

Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: Characteristics and drivers in the Philippines

Technology has become an increasingly relevant medium for child sexual abuse and exploitation.¹ The exponential growth of Internet connectivity worldwide, coupled with advanced technology such as smartphones, ease of access to online payment mechanisms and perceived anonymity has resulted in an epidemic of cases of online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC).

OSEC is a form of sexual abuse affecting millions of vulnerable children worldwide, involving “the production, for the purpose of online publication or transmission, of visual depictions (e.g., photos, videos, live streaming) of the sexual abuse or exploitation of a minor for a third party who is not in the physical presence of the victim, in exchange for compensation.”² Although there is no agreed definition of OSEC it constitutes a trafficking in persons offense according to the Palermo Protocol, as well as child abuse, cyber-crime and child pornography offenses in many countries.

One of the most prevalent forms of OSEC is live streaming or on demand child sexual abuse, where child sexual activities are transmitted by a “facilitator” – usually, though not necessarily, a victim’s relative, neighbour or close friend - through webcam or audio interface and watched remotely in real-time by viewers who request, order, pay and dictate how the sexual activity will be carried out on and often by children.³ Consumers, in turn, send payments via a money transfer agency to the facilitator, a distinctive feature of OSEC that distinguishes it from other common but non-commercial forms of online crime against children.ⁱ Sometimes, the live-streaming sessions are recorded and circulated online, resulting in a chronic victimisation of children from which facilitators continue to profit financially.ⁱⁱ

The Philippines is a global epicentre of OSEC in general, and live stream sexual abuse of children in particular. High poverty rates and lack of social protection services, coupled with a well-developed money remittance infrastructure, widespread and inexpensive internet access, high levels of English language proficiency and a historically tolerated sex industry in the country have contributed to turning the Philippines into a hotspot for

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Rapid technological change has given online sex offenders access to vulnerable children in countries where protections from this threat have not kept pace with these advances.
- Vulnerability to online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) has only heightened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Socio-economic vulnerability, increased access to internet connectivity and the growth of online remittance technology are among the key factors fuelling the supply of children for exploitation.
- The Philippines is a global epicentre of OSEC - particularly in the area of live-streaming of this abuse.
- Despite efforts to tackle the rise in OSEC government, civil society, and industry actors face important challenges - from technological and legal, to psychological and cultural.
- Taking immediate steps to address the rise in OSEC is critical given the higher levels of post-traumatic stress, lower self-esteem, and severe educational delays victims experience.
- Justice and Care is partnering with international researchers, with the support of NGO IJM, to conduct a study of convicted OSEC traffickers in the Philippines.
- The study is the first of its kind, focusing on supply-side OSEC activities with the goal of helping practitioners better understand and more effectively respond to OSEC, within and beyond the Philippines.
- This research is expected to contribute to enhancements in detection and offence prevention across global platform providers and remittance services implicated in these offences, and disruption by law enforcement.

ⁱ The production and sharing of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) is not deemed trafficking unless financial compensation is involved.

ⁱⁱ It is also not uncommon for facilitators to use these recordings to gain access to child exploitation communities or to trade them for other child sexual exploitation materials (e.g., photos or videos of other OSEC victims).

OSEC activity. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2016 revealed that 80% of the children in the Philippines were vulnerable to being victims of online sexual abuse or bullying, and that 2.5% of them had had their nude bodies or sexual activities shown on the Internet or on a cell phone.⁴ The situation has worsened in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated families' economic distress while simultaneously allowing customers and facilitators to enjoy unprecedented levels of access to children. In this direction, the Department of Justice of the Philippines recorded a threefold increase in OSEC cases following the lockdown restrictions imposed in the country,^{5,iii} with IJM estimating in their recent prevalence study nearly half a million Filipino children trafficked to produce new child sexual exploitation material in 2022.⁶

Despite the rapid proliferation of OSEC cases in the Philippines and other low and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa, this phenomenon remains under-researched. Furthermore, most of the literature in this area has predominantly focused on "demand-side" OSEC-offending in the West, with little concern for the "how" and "why" of "supply-side" offending or facilitation. Understanding the contextual drivers and pathways to OSEC offending is critical to improve the efficacy and impact of measures aimed at tackling this type of crime in the source countries.

In this issue brief, we examine the literature and empirical evidence around the characteristics and determinants of OSEC, focusing on the role of "supply side" facilitators in the Philippines as a case study. After discussing the characteristics of online sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines, we review the prevailing policy approaches adopted by the Filipino authorities, international organisations, and civil society actors in the fight against OSEC. We conclude by sharing details of an important study we have underway to strengthen our understanding of OSEC facilitation and enhance the effectiveness of efforts to prevent, disrupt and prosecute this type of criminal activity in the Philippines and in other nations with similar contextual conditions.

OSEC in the Philippines

Characteristics of OSEC, facilitators and victims

OSEC in the Philippines is largely a "surface web crime". It occurs with the use of webcams and communication software, through chat rooms, email, and social networking sites. Domestic traffickers or "facilitators" play a central role in this type of child exploitation, contacting remote offenders - typically middle-aged English-speaking men from Europe, North America and Australia - via widely used social media platforms and using inexpensive smartphones with pre-paid cellular data service to produce or distribute OSEC materials.

Prior research has identified three main groups of facilitators. The first, largest group is composed of - mostly (65%) adult females - relatives or close friends of the victims. A second group comprises

"self-facilitators", generally older teenagers who send materials to OSEC consumers. The third group of facilitators consists of "entrepreneurs" "cyber-sex dens" and establishments like internet and pisonet cafes, where multiple victims are exploited.⁷ The relative importance of this latter group has dwindled over time, both as a result of explicit efforts by Filipino authorities to eradicate cybersex dens and as a by-product of the increased affordability of technology, which allows small-scale facilitators to engage in OSEC at home.

As for the profile of OSEC victims in the Philippines, while the vast majority of victims are girls, there is a considerable proportion of boy victims as well.⁸ Victims' ages range from infants to teenagers - although there is a growing concern around the gradually rising presence of younger OSEC victims (under the age of 10). These younger children are increasingly vulnerable to OSEC victimisation, since they are very compliant to the requests of commands of their authority figures and are still dependent on their caregivers, which renders exploitation by a family member especially "easy". In this sense, victims' age tends to be highly dependent on the identity of the facilitator: victims tend to be considerably younger when the facilitator is a direct relative; by contrast, when the facilitator is not related to the victims, victims tend to be older - usually an adolescent - and frequently forced to engage in prostitution with foreign OSEC consumers.

Risk factors for OSEC

Facilitators' motivation to engage in OSEC is mainly economic: most facilitators and their victims live in extreme poverty, unemployed or with unsecured jobs, and must support large families. The need to provide food, clothing and school tuition for children is commonly used by victims' relatives - the most prevalent type of facilitators - as a justification for their engagement in OSEC.⁹ The comparatively low levels of social protection in place in the Philippines exacerbates the vulnerability of OSEC victims and facilitators.¹⁰

However, poverty and economic disadvantage is not the only driver of involvement in OSEC activity. In other instances, the lure of making "easy money" is a powerful motivator for facilitators to engage in OSEC: proceeds from this type of criminal activity largely exceed the average income they would obtain in the labour market - especially given that the low level of education and skills among facilitators limits their job opportunities to low-income informal employment.¹¹

In addition to facilitators' socioeconomic vulnerability, recent technological developments in the Philippines have also helped explain the increase in OSEC the country has witnessed in the past few years. Internet connectivity in the country has quadrupled over the last decade, contributing - alongside the availability of affordable devices like smartphones, tablets, and laptops - to the upsurge in live-stream OSEC.¹² The growth of online remittance technology, commonly used by overseas Filipino workers, has

iii It is worth noting that OSEC - in particular, live-streaming - is a severely under-reported crime. Hence, the actual number of cases is in all likelihood higher.

also made financial transactions related to OSEC easier. Many remittance services have minimal restrictions when recipients claim payments,^{iv} which contribute to lower perceptions of risk – i.e., the likelihood of detection and arrest – among facilitators.¹³

The relatively high levels of English language proficiency among the Filipino population (including children), which makes communication and transaction with Western customers easy, also contributes to the comparatively high rates of OSEC in the country. Since language is not a barrier to communication, foreigners can easily dictate whatever they want to the traffickers and victims.¹⁴

Policy responses and challenges

Law enforcement authorities in the Philippines, international agencies, non-governmental organisations and private actors in the information technology and financial sectors have tried to respond to the spike of OSEC cases in the country.

Over the last few years, the government of the Philippines has adopted several laws to protect children from OSEC while simultaneously attempting to equip law agencies, the judicial system and social services to respond to the increase in OSEC. The government implemented a National Response Plan to Address Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children between 2017 and 2020 and a “War on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children” in 2022. This policy response engages various national and local authorities in a comprehensive plan against OSEC while simultaneously working with telecommunications companies and Internet service providers to filter the OSEC payment transactions and strengthen collaborations with foreign governments to combat this crime.^v

These public sector initiatives are being complemented by the work of various third sector organisations actively supporting OSEC victims in their communities, providing survivor care, creating assessment centres, establishing hotlines dedicated to OSEC, and assisting the criminal justice and social service systems in the country.¹⁵ Many organisations additionally advocate awareness and educational campaigns promoting safe internet practices among parents and children to reduce the risk of OSEC victimisation.

Despite these efforts, government, civil society, and industry actors face important challenges that undermine their attempts to tackle the rise in OSEC – both in the Philippines and worldwide. Some of these obstacles are related to the lack of enforcement of the legislation that is already in place. Procedural and administrative challenges that deter victims from pressing charges also create obstacles to the prevention, disruption and deterrence of OSEC perpetration and facilitation.

Additionally, a key technological obstacle in the fight against OSEC is that, while the platforms can detect an enormous volume of child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) online, available technologies do not and cannot detect newly produced CSEM. This is especially problematic in the case of live-streaming OSEC which, by its own nature, involves ephemeral video streams – rather than stored image or video files – which are not usually subject to screening or content review by tech platforms. Moreover, such streams frequently take place through private communications and not broadcasted for open viewing, and thus may be protected via technologies like end-to-end encryption or by privacy policies implemented by the tech industry. Whatever evidence that does exist is often dispersed across different social media apps, computers and mobile devices, making it difficult for law enforcement agencies to detect and criminalise live-streaming OSEC when it occurs.¹⁶

Besides these technological and legal difficulties, there are important psychological and cultural traits specific to Philippine society that enable and sustain exploitative practices. For instance, a commonly held belief among OSEC facilitators is that online behaviours such as live-streaming do not constitute forms of child abuse because usually there is no physical contact between the victims and the – typically – foreign perpetrators of the abuse.¹⁷ Online sex work is also “normalised” or at least tolerated in many communities in view of the prevalence of these type activities among the young and old alike. These attitudes are compounded by cultural norms – e.g., the social stigma associated with being a sexual victim; the belief that child abuse is a private family matter; the perception that young people are to blame for engaging in online sex activities, partly driven by the historically low age of consent in the Philippines;^{vi} and the lack of trust in authorities – that act as barriers to crime reporting and hampers the effectiveness of policy responses seeking to combat online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country.

Moving forward

Taking immediate steps to address the rise in OSEC in the Philippines is critical given the impact of this type of abuse on society’s most vulnerable children. Previous research has shown that OSEC victims suffer higher levels of post-traumatic stress, lower self-esteem, and severe educational delays.¹⁸ There is also evidence that victims of child sexual exploitations are more likely to become criminal offenders later in life.¹⁹ While more needs to be understood about the longer-term effects of OSEC on the mental, physical, sexual, and social wellbeing of children, it is clear that the recording of abuse and threat of distribution adds an additional layer of trauma to that experienced through contact abuse.²⁰

^{iv} For instance, individuals only provide serial numbers to receive a money transfer, without the need to show any form of identification.

^v For instance, in 2017 the Philippines signed the Child Protection Compact Partnership with the U.S. Department of State Office. The CPS committed resources towards a plan aimed at increasing the protection of OSEC victims.

^{vi} Until 2022, the age of consent in the Philippines was 12 years old, one of the lowest in the world. This has contributed to shaping societal attitudes towards OSEC: survey data has shown that a large fraction of the Filipino public opinion believes that OSEC victims older than 13 should be held responsible for their actions.

There is, however, a critical lack of understanding of the socio-cultural context of online sexual exploitation of children, as well as how it is understood and conceptualised across communities.²¹ In particular, more needs to be done to understand how and why OSEC traffickers and facilitators begin committing this crime. The collection of relevant data and the development of evidence in this regard is especially challenging given the sensitives and stigma surrounding OSEC.²²

In this direction, Justice and Care has partnered with Dublin City University and De La Salle University of the Philippines, with the support of IJM, to carry out a two-year study on the facilitation of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children in the Philippines. The study is the first of its kind, examining the supply-side of OSEC activities with the goal of shedding light on the situational factors and motivations to offending, and to inform practical strategies to improve the efficacy of protective and preventive approaches to this type of exploitation.

To that end, the research team has conducted interviews with domain experts and professionals with direct experience of working in this area, examined case-file records of and conducted interviews with convicted OSEC Filipino offenders, and analysed data on financial transactions and chat-logs between facilitators and “consumers” to identify opportunities for prevention, and point to specific courses of action that financial services providers, social media platforms, law enforcement, and other relevant stakeholders should take to more effectively tackle OSEC. And while the research project focuses on the Philippines, the study will contribute to understanding the drivers and vulnerability to OSEC in other low and middle-income countries, contributing to enhancements in technological detection and prevention of OSEC globally. We look forward to sharing our findings with you in early 2024.

- 1 Perkins, Derek, et al. (2018). Interventions for perpetrators of online child sexual exploitation – A scoping review and gap analysis.
- 2 United Nations Children's Fund (2020). National Study on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in the Philippines.
- 3 Hillman, Raymond, et al. (2014). “Online child exploitation: Challenges and future research directions.” *Compute Law & Security Report* 30(6): 687-698.
- 4 UNICEF (2016). *Situation Analysis of Children in the Philippines*.
- 5 World Hope International (2022). “Online Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Philippines”; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2022).
- 6 IJM and University of Nottingham Rights Lab (2023). *Scale of Harm Research Method, Findings, and Recommendations: Estimating the Prevalence of Trafficking to Produce Child Sexual Exploitation Materials in the Philippines*.
- 7 International Justice Mission (2020). *Online Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Philippines: Analysis and Recommendations for Governments, Industry, and Civil Society*.
- 8 International Justice Mission (2020).
- 9 United Nations Children's Fund. (2020). *National Study on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in the Philippines*
- 10 Roche, Steven, et al. (2023). “Online sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines: A scoping review”. *Children and Youth Services Review* 148: 106861
- 11 Roche et al. (2023).
- 12 Dedase-Escoton, Vivian, et al. (2020). *A study on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children for Aftercare Reintegration*.
- 13 Roche et al. (2023).
- 14 Dedase-Escoton, Vivian, et al. (2020).
- 15 International Justice Mission (2020).
- 16 International Justice Mission (2020).
- 17 World Vision Development Foundation (2020). *Community Perspectives on Online Sexual Exploitation of Children - A Study Examining Existing Knowledge and A wareness in Select Areas in the Philippines*.
- 18 Terre Des Hommes (2013). *Fullscreen on View: An exploratory study on the background and psychosocial consequences of webcam child sex tourism in the Philippines*.
- 19 Ryan, Gail, et al. (2011). *Juvenile Sexual Offending: Causes, Consequences and Correction*.
- 20 Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2017). *Survivors' Survey*.
- 21 Roche et al. (2023).
- 22 Collin-Vezina, Delphina, et al. (2015). “Lessons Learned from Child Sexual Abuse Research: Prevalence, Outcomes, and Preventive Strategies, continued”.

Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: Characteristics and drivers in the Philippines

OCTOBER 2023

Nicole Munns International Systemic Change Director

Gabriel Katz International Systemic Change Research Associate

Suite 139,
210 Upper Richmond Road,
London SW15 6NP

hello@justiceandcare.org
+44 (0)203 959 2580
www.justiceandcare.org



© 2023 Justice and Care

Companies House No 6990037, England and Wales Charity No 1133829 and Scotland No SC042389