

Information and Communication Technology (ICT): An Exploration of Online Child Abuse During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Covid-19 has prompted widespread school closures and physical distancing measures and made online platforms and communities essential to maintaining a sense of normalcy.¹ Children are turning to digital solutions more than ever for learning purposes, socialisation and play.² While online platforms provide huge opportunities for children to learn different things and to entertain themselves, these same platforms increase children's exposure to online abuses.³ Digital media contain a high potential for addiction. Children and youth are more at risk compared to adults because it is more difficult for them to differentiate between the real and virtual worlds. When a smartphone vibrates [rings] one has to react as quickly as possible, no matter where one is.⁴ For many it is difficult to endure not looking at their cell phone for the length of 10 minutes. One reason for such addiction is the desire of children and youth for recognition. Such recognition is noticeable through the number of "followers" and "likes" one gets which translates into the measure of one's popularity. To win the competition, they spend a lot of time in the search for something new.⁵ Often unusual, such as sharing naked images which fall in the hands of some hackers/ offenders who then misuse them and exploit the young people.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund, the internet and associated technologies have made images of children easier to create and distribute, and provide significantly new opportunities for abusers to access and make contact with children and young people online (UNICEF 2017). Therefore, it would be a big mistake to think and believe that child abuse, in which Information and Communication Technology (ICT) plays a role, is only an issue for the economically developed countries, societies or families (UNICEF 2017). It would be also a blunder to assume that all children and young people are equally adept or at home

in an online environment, or equally knowledgeable about the internet. It has been established that the level of use of the internet, the behaviours and vulnerabilities of young people online differ according to their age (UNICEF, 2017). The advent of Covid-19 pandemic has forced almost all the education systems to administer their learning material on the internet and online learning have become a new revolution in the teaching and learning field. This has also increased the chances of children to be abused online.

Key terms: Online Child abuse, Cyberbullying, Cyber-grooming, Sexual Exploitation, sexting and sextortion, Fake Profile and Fake Notices, Live-streaming.

Introduction

Movement restrictions and closure of schools suggest that children spend more time online, thus increase their exposure to online bullying, pornography, sexual violence and exploitation.⁶ Perpetrators are taking advantage of children spending more unsupervised time online and are seeking to groom and exploit children through sexual coercion and sextortion (SOS Children's Villages International et al. 2020). While the internet has been a positive catalyst for innovation, education, and economic growth, it has also enabled those who would harm children by making it easier for them to produce access and share child sexual abuse materials.⁷ Bogdan-Martin, the Director of Telecommunication Development Bureau (2020) reported that, Covid-19 global pandemic saw a surge in the number of children joining the online world for the first time [...] The constraints imposed by the virus [Covid-19] not only meant that many younger children began interacting online much earlier than their parents might have planned, but the need to juggle work commitments left many parents unable to supervise their children, leaving young people at risk of accessing inappropriate content or being targeted by criminals in the production of child sexual abuse material (ITU, 2020). This article will explore some of the following online abuses which children are likely or experiencing during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include: grooming of children for sexual purposes, cyber bullying, the danger of Live-streaming platforms; contact with criminal players: cyber

grooming, fake profile and fake notices; sextortion: coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes. This article will also explain how some of these crimes are committed online in order to alert parents, caregivers, children and readers of this article about the dangers of online child abuses and the mechanisms which can be adopted in order to curb these crimes.

Statement of the problem

As the Covid-19 pandemic has spread across the globe, we have seen an increase in violation of children on different internet platforms and social media which should make us worry about the future of our children. Children are encountering different types of online abuses such as Cyberbullying, grooming, sexting, sexual abuse, and sexual exploitation, among other abuses. Most children are not even aware that these are forms of abuses which are worth reporting. Worse, some parents seem not to be even interested in what their children do online or the sites that they explore, which makes it difficult for them to notice the abuses which they might be encountering. This study will then explain some of the online abuses which children might be experiencing so that they can be aware of them and be able to report these abuses. Again, on parents and guidance or any other caregiver to be conscious of these online abuses so that they can be able to monitor the activities of their children online or social media platforms so that together we can be able to curb these forms of abuses and safeguarding our children so that they can live their lives to the fullest. Failing to prevent and effectively respond to violations against children can have life-long impacts on children's health and well-being, educational attainment and development (SOS Children's Villages International, 2020).

Purpose of the study

- To explore different types of online child abuses experienced by children during Covid-19 pandemic.
- To explore some international mechanisms set to curb online child abuse and how they can be adopted and adapted in our country by relevant stakeholders in order to protect children from online predators.

- To expose some of online behaviours that can expose children to criminals.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on desk research and the analysis of available literature on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and child online abuse especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Desk research is a term that is used loosely and it generally refers to the collection of secondary data or that which has already been collected.⁸ Desk research helps the researcher to understand the research problem, generate hypotheses and determine the most effective methodology and sample for future research, and it also gives a basis for evaluation and allows for comparison over time.⁹

Implications for safeguarding children from online abuses during the Covid-19 pandemic

Since the beginning of Covid-19 in Zimbabwe many children's learning experiences have been reshaped by the introduction of distance or online learning including-where available-technology and virtual platforms as a substitute for the classroom and schoolyard.¹⁰ While children aged 10 years and above may already be familiar with social media and other online platforms, the pandemic has introduced younger children such as 5-year-olds and others to social networking tools that may not be designed for them and which they may have limited preparation.¹¹ This has heightened the risk of being abused online.

Online sexual exploitation

The Global Threat Assessment done by WePROTECT GLOBAL Alliance and ground-breaking investigative reporting by New York Times shows that spending more time online may increase the likelihood that children come into contact with online predators.¹²

The danger of Live-streaming platforms

According to Europol's 5 October 2020 Cybercrime Report, the main threats related to online child abuse exploitation have remained stable in

recent years, however, detection of online child sexual abuse material saw a sharp spike at the peak of the Covid-19 crisis. They also discovered that Live-stream of child abuse continues to increase, becoming even more popular than usual during the Covid-19 crisis when travel restriction prevented offenders from physically abusing children.¹³ In some cases, video chat applications in payment systems are used which becomes one of the key challenges for law enforcement as this material is recorded.¹⁴ Karakaya notes that, on YouTube or Musically, there is the possibility to review the video before it is made public to the internet community.¹⁵ On most Live-streaming platforms, however, this is not possible. This leads to the posting of many unfiltered, unedited videos from classrooms, playgrounds, children's bedrooms or any other place. These images can be viewed by all and can no longer be deleted. Parents, Caregivers and children themselves should be aware of these realities in order to avoid situations which can endanger their privacy and lives in general. Children and youth should be aware that one cannot influence what happens with photos posted on the internet. Once on the internet, always on the internet! Even when a picture has been deleted, one does not know how many people downloaded it previously during the time it was available.¹⁶ Children and youth should always ask themselves two questions when they think about posting photos or messages on the internet: i) Would I post the message or picture on an advertising billboard, where everyone could read it and see it? ii) Could I regret this action? One should know that even harmless pictures can be edited with graphics editing programs so that one can find oneself portrayed as naked or in other compromised situations on the internet. The Snapchat process that allows one to determine the time period after which a photo should no longer be visible, or when it should be deleted, offers no absolute certainty that this will be done. During the time when it is publicly seen, a screenshot can be taken of the image.¹⁷

Once, on the internet, always on the internet!

It is problematic that many photos can be uploaded onto websites which are hosted in countries outside of Africa. Neither Zimbabwean nor African laws apply in this case, which has a critical impact on data

protection. In this case children and youths have to be educated about the dangers of posting pictures on the internet because at the end of the day they do not have control over them and the servers of those pictures and videos sit in another continent and country. This increases the risks of being blackmailed or sexually exploited on the internet.

Children's online experience and exposure

Covid-19 stay-at-home restrictions have made many children and youths to retreat on online entertainment platforms which have increased the risks of being exploited by online criminals. Many children take the internet as a platform for entertainment, rather than for educational purposes, this is portrayed in the research which was done in Zimbabwe by National Association of Social workers (2019). They found out that some explanations of children's internet use suggest that children are not entirely unaware of the many risks connected with internet use and they are not always ill equipped to manage cyber risks.¹⁸ According to Dzoro, Chereni and Gwenzi, the study participants were five females and five males aged between 14 and 17 years old.¹⁹ They each used sophisticated handheld devices including smartphones and tablets. They also found out that the social media platforms which children used were not different from those that adults ordinarily use: WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Gmail and Facebook.²⁰ When asked to describe her online presence, Jennifer, a 17-year-old teenager girl retorted with a hint of pride: 'I have access to Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp almost all the time and I want to open an Instagram account.'²¹ When online, Jennifer engages more in entertainment than educational tasks: 'I do less of school stuff...I download music videos.' Similarly, Mukudzei, a 16 years old male student, spends much of his time online to 'download music and videos and play games.'²² Interestingly, the internet is a source of entertainment for many children, rather than for educational purposes. Many children are not aware that they can be in contact with criminal players when they explore online games.

Mukudzei, a 16-year-old boy when asked to describe some of the things he usually does online said: 'I download music videos and games. I have downloaded one porn video long back... I also watch them'.²³

Rukudzo confessed that, ‘I download music videos, porn and games’ and added, ‘I am in a WhatsApp porn group.’²⁴ Children not only access sexually explicit content such as videos and pictures. They also share these within social media networks that exclude adults. Tonderai, a 17-year-old boy similarly revealed that, apart from online games, he accessed sexually inappropriate content.²⁵ Not unlike Mukudzei and Rukudzo, he belongs to a WhatsApp group within which members share age-restricted content. He disclosed that, ‘I download porn, games and music on the internet²⁶ I am [a member of] two WhatsApp porn groups.’ (National Association of Social workers-Zimbabwe, 2019). It is alarming that children casually watch pornographic images and videos although such material is not only age-inappropriate but also unlawful in Zimbabwe.²⁷

The three Statutes in Zimbabwe that presently exist to curb unwanted behaviour in the Cyberspace are:

- The Postal and Telecommunications Act [Chapter 12:05].
- The Censorship and Entertainments controls Act [Chapter 10:04].
- The Criminal law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23].

These statutes were enacted before the advent of the technological boom that saw the introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, among other platforms.²⁸ Considering the technology advancements in our country and communities there is a need to review these statutory laws in order to align them to the present technological advancements in the country and the world. Besides the above Statutes there is also a Cyber Security and Data Protection Bill, 2019 which was produced in order to respond to the current needs for cyber security and protection for children and all people in the country. As such:

- Clause 164 B Cyber bullying and harassment deals with any data message which is sent to coerce, harass or intimidate.
- Clauses 165 and 165A deals with pornography involving a child or exposing pornography to children.

Cyber-Grooming: Contact with Criminal Players

In the game one can explore the world of a movie star, become famous, shoot films, or try out to be a singer or a model. The game is a simulation

and therefore created so that one can interact with other children, who are also pretending to be other characters, via chat. However, criminals can also pretend to be such characters.²⁹ When criminals approach children on the internet, it is called cyber-grooming. The procedure is: first, the offenders build trust with the underage victims and then they sexually molest them. They know exactly where children can be found on the internet, especially in certain computer game apps or in social networks. In the games, they offer the children whatever they need to continue to play, similar to the pay-to-play option in the games. These gifts are given only under conditions connected to the desire for more material: when the children need more material, they must send photos of themselves in their underwear or naked. The offenders usually pretend to be the same age. In addition, it is also well-known that terror organisations participate in computer shooting games to recruit children and youths by promising to teach them how to use real weapons.³⁰ According to Laylee Moshiri, “this is evidence that it is more important than ever to teach children how to be informed digital citizens. Parents can do this by fostering open communication with children about how technology can and should be used and by setting clear expectations and boundaries”.³¹ It is essential to keep communicating with children in open and honest ways and let them know that they can always approach parents or caregivers if something online makes them uncomfortable or it is potentially dangerous (Moshiri).

Fake Profile and Fake Notices

It is important to make children and youth sensitive to the fact that they should have a healthy distrust of things happening on the internet. They need to know that their chat partners may not necessarily be the persons they say they are. Most probably, many of the profiles that can be found on the internet do not even exist. If one has a bad feeling in the stomach during a chat, then one should know that one should stop the communication immediately. It is also important that children should be able to confide to an adult at any time, especially a parent or a caregiver. The first reaction by the person of their choice is important.³² One needs to take the shame away from the child and communicate that he or she has done well by reporting the case.

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (Sexting and Sextortion)

Online child sexual abuse and online sexual exploitation involve the use of information and communication technology as a means to sexually abuse and/or sexually exploit children.³³ Child sexual exploitation involves child sexual abuse and/or other sexualised acts using children that involve an exchange of some kind of, for example, food, affection, drugs and shelter (UNODC, 2015). According to ECPAT International (2017), sexting is producing and/or utilising sexual images and/or videos depicting a child, for the purposes of sexual, financial or other personal gains. Offenders can be adults or peers of the victims-and sometimes the child sexual abuse material is self-produced through manipulation of the victim.³⁴

Here is a real story which depicts online child sexual exploitation which happened in one of the High Schools in Zimbabwe. One of the school girls was added in a WhatsApp group by her friends from the same school to play a game of ‘dare’. According to Plan International blog, “everyone was asked to post a random number and given a corresponding challenge which they had to complete. Chipo was asked to upload half-naked photos to the group. She felt obliged to comply because not participating in the game meant that her dare turn would not be complete and that also meant losing her friends”.³⁵ Soon after uploading the pictures, her mother discovered the photos on her phone and banned her from using it again.³⁶ For a few weeks everything seemed alright, but one day at school things began to take another form. Some of her classmates were laughing at her whenever they looked at her. Some of them stopped talking to her and tried to avoid her whenever she wanted to join their group. She felt deserted and ashamed. One of them called her a name, and it dawned on her that the photos had been circulating on social online. During break time, she discovered that one of her classmates had printed her photos and was selling 50 cents to other children.³⁷ They were buying for fun to show their friends who were somewhere else. The pictures began circulating on social media, going beyond her school. She saw mocking memes of herself, other children calling her all kinds of names.³⁸ She was emotionally and psychologically disturbed from

betrayal of her friends. Guilt, shame and sadness grabbed her. As she looked at her WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter messages she saw grown men posting sexual comments about her.³⁹ Some were making appointments to meet her face-to-face promising to give her whatever she wanted and to take her to her favourite places. When Chipo got home she broke down in tears and her mother saw her crying. She asked her why she was crying but she could not reveal it to her immediately. After some hours of insisting is when Chipo unveiled to her mother all what had happened. Her mother was shocked and approached the school authorities where her child was learning. She reported the case to the school head who then handled the case in collaboration with the police. Chipo was taken to the psychologists who journeyed with her.⁴⁰

This story meant to conscientize parents, caregivers and children on how one can be exploited online through what looks like a simple behaviour or action. Chipo willingly uploaded her half-naked pictures on WhatsApp group without reflecting on the consequences of doing that.

“International Conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography of 2000, enumerate children’s rights and clarify the obligation of the states to protect children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.”⁴¹

How children, parents and caregivers should respond to online dangers

- The first recommendation is always to listen to your gut. This is our best form of firewall. If one has the feeling one is being blackmailed or deceived, the contact should be immediately broken off.⁴²

- If parents or caregivers suspect child online violence or when a child reports about any online misconduct or abuse, they should call Childline (Zimbabwe) and report the case on 116 or message on WhatsApp on +263 716 116 116 or +263 732 116 116.

- In the case of online child abuse the case can also be reported to the Victim Friendly Unit or any police station close by.

- There are also some organisations which help children such as

Justice for Children Trust. These Lawyers offer free services to children who have been abused in any form of abuse: +263 242 778474 or +263 242 741782.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The following recommendations can help parents and caregivers to safeguard children from online predators and what to do when a child reports an online abuse to them. In addition, the recommendations also inform parents and caregivers on the right procedures to take when they suspect or a child reports to them about online abuse.

- Keeping children informed and engaged and empowering them with the skills to use the internet safely is a critical line of defence (UNICEF, 2020).

- Child-serving agencies in the government of Zimbabwe and civil society should design and implement educational programmes to improve parents' and caregivers' knowledge about safe online presence and safe online presence for children.⁴³ Topics may include internet risks for children, children's risk-taking and risk-making as well netiquette and cyber ethics. Such educational interventions should aspire to make parental and adult involvement in children's internet use a part of non-authoritarian parenting approaches that recognises children as internet users in their own right (National Association of Social workers, 2019).

- Parents, guardians, and educators spend most of the time with children, hence, they should be educated in digital literacy to understand the online environment and be able to protect children and teach them how to protect themselves (ITU, 2020).

- Parental control should be set on family internet and gadgets used by children in order to safeguard minors from online perpetrators.

- Children should be informed about different types of online abuses and where to report abuses.

- Government and legislature should come up with effective mechanisms to ensure that network providers in Zimbabwe develop the right tools that parents and caregivers use to safeguard children from online predators, and for children to protect themselves from online criminals.

- Parents and Caregivers should be well informed about the

Statutory Laws in our country (Zimbabwe) which safeguard children from online abuses, for instance:⁴⁴

- i) The Postal and Telecommunication Act [Chapter 12:05].
- ii) The Censorship and Entertainment Controls Acts [Chapter 10:04].
- iii) The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) [Chapter 9:23].
- iv) Cyber Security and data Protection Bill, 2019 [Clauses 164B, 165 & 165A].

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