Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Lessons learned and promising practices in low- and middle-income countries

UNICEF released a report on ending online child sexual exploitation and abuse. From the report, it is documented that 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys all over the world have been sexually exploited or abused before reaching the age of 18. Interactions happening online have become very common.

Such interactions feature in some form in online child sexual exploitation and abuse. It is difficult to track or even quantify the scope of such forms of child exploitation and abuse. Why? Offenders and perpetrators hide behind the secrecy and the inability to identify them online. This has resulted in an increase in the number of cases that are being reported through national helplines and clearing houses.

Another factor that has led to the increase in online child sexual exploitation and abuse is the Covid 19 pandemic. As people were on lockdown and have been relying on technology for work and school, children increasingly became victims of online sexual exploitation and abuse. Child protection services were also interfered with by the pandemic, which made children more vulnerable because they could not access those services.

Fortunately, the We Protect Initiative was introduced to deal with child online sexual exploitation and abuse. The initiative developed a Model National Response (MNR) which provides a guideline on how to tackle the issue at the national level.
UNICEF has been working with its partners to address child exploitation and abuse,

including technology-facilitated child exploitation and abuse. Through the Global Programme that was implemented in 2015, the UK government sought to build the capacity of governments, the private sector and the civil society to handle this kind of exploitation and abuse. The first phase of the Global Programme was implemented in 17 countries across 4 regions. The second phase was then expanded in 2018 with support from the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children. The report also takes stock of the current level of implementation of the MNR across selected countries. The report also highlights promising practices and lessons learnt.

Key Findings

It was reported that there has been progress made towards dealing with online child exploitation and abuse across many low- and middle-income countries over a short period of time. Progress has focused on strengthened policy and governance frameworks; improved capacity of law enforcement, the judiciary and prosecution services to handle such cases; the greater availability of hotlines and helplines for reporting, support and referral; and the increasing roll-out of education and awareness raising programmes on online and offline child sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite this, serious challenges remain across all six domains of the Model National Response.

Domain 1: Policy and governance

69%, which represents majority of the countries surveyed have some form of national governance structure to deal with online child sexual exploitation and abuse. 59% of the surveyed countries have a relevant national policy or strategy, and 79%

have nationally representative research on child sexual exploitation and abuse, sometimes including online dimensions.

Some of the challenges under this domain include effective functioning of governance systems, major gaps in legislative frameworks in 90% of the countries, limited systematic data collection and limited use of generated evidence to inform policy and practice, as well as constrained enforcement of legislation.

Domain 2: Criminal Justice

One of the findings under this domain is that all of the surveyed countries had some form of law enforcement that is able to tackle both online and offline child sexual abuse and exploitation. The law enforcement is connected to a unit that is responsible for cybercrimes. This unit sometimes collaborates with units that specialize in crimes against women or children. However, there seemed to be a challenge for these two units to properly work together. There is even an unclear connection of the law enforce-

Although 75% of judiciary and 79% of prosecution services in most countries have some knowledge and skills in positive outcomes for cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse, only one country reports to have comprehensive knowledge among both prosecutors and judiciary. Offender management processes are one of the least developed capabilities. More than half of the countries surveyed have no offender management process in place. The report also highlights that about 48% of the countries have access to INTERPOL's International child exploitation database.

Domain 3: Victim

The report provides that 69% of the countries have some form of policy, protocol or legislation that lists the procedure for providing integrated support to victims. The biggest challenge is the implementation of the plans and procedures. In addition, the availability of trained child protection workforce is arm-twisted. Only one of the countries surveyed had a comprehensively trained social protection workforce to meet the rising number of cases.

Majority of the countries report having a child helpline. Although the helplines are free of charge and accessible 24/7, many of them face human and financial resource challenges. They also face challenges in providing referral linkages.

Domain 4: Societal

90% of the countries surveyed reported having a functioning hotline or a form of reporting platform for the public to report illegal online content and material. Most people do not use hotlines because they do not know that they exist. They also lack faith in the reporting system for fear of victim-blaming. In addition, more than two thirds of the countries surveyed have a national education programme to raise awareness of both online and offline child exploitation. Also, most of the countries surveyed reported that children and young people are, or have been, encouraged to participate in coming up with policies that are child abuse related.

One of the challenges in this domain is the weak offender support systems. Most of these countries do not have a specific support system for offenders, that is, those who have

a sexual interest in children, so that they can be helped to prevent them from harming more children.

Domain 5: Industry

On a positive note, most of the countries have take-down procedures for child sexual abuse material. However, these procedures are not always managed by law or enforced. The reason for this is that there are not enough people who are equipped with the technical skills to implement such procedures. Another reason is that there is not enough awareness among the technology industry and law enforcement of the procedures.

Domain 6: Communication and Media

Majority of the countries reported to have strong support from their governments for ethical, informed and balanced reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Other countries have discussed or are using terminologies that have been accepted worldwide relating to child exploitation and abuse. Work still needs to be done to translate and put in context the terms used.

Systemic challenges and the way forward

Some of these challenges include:

★ Gaps in legislative frameworks and generally limited law enforcement capacity.

★ Overall weak child protection systems.

★ Significantly understaffed social welfare workforce, lacking professional recognition.

★ Limited awareness of, and sense of urgency to address, online and offline child sexual exploitation and abuse among all professional cadres.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the limited capacity of social welfare and child protection systems around the world. This is mostly in those areas with inadequate resources. The already existing systems that were struggling before the pandemic found it hard to cope during the pandemic because of the rise in demand for support systems. This left very many children without the proper support and protection they needed.

Another systemic weakness is the large number of people leaving their jobs (high staff turnover) in many professions, as well as having a widespread project-based approach in tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse cases. Both of these lead to limited sustainability of interventions. On the other hand, because of the low number of online abuse cases being reported worldwide, this area continues to be de-prioritised.

Recommendations

The following are the overall key actions that were recommended to systematically improve the prevention and response to child sexual exploitation and abuse in low- and middle-income countries:

1. Move towards a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse:
It is important to understand that technology-facilitated exploitation and abuse has its own dynamics, and therefore cannot be dealt with using technology alone. It requires specific interventions to complement the broader work being done to address this vice.

2. Move from project-based support to system-strengthening through statutory bodies:
IInterventions focused on strengthening, and working through, statutory bodies or aiming to formally combine education or training

programmes into national curricula at schools, as well as in pre- and in-service training for law enforcement, judiciary and the social service workforce, have more potential impact in the medium to long term.

3. Invest in evidence-based policymaking and advocacy:

Having national systems that have generates and manages data to provide a solid and reliable evidence base will go a long way to develop policies and frameworks that effectively tackle online and offline child sexual exploitation and abuse.

4. Strengthen multisectoral, national collaboration:

In order to successfully tackle technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, there needs to be cooperation among the many different actors and sectors. These include the Ministries of Health, Education, Communication, Justice, Social Welfare, the law enforcement units, the social service workforce, the technology industry, among others. The different stakeholders need to engage in structured dialogue to learn each other's language, create trust and develop mutual understanding for action.

5. Facilitate cross-border, regional and international collaboration:

Cross-border, regional and international collaboration across the 6 domains above in addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is of great importance. The cross-border nature of the issue makes it gather more attention and fosters the ability for.

different regions to share best practices to handle it.

6. Strengthen children's overall digital skills, including online safety:

It is important for children to be guided on online exposure and safe use of the internet. As a result of technology sipping through almost all aspects of children's lives, it is important for education systems to include digital safety into their already existing curricula which address offline harm such as bullying and sexual abuse.

7. Promote child participation and children's agency:

Efforts must be stepped up to involve children and young people in the development of tools, software and other interventions to improve their online safety. Child participation must also extend to making sure that children's voices are heard and views considered in all matters that affect them.

Reference

UNICEF. 2021. *Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*