Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Lessons learned and promising practices
in low- and middle-income countries

End Violence
Against Children

unicef | for every child

Executive Summary

Globally, 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 13 boys have been sexually exploited or abused before reaching the age of 18. Some recent research suggests that online interaction is now so ubiquitous that it is likely to feature in some form in almost all cases of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Increased internet penetration and advances in technology have allowed offenders to engage in child sexual exploitation and abuse in an unprecedented environment of secrecy and relative anonymity across the globe. While the full scope and extent of the threat of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse remains unknown, global statistics show alarming increases in reported cases to national hotlines and clearing houses in recent years.

A new sense of urgency: The COVID-19 pandemic, which brought with it increased emotional vulnerabilities, economic hardship and surges in unsupervised time online among children and adolescents is likely to have magnified vulnerabilities to child exploitation and abuse, particularly online. Widespread disruptions in child protection services across the world have left vulnerable children without access to adequate protection, further contributing to a new sense of urgency to address online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

The WeProtect Initiative. To tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation globally, the UK government, with support from other national governments, leading technological companies, INTERPOL, UN agencies and civil society organizations, established the WeProtect initiative in 2014. The initiative developed the WeProtect Global Alliance Model National Response (MNR), which provides a comprehensive blueprint for effectively tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse at the national level *(See Appendix 1).*

Figure 1: WeProtect Model National Response

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE
Highest level national commitment to child sexual exploitation and abuse prevention and response

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
Effective and successful child sexual exploitation and abuse investigations, convictions and offender management

VICTIM
Appropriate support services for children and young people

SOCIETAL
Prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse

INDUSTRY
Industry engaged in developing solutions to prevent and tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse

COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA
Awareness raised among the public, professionals and policymakers

Rationale and methodology

UNICEF has been working with its partners to address child sexual exploitation and abuse, including technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, through a comprehensive systems approach. This work intensified from 2015 through the implementation of a Global Programme to build capacity of governments, civil society and the private sector to tackle technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation. The first phase of the Global Programme, funded by the UK government, was implemented in 17 countries across 4 regions, and was expanded in its second phase starting in 2018 with support from the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

Over five years into the roll-out of the UNICEF Global Programme, this report takes stock of the current level of implementation of the MNR across selected countries, and identifies promising practices and lessons learned.

The report primarily relies on survey responses from 29 UNICEF country offices in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in all regions, as well as four field visits and a desk review of relevant literature and documents. Given the methods used and the breadth of the report, it does not aim to evaluate or provide a comprehensive review of the implementation of the MNR. Rather, it intends to provide a headline overview of the current situation across target countries to draw out promising practices and lessons learned to inform future policy and practice. The survey responses will also feed into a forthcoming global report by the WeProtect Global Alliance on how the MNR is supporting national efforts to end online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Key findings

Overall, significant progress has been made in terms of tackling online child sexual exploitation and abuse across many low- and middle-income countries in a relatively short period of time. Advances have particularly centred around 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, significant challenges remain across all six domains of the MNR *(see Figure 2).*
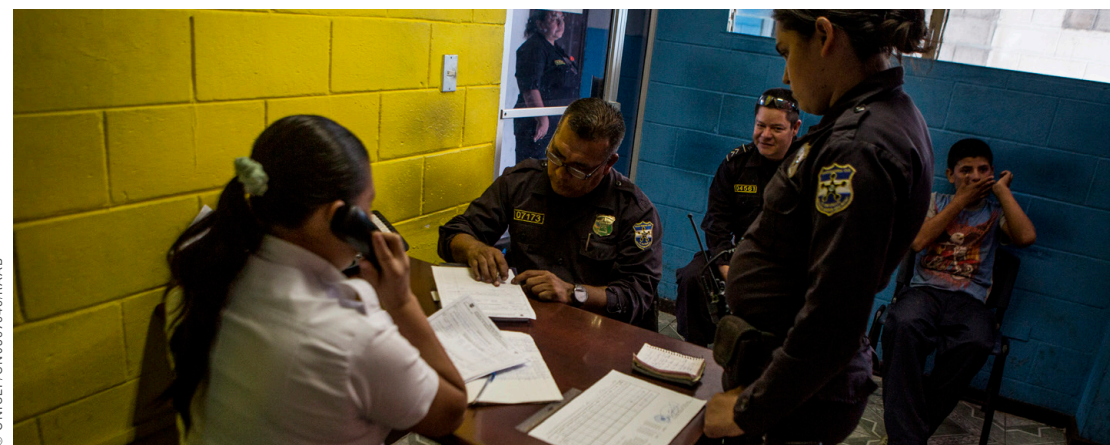
Domain 1: Policy and governance

The majority (69 per cent) of surveyed countries have some form of national governance structure to deal with online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Just over half (59 per cent) have a relevant national policy or strategy and most (79 per cent) have nationally representative research on child sexual exploitation and abuse, sometimes including online dimensions. Significant gaps remain in legislative frameworks in the majority (90 per cent) of countries. Despite the

existence of some capabilities, there remain challenges in effective functioning of the governance mechanisms, 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

All of the surveyed countries have law enforcement capability with an explicit remit to respond to offline and online child sexual exploitation and abuse. More than half of countries (72 per cent) that have such capability report it to lie with a unit responsible for cybercrimes, at times in collaboration with units specialized in investigating crimes against children or women. In these cases, effective collaboration between the different units appears to be a challenge and linkages with child protection and victim services remains unclear. Although judiciary and prosecution services in most countries (75 per cent and 79 per cent, respectively) have some knowledge and skills to enable positive outcomes for victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, only one country reports comprehensive knowledge among both prosecutors

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and judiciary. Offender management processes is one of the least developed capabilities and more than half of all countries surveyed (57 per cent) have no offender management process in place. Approximately half of all respondent countries (48 per cent) have access to INTERPOL's International Child Sexual Exploitation database.

Domain 3: Victim

To provide integrated end-to-end support to victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, the majority of countries surveyed (69 per cent) have a case management plan, a protocol, or applicable legislation that outlines relevant procedures. However, effective implementation of plans and procedures is a critical challenge in many countries. Availability of a trained child protection workforce appears to be significantly constrained, with only one of the countries surveyed reporting to have a comprehensively trained social service workforce in sufficient numbers to meet demand. Only one country reports having in place comprehensive remedies for victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse. The vast majority of countries (93 per cent) currently offer a child helpline. Although helplines tend to be free of charge and accessible 24/7, survey findings suggest that many face human and financial resource constraints, as well as challenges to provide effective linkages to referral systems.

Domain 4: Societal

Almost 90 per cent (26 countries) of all countries surveyed have a functioning reporting hotline or reporting portal for the public to report illegal online content including child sexual abuse material. However, there are challenges to use and uptake of hotlines, for example because of limited awareness of their existence, lack of faith in the reporting system or fear of victim-blaming. More than two-thirds of all countries surveyed (72 per cent) have a national education programme to raise awareness of online and offline child sexual exploitation and approximately two-thirds of countries surveyed (64 per cent) report that children and young people are, or have been, encouraged and enabled to participate in development of child sexual exploitation and abuse-related policy and practice. The most critical challenges in this domain relate to weak offender support systems, as the majority of countries surveyed (74 per cent) do not have any specific support system for offenders, and none of the countries surveyed report having any kind of support system for people with a sexual interest in children to prevent them from harming children.

Domain 5: Industry

The majority of countries surveyed (93 per cent) have take-down procedures in place for child sexual abuse material, although these procedures are not always regulated by law or enforced. Reasons for limited enforcement relate mostly to limited technical and human resource capacity to enforce such procedures and overall limited awareness among the technology industry and law enforcement of the procedures.

Domain 6: Communication and media

Almost half of all surveyed countries (48 per cent) report strong government support for ethical, informed and balanced media reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse including through guidance, training, regulations and monitoring; and 68 per cent of countries have discussed, or are using, universally agreed terminology relating to child sexual exploitation and abuse. There remains work to do to translate, contextualize and use the Terminology Guidelines for the protection of children from child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Systemic challenges and the way forward

Despite significant progress in addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, challenges remain across all six domains of the MNR. Underlying these shortcomings are systemic challenges, which are particularly pronounced in LMICs. These 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 has further highlighted the limited, and highly volatile, capacity of social welfare and child protection systems across the world, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Fragmented, under-resourced and understaffed systems that were already stretched before the pandemic, are struggling to cope with increased and urgent demands for support, leaving countless vulnerable children without appropriate protection.

Systemic weaknesses in LMICs are compounded by high staff turnover across many cadres, and a widespread project-based approach to tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse. Both risk leading to limited sustainability of interventions. As there is limited evidence on child sexual exploitation and abuse, in particular the online dimension, the issue continues to be de-prioritized.

Based on the findings of this report, the following overall key actions are recommended to improve systematically the prevention and response to online child sexual exploitation and abuse in LMICs:

➔ **Move towards a comprehensive and integrated approach to tackling child sexual exploitation and abuse:** Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be addressed effectively in isolation by focusing on the digital dimensions alone. Effective action to tackle technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse requires consideration of underlying vulnerabilities and risk factors to child sexual exploitation and abuse. At the same time, there is a need to be cognisant that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse has its own dynamics and, therefore, requires specific interventions to complement broader work to address child sexual exploitation and abuse and violence against children.

➔ **Move from project-based support to system-strengthening through statutory bodies:** Although project-based, fixed-term, interventions can deliver quick and tangible results across all domains, there is a risk that such interventions have limited long-term impact and sustainability. Instead, interventions focused on strengthening, and working through, statutory bodies or aiming to formally integrate 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 considerably more potential impact in the medium to long term.

➔ **Invest in evidence-based policymaking and advocacy:** A systems approach that invests in building of national systems for data generation and management that provides a reliable and comprehensive evidence base on online and offline child sexual exploitation is critical to develop comprehensive and contextualized

policies and frameworks necessary to effectively tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse.

➔ **Strengthen multisectoral, national collaboration:** Successfully tackling technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse requires cooperation between a multitude of different actors and sectors including Ministries of Communication, Health, Education, Justice, Social Welfare, various units in law enforcement, the technology industry, the social service workforce and community sector. To facilitate this, there is a need for different stakeholders involved in addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to engage in structured dialogue to 'learn each other's language', create trust, and foster mutual understanding. Experience has shown the great potential for UNICEF, as a trusted partner with a strong international mandate on children's rights and a long-standing in-country presence, to bring together various stakeholders and facilitate cooperation and trust for action.

➔ **Facilitate cross-border, regional and international collaboration:** Cross-border, regional and international collaboration across a number of MNR domains is of great importance in addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, especially because of the cross-border nature of the issue. In South-east Asia for example, with the support of UNICEF and ECPAT, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has developed a regional declaration and action plan for the protection of children from all forms of online exploitation and abuse. Regional cooperation can also support filling knowledge gaps as the example of a regional multi-stakeholder Think Tank in East Asia and the Pacific has demonstrated.

➔ **Strengthen children's overall digital skills, including online safety:** Guided exposure to the internet that includes online safety is critical to

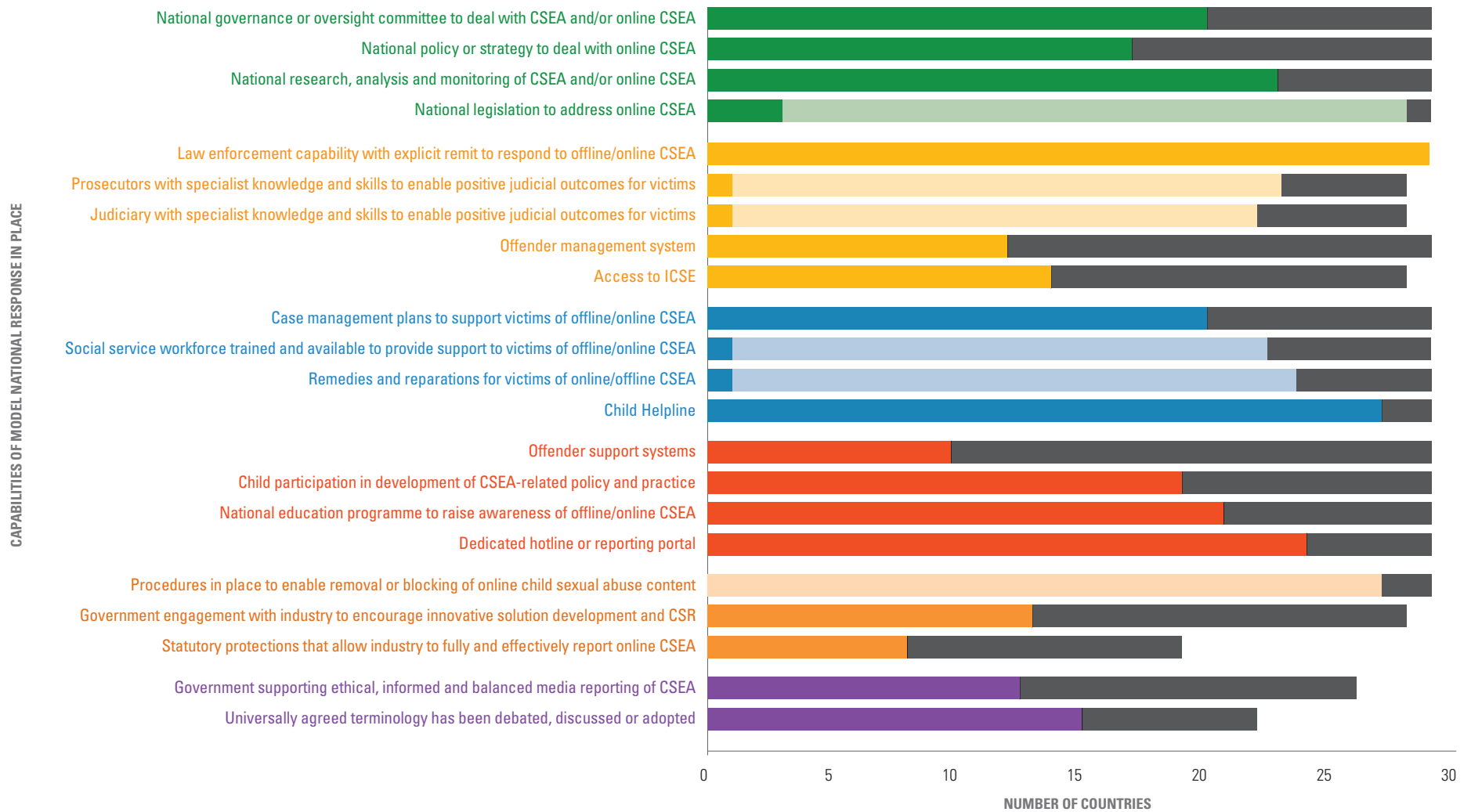© UNICEF/UN0398146/KARIMOVA

enable children to navigate the internet safely. As technology is becoming increasing intertwined with all aspects of children's lives, it is critical to integrate digital safety into already established education programmes that address offline harms, such as bullying or sexual abuse.

➔ **Promote child participation and children's agency:** Children's agency in solution development to children's online safety challenges is critical. Efforts must be stepped up to systemically involve children and youth in the development of tools, software or other interventions to enhance their online safety. Child participation must also extend to ensuring children's views are considered in all matters that affect them including administrative and judicial proceedings and child protection case management.

Figure 2: Overview of the **current** implementation status of the Model National Response in 29 LMICs

CAPABILITIES OF MODEL NATIONAL RESPONSE IN PLACE

NUMBER OF COUNTRIES

POLICY AND GOVERNANCE
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

CRIMINAL JUSTICE
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

VICTIM
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

SOCIETAL
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

INDUSTRY
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS
- YES/COMPREHENSIVE
- PARTIAL
- NO/NONE

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References

Please see main report for full references.