

Keeping Children Safe Online Needs a Holistic Approach

Off late, there are a lot of conversations around the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2020 data which has shown a steep 400 per cent increase in cyber-crime cases committed in comparison to 2019, with most of them relating to publishing or transmitting of materials depicting children in a sexually explicit act. While we witness a sense of alarm at the 400% rise, if we dig deeper, we understand this is not even the tip of the iceberg. Among the 842 cases of online offences reported, 738 cases were about publishing or transmitting materials depicting children in a sexually explicit act. Are we really saying there were only 738 cases of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) published or transmitted in India?

As Ms. Sonali Patankar, Founder of Responsible Netism, an organization working on empowering people about online safety and promoting responsible online behaviour, puts it, “It is under-reporting absolutely. This is not even close to the real numbers.”

If we look at this in the backdrop of the data from the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) in 2019 which reported 1,987,430 pieces, the highest number of uploads, of suspected CSAM was from India as per geographical indicators - this looks minuscule. Or the fact that on average, 30 analysts at the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) process 60,000 Cyber Tipline reports of Child Sexual Abuse online every day. These numbers should be sufficient to draw our attention towards the complexity and the span of the problem that we need to tackle.

While increased reporting is promising and cannot be proportionately equated with the number of cases, in the Indian context, the scale of sexual abuse is significantly higher than the reported data.

The 2020 Global Threat Assessment by WeProtect Global Alliance showcases that in the past two years, the reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse online has reached its highest levels with a phenomenal increase in the incidence of online grooming, the volume of CSAM available online and the sharing and distribution of CSAM and live streaming for payment.

Mr. Iain Drennan, Executive Director, WeProtect Global Alliance, says “COVID-19 has exacerbated risks, with our Global Threat Assessment showing a 95% increase in searches for CSAM during the pandemic. Our survey of young people’s global experience of sexual harms online shows that 50% of respondents in South Asia experienced at least one online sexual harm. As many boys (48%) as girls (51%) in South Asia reported atleast one sexual harm, pointing to victimisation of boys as a key area for further research and action.”

Ms. Patankar mentions, in her work with children in India the three key online safety concerns that arise are, “hacking or creating of fake profiles, trolling and cyberbullying on gaming platforms and sharing of sexually explicit images and pictures”.

The data flags that the nature of harm has continued to grow and diversify. These are not mere numbers, it means safety of considerable number of children are at stake and their emotional and psychological wellbeing are being compromised, if not healed. As behind every image there is a real child, the harm continues even if the abuse stops. The probability that the image can be re-transmitted in the future intensifies feelings of shame, humiliation, guilt and chances of revictimization.

As Ms. Anupriya Das Singh, Sr Manager, Healing Services at Arpan, an organization working on prevention and intervention of Child Sexual Abuse says, “Online sexual abuse can leave children with a strong sense of betrayal and guilt because of the nature of cyber grooming. Children can have difficulty in building trust and sustaining relationships in future, if not healed”

Both the scale and the impact call for a targeted response that recognizes the layered complexity and response from a multipronged approach that is reflective and nuanced. A precursor to this effective and collective response is to understand that Child Sexual Abuse takes many forms and often is overlapping. Hence different forms of sexual abuse cannot be looked at as discrete, distinct categories or tackled in an isolated manner. This will otherwise incorrectly create watertight diversification of our understanding and treatment of online and in-person sexual abuse. As more often than not, CSAM accessed by online offenders is the result of ‘contact abuse’, where a child has been abused in person; on the other hand, a child may be groomed online to be abused in person. Understanding this fluidity and interconnectedness will help devise a response and chart a pathway that will create a world safe for children whether offline or online. Strengthening our understanding of these pathways to sexual abuse will help us inform our efforts for deterrence and prevention. To tackle sexual abuse, we need a collective voice, with inter-agency collaboration where governments, civil society, communities and online service providers all play their part.

Mr. Drennan flags, “This global crime needs a global response: a victim of abuse could be located in India, with the perpetrator in Europe and using a service based in North America. We need to pivot towards prevention – we cannot wait until the harm takes place before taking action. We believe there are three areas with the potential to deliver major improvements – legislation, online safety technology and voluntary collaboration. The latter being the key complement to regulation, helping to bridge the gaps that will emerge as different regulatory frameworks are implemented.”

The focus definitely needs to be on strengthening child protection systems and legislative options and designing child-friendly reporting mechanisms.

As Ms. Patankar asks a pertinent question, “How do we build faith in people that action will be taken? Currently, the reporting procedure is complex, so the drop-out rate is high and convictions are extremely low”.

Additionally, the need is to develop context-specific standards for the timely removal of CSAM from the internet and create a 'Safety by Design' approach that includes assessing all products and services from the lens of safety for children.

While we continue to develop technological fixes to prevent abuse, we cannot undermine the fact that communication is key. We need to educate adults to create a safety network and initiate dialogues on Personal Safety. We need to integrate Personal Safety into the educational curriculum and empower all children with Personal Safety Skills. Only if we establish Child Sexual Abuse as a nuanced, cross-policy and cross-sector issue and develop a shared uniform framework across research, policy and practice that guides stakeholders to work collaboratively and play their part in child protection, we will be able to create 'A world free of Child Sexual Abuse'.

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