

Addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the face of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken in response to it have increased the risk of children being exposed to violence, including technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The widespread message to 'stay at home' confined many vulnerable children to the exact environment where they are most at risk.¹ Simultaneously, services, including violence prevention and response services, have been disrupted in many countries, leaving children with limited support. School closures and lockdown measures have further increased children's unsupervised screen time, and evidence suggests that more younger children than ever before have been introduced to digital platforms.² Increases in emotional vulnerability and stress resulting from the pandemic and the lockdown measures, may have also contributed to an increase in the activity of offenders.³ In addition, poverty and devastating losses of livelihoods linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, are likely to have further increased the vulnerability of poor children and parents to employ harmful coping mechanisms.

Although there are no robust global data on increases in technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in low- and middle-income countries during the pandemic, available country-level data suggest a significant increase in some forms. Notably, Cambodia reported a 20 per cent increase in child sexual abuse material reports to their hotline in the first half of 2020,

1 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Action to end child sexual abuse and exploitation: A Review of Evidence', UNICEF, New York, 2020.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

while there was a 63 per cent increase in CyberTipline reports for Ghana between January and September 2020 versus the same period in 2019.⁴ As such, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new sense of urgency to the fight against violence against children in general, and technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in particular, as vulnerabilities have been magnified and available support and redress mechanisms reduced.

Adaptation and innovation

From the onset of the pandemic, UNICEF has worked with its partners to offer support to governments to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 and its respective containment measures on children. This included support to respond to the specific risk of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. At the global level, UNICEF worked with the End Violence Partnership to produce an interagency Technical Note on COVID 19 and its implications for the protection of children online,⁵ which was supplemented by a Resource Pack. In recognition of the technology industry's responsibility to respect children's rights (including the right to protection) in light of the numerous impacts and opportunities brought to the fore by the pandemic, UNICEF also produced a brief capturing key messages on 10 core industry impact areas.⁶

4 These figures represent reported child sexual abuse materials and not the full scope of online child sexual exploitation and abuse.

5 United Nations Children's Fund and partners, 'Technical note: COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online', 2020.

6 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Children's Rights and Digital Business During COVID-19 and Beyond', UNICEF, New York, 2020.

At national and regional levels, UNICEF has supported efforts across four main areas: empowering children and supporting parents and caregivers to help children stay safe online; providing a safe online learning experience for students; making online platforms safe and accessible for children; and strengthening national prevention, response and support services. Some of this work commenced before COVID-19 but was adapted and/or intensified during the pandemic. Some examples of this work are illustrated on the following page.

Lessons learned and opportunities: Building back 'better'

Around the world COVID-19 response measures have resulted in an unprecedented number of children of all ages engaging in the digital environment. Lockdown measures, including a widespread shift to online learning and working, has effectively removed the ability to 'opt out' of using digital services.

→ **The issue is now at the forefront of debate and action, including a spotlight on industry's responsibilities:** Whether among caregivers, teachers, law enforcement officials or politicians, the global move towards online learning and socializing – coupled with childcare challenges resulting in more unsupervised time for children and adolescents – has brought the issue of online child safety to the forefront of debate and action. The shift also placed a spotlight on industry's responsibilities, as engagement with digital products and services became one of the only channels available to children and communities for accessing entertainment, social interaction, information and more. As much as this situation has brought with it critical challenges that must be addressed as a matter of urgency – and important work is ongoing – the situation has also created new opportunities for advocacy, action and investment to protect children on- and offline.

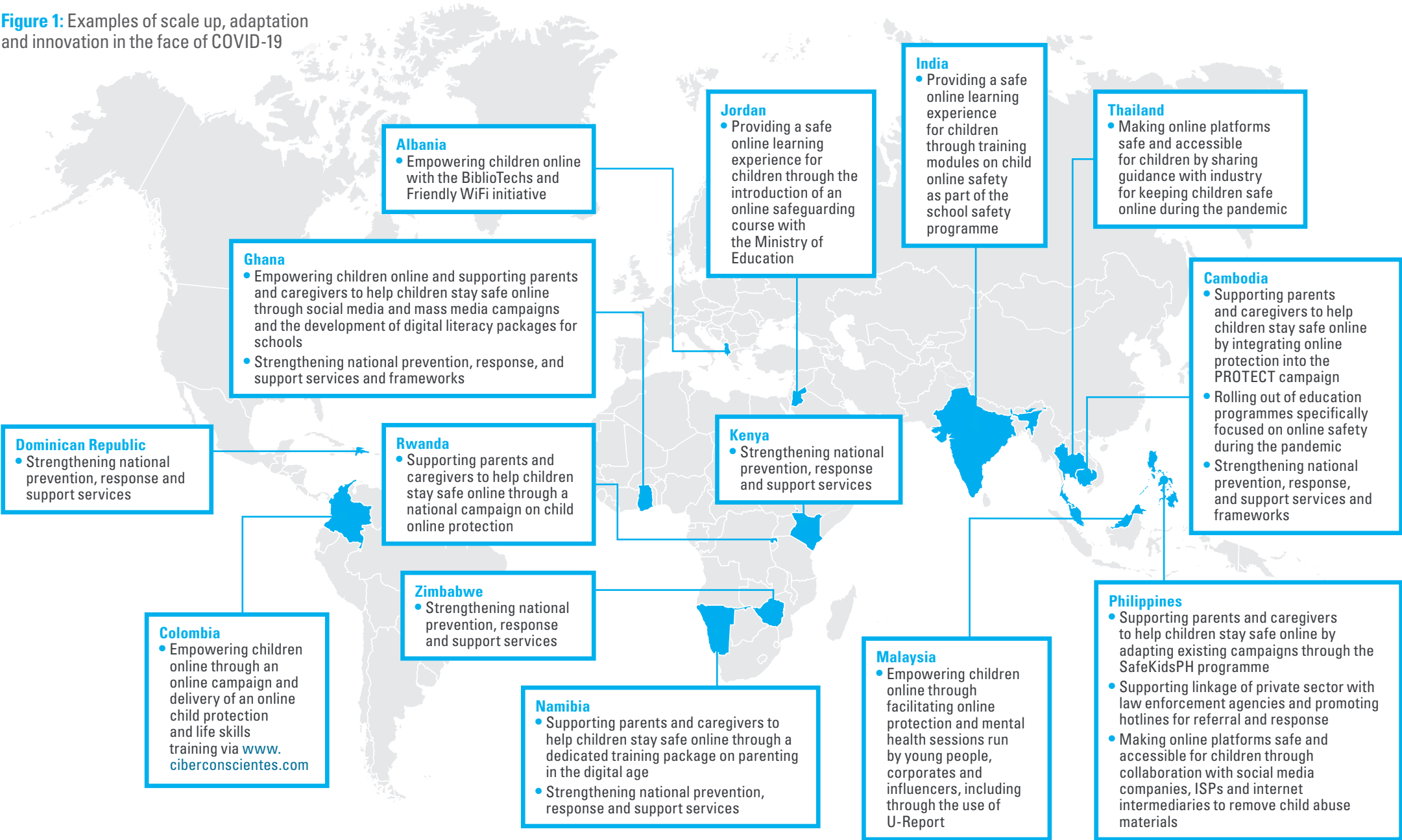
→ **The integral role of parents and caregivers:** COVID-19 and its impact on children's protection has also highlighted the critical role of parents and caregivers to support children's safety. This has brought to the fore the need to invest more in parents' and caregivers' capacity to enable them to support their children to be safe online. The move to online learning has further highlighted the digital divide and the ongoing need to ensure that all children can take advantage of the opportunities brought by digital access and digital skills.

→ **The importance of taking a systems approach and investing in child protection systems:** Most crucially, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the limited, and highly volatile, capacity of social welfare systems, including child protection systems, across the world, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Fragmented, under-resourced and understaffed systems that were under strain before the pandemic, were struggling to cope with increased and urgent demands for support, leaving countless vulnerable children without appropriate protection. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the critical need to take a systems approach to any kind of child protection issues and to invest in a strong, comprehensive and well-integrated social welfare and child protection system. Not all children that are at risk of technology-facilitated abuse are 'users' of technology and therefore, online child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be tackled taking a narrow lens of 'online safety'.

→ **A need to expressly address harmful gender attitudes and norms that drive sexual abuse:** Gender inequalities, harmful gender stereotypes and negative, sexualized, conceptualization of femininity and masculinity have once again been highlighted as critical underlying drivers of child sexual exploitation and abuse in all its different forms. Interventions to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse must firmly integrate efforts to address these underlying drivers.

→ **Harness the innovative potential of children and young people and take into account their views in solution-development:** Last, and most critically, the pandemic has in many ways illustrated the importance of children's agency. Thus, in addition to systems building and capacity-building of caregivers and other stakeholders, efforts must be stepped up to improve children's own capacity in line with their evolving capacities. Children's opinions on solutions developed for them should be systematically solicited and considered. Harnessing the innovative potential of children and youth, including the power of peer-to-peer learning in this context, should take centre stage in future efforts to address technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Figure 1: Examples of scale up, adaptation and innovation in the face of COVID-19



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