of online harm and how to stay safe. These kinds of programmes could be mainstreamed through the public education systems in collaboration with ministries of education.

CAREGIVERS – AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF SUPPORT – ARE LAGGING BEHIND

Caregivers are an important influence in children's lives as a source of knowledge and support. Caregivers have the potential to act as a first line of defence in protecting children from all forms of risks and harm, including online sexual exploitation and abuse.

However, our data shows that many caregivers of internet-using children in the region lack digital skills and even basic experience using the internet.

On average, only 50 per cent of caregivers in these six countries use the internet, with great variation between countries. Whether caregivers use the internet or not is strongly related to their age. Older caregivers (aged 50 and above) are much less likely to use the internet compared to caregivers below 40 years of age.

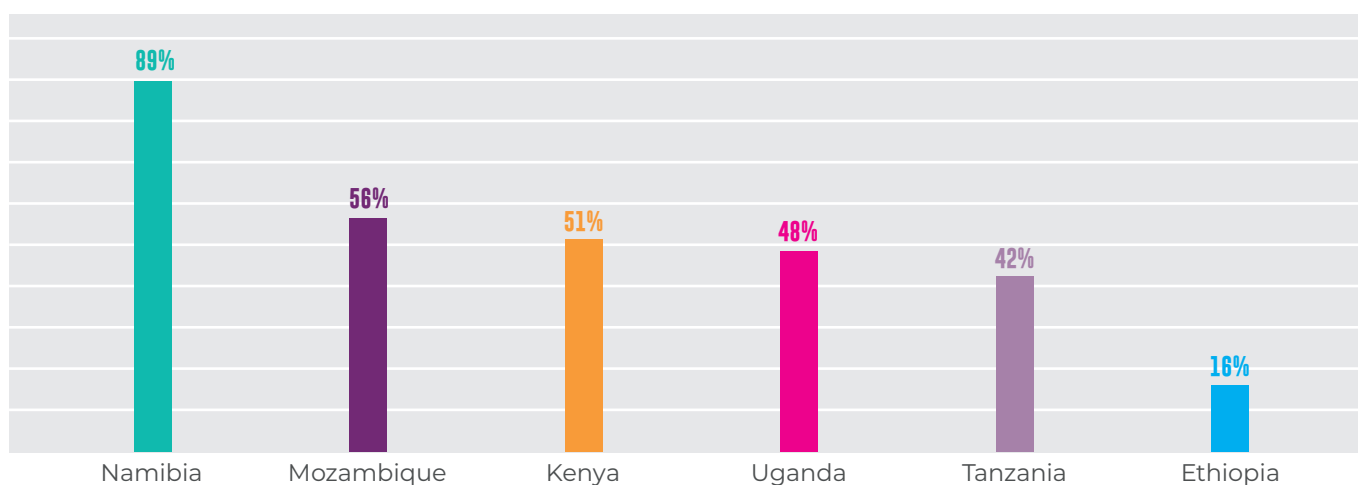
This suggests that older caregivers may be less able to proactively support their children and help them learn about online harm. **Over 40 per cent of children in these six countries had never received any advice or guidance from their caregivers on how to use the internet safely.**



OVER 40% OF CHILDREN NEVER RECEIVED ANY ADVICE OR GUIDANCE FROM THEIR CAREGIVERS ON HOW TO USE THE INTERNET SAFELY

(in these six countries)

Proportion of caregivers that use the internet, by country



Base: Caregivers of internet-using children aged 12–17. ET = 1,000; KE = 1,014; MZ = 999; NA = 994; TZ = 996; and UG = 1,016.

TAKEAWAY

Talking to children about their online experiences and providing an open and supportive home environment can help children develop critical skills to navigate risks, both online and in person. It also helps build the trust needed to ensure children feel comfortable disclosing negative experiences without fear of judgment or reprisals. This is something caregivers can do even if they do not know much about the internet, as long as they build an open, caring and trusting relationship with their child.

IMPORTANT GAPS IN LEGISLATION REMAIN ACROSS THE REGION

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has stated that “legal and policy frameworks should be reviewed and where necessary adapted to rapidly changing realities concomitant with developments in the digital world”.¹⁴ This includes ensuring that legislation criminalizes online child sexual exploitation, while also guaranteeing protections for victims and witnesses. Additionally, it entails implementing the necessary procedural updates to the law in order to effectively handle electronic evidence.¹⁵

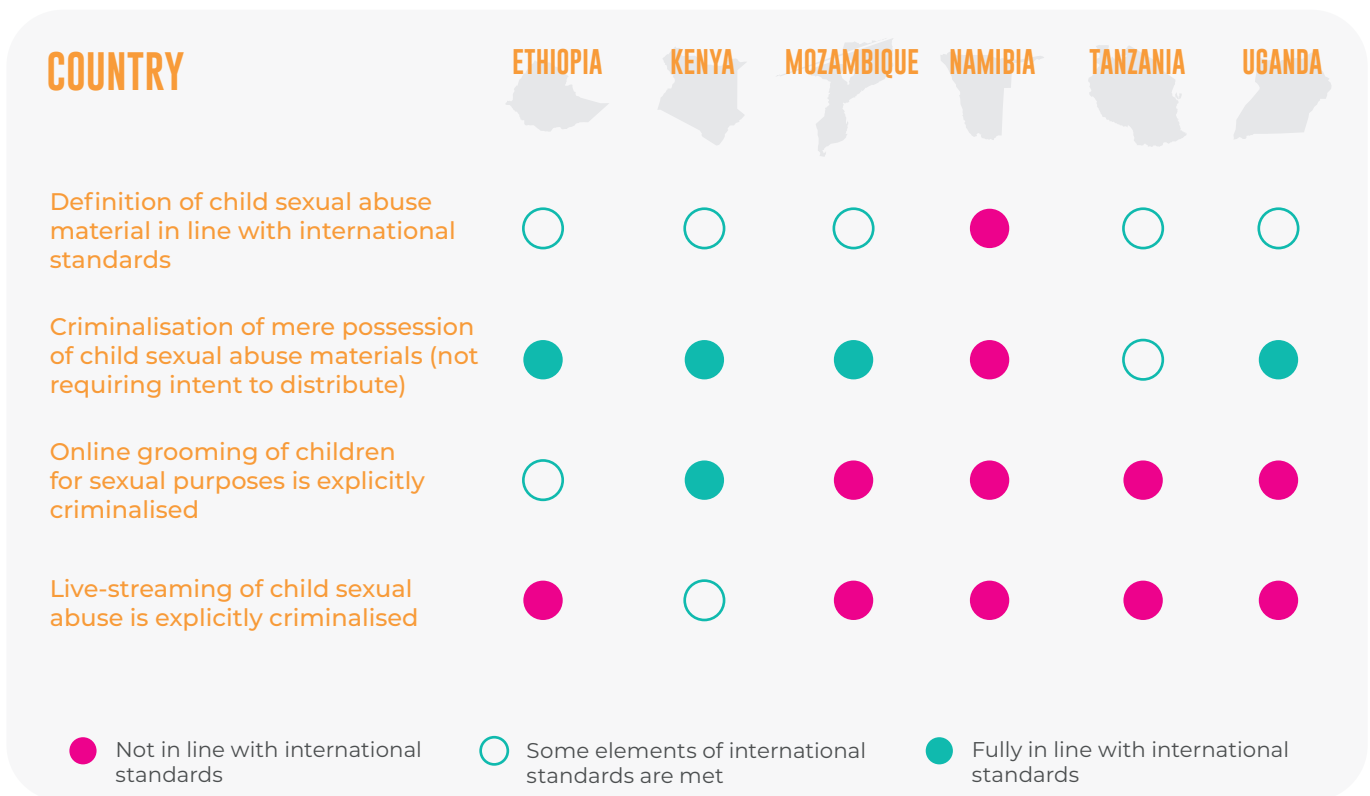
Criminalizing online sexual exploitation and abuse is part of a State party’s obligation to protect children under a number of international and regional legal instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. Similar obligations are further enshrined in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child¹⁶ as well as the African Union’s Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection.¹⁷

A detailed analysis of national legislation conducted as part of Disrupting Harm highlights

that these six countries still have important work to do when it comes to the comprehensive criminalization of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.¹⁸ In most countries, ‘child sexual abuse material’ are not comprehensively defined in national legal provisions, nor is online grooming of children fully and explicitly criminalized (both with the intent of sexually abusing them in person and online – for example for the production of child sexual abuse material).¹⁹ Positively, with the adoption of the Children’s Act 2022 in July 2022, Kenya’s legislation now includes a definition and criminalization of grooming.²⁰

Although none of the countries have explicitly criminalized livestreaming of child sexual abuse, with the adoption of the Children’s Act 2022, Kenya has introduced legal provisions which can implicitly cover this crime.²¹ As shared by professionals interviewed in the context of the Disrupting Harm study, the lack of a clear definition of livestreaming of child sexual abuse can cause an obstacle for law enforcement in intervening and prosecuting perpetrators.

Scope of legislation addressing online child sexual exploitation and abuse in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Uganda and Tanzania



TAKEAWAY

Despite the existence of some dedicated legal provisions on child sexual abuse material, more work must be done so that these are defined comprehensively using appropriate terminology. It is important that all forms of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (such as online grooming of children for sexual purposes and livestreaming of child sexual abuse) are comprehensively criminalized in legislation.

Clear and comprehensive legal provisions will afford greater protection of children, as well as functioning as deterrents and resulting in appropriate punishment for offenders. However, this can only happen if laws are properly implemented; a crucial gap remains between the existence of legal provisions and their effective enforcement.

CONCLUSIONS

Technological development is moving at lightning speed, alongside a rapidly expanding child population in Africa. There is an urgent need for investment and action to secure the protection of children in a digital age, now and for the future.

Over the next decade, children living in Africa will be increasingly exposed to the benefits and risks of digital technologies. While States focus on increasing connectivity, it is critical that efforts to do so are accompanied by consideration of the risk of harm caused by digital technologies. The African Union states that due to a combination of factors, including rapidly increasing connectivity, limited regulation, low awareness and poverty, there is potential for an explosive growth in online sexual abuse of children in the coming years.²²

Complementing the seven takeaways provided in each section, this report makes four broader recommendations based on the data presented here and insights from the Disrupting Harm project:



1. As countries in Eastern and Southern Africa (and globally) continue to invest in infrastructure and efforts to lower cost of connectivity, there is a need to expand the notion of digital inclusion

to also account for normative and safety issues that may prevent children from using digital technologies to their advantage.²³ **It is not enough to simply provide access to digital technologies; if the technology is not safe to use or designed with children in mind, it will undermine rather than enhance their lives and well-being.**²⁴



2. In many low- and middle-income countries, where fundamental prevention, child protection and justice capacities may be constrained, there is a need to both improve the basic capacity of these systems **and** build their capacity to respond to online sexual exploitation and abuse. **This requires urgent investment by governments and concerted efforts by international organizations and civil society.** Investments should be underpinned by high-quality national evidence to pinpoint existing gaps in service delivery and ensure they meet children's needs.



3. It is important to provide children with the necessary skills to recognize adversity and take action to stay safe. **The formal education system has a key role to play in ensuring that children receive online safety education.**

Age-appropriate and culturally relevant comprehensive sexuality education centred on empowerment, critical thinking and the promotion of gender-equitable norms and power relations in line with international technical guidance²⁵ could help keep children safe from both online and in-person sexual exploitation and abuse.

4. Legislation that regulates businesses' conduct, services and their design of digital technologies should be fundamentally rooted in the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.²⁶ This foundation is urgently needed in Africa and globally. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recognizes that, although businesses may not be directly involved in perpetuating the sexual exploitation and abuse, "they can cause or contribute to violations of children's right to freedom from violence, including through the design and operation of digital services."

Companies should conduct child rights due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address their child rights impacts.²⁷

HOW DISRUPTING HARM FINDINGS ARE BEING USED IN THE REGION

Based on the Disrupting Harm research in the region, ECPAT International organized a three-day workshop in Nairobi to consult with civil society, government representatives, justice experts and international organizations on how to translate evidence into action to prevent online sexual abuse of children in Eastern and Southern Africa.

When summarizing the event, workshop participants made three key observations:

- Following the Disrupting Harm project, the existence and prevalence of online child sexual abuse is no longer disputed in the region. However, initial mobilization stemming from the launches of the research has not yet translated into sufficient implementation of the recommended actions.
- Civil society actors noted that most efforts advanced so far have emphasized higher-order functions: legal reform, developing plans of action, investing in sectoral strategies and coordination mechanisms, budgeting exercises and creation of specialized police units. These are all critical steps towards protection systems that are fit for purpose in a digital age, but not sufficient to comprehensively address this crime.
- Efforts to provide stronger support services at the local level are still lacking, and directly involving children, families and communities in contributing to change remains a challenge. Advancing bottom-up approaches and local solutions is paramount to advancing regional and national efforts to prevent and respond to online child sexual abuse.

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Rogers Twesigye led on the conceptualization and data analysis for the report while Daniel Kardefelt-Winther led on the writing.

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While the *Disrupting Harm* project is a close collaboration between ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, the findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the three organisations ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF, individually or as a collaborative group.

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UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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