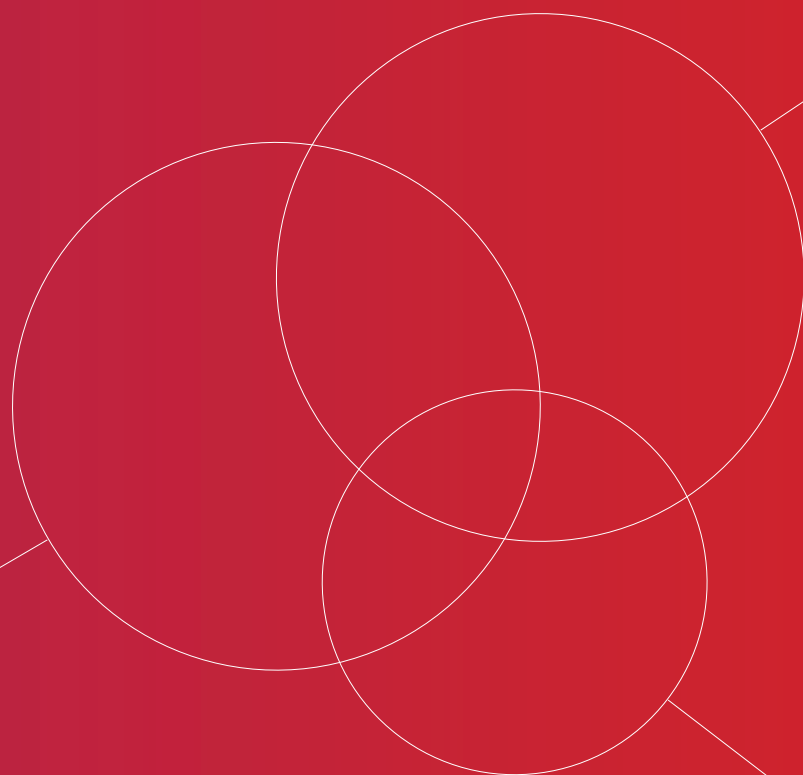


# Facilitation of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) in the Philippines

Analysis and recommendations for better detection, deterrence and prevention

Final Report, April 2024



# Research Team

Ms. Nicole Munns, Director of International Systemic Change, Justice and Care

Dr. Maggie Brennan (Principal Investigator), School of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Health, Dublin City University

Dr. Elaine Byrnes, School of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Health, Dublin City University

Ms. Cydney Sheridan, School of Psychology, Faculty of Science and Health, Dublin City University

Prof. Melvin Jabar, Social Development Research Center, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

Prof. Maria Caridad Tarroja, Social Development Research Center, De la Salle University, Manila, Philippines

Dr. Zaldy Collado, Social Development Research Center, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

Prof. Derek Perkins, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London

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# Foreword

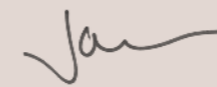
In the modern digital era, where technological advancements have revolutionised connectivity and access, the protection of our most vulnerable, our children, has not kept pace. Moreover, the global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, leading to unforeseen challenges in safeguarding children from online sexual abuse and exploitation. In this ever-evolving landscape, the Philippines has emerged as a hotspot for such despicable crimes.

The findings presented in this report are alarming and important. They shed light on the contagion effect and vicious cycle of abuse perpetuated by the facilitators of online sexual abuse and exploitation in the Philippines. It's disturbing to learn how online platforms, including dating sites, and financial intermediaries are being used in the exploitation of innocent children, sustaining a cycle of harm that must be stopped.

This research underscores the imperative for a global response to combat online sexual abuse and exploitation, recognising that it's not merely a local issue but a pervasive threat that transcends borders. The harm inflicted upon children, and the perpetuation of abuse, demand immediate and concerted action from all stakeholders, including governments, law enforcement agencies, technology companies, and civil society organisations.

As we delve into the findings of this comprehensive study, it becomes evident that reducing re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation of children, addressing the contagion effect, and strengthening the enabling environment of online platforms are critical steps towards effective prevention and intervention strategies. Furthermore, strengthening the global response through targeted measures aimed at tackling demand for online sexual exploitation in the Philippines is paramount.

This report serves as a wake-up call to the collective conscience of the global community. The protection of our children must be prioritised, and concerted efforts must be made to eradicate the scourge of online sexual abuse and exploitation. The findings presented here underscore the urgency of action and the imperative to act swiftly and decisively to safeguard the innocence and well-being of our children.



James Clarry,  
Global Chief Executive, Justice & Care

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# Executive Summary

Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) in the Philippines has become more prominent in recent years with the growth in internet connectivity, access to mobile devices and online payment mechanisms. Here, vulnerability to OSAEC heightened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, with foreign perpetrators and local facilitators of these crimes gaining an unprecedented level of access to children; colluding in their abuse and exploitation online.

While OSAEC has received increasing attention from authorities, academics and practitioners in recent years, extant research has typically focused on ‘demand side’ offending in the West and other foreign countries, with little attention to ‘how’ and ‘why’ OSAEC crimes are facilitated on the ground in the Philippines. Consequently, there is a dearth of literature and empirical understanding of the role of and profile of ‘supply-side’ facilitators of OSAEC in the region.

In 2022, Justice and Care partnered with Dublin City University, De La Salle University, Manila, and the International Justice Mission (IJM) to address this gap in understanding by carrying out a two-year study on the facilitation of OSAEC in the Philippines, a global epicentre of OSAEC live streaming and other associated crimes.

The project was designed to enhance our understanding of methods of OSAEC offending, to shed light on the situational factors, motivations and pathways to offending, and to inform practical strategies related to law enforcement investigation and technological and financial facilitation of this crime. Here the objective was to make recommendations that might improve the efficacy of OSAEC detection and deterrence, as well as preventative approaches to this type of abuse and exploitation.

## This report brings together high-level findings from two distinct phases of the project.

**Phase One:** During this phase, information from a number of sources was gathered and analysed by the research team. Data sources included one to one interviews with domain experts and professionals with direct experience of working on OSAEC cases facilitated by Filipino offenders at national and international level (‘Key Informants’). These Key Informants were based both in the Philippines and internationally, from a range of backgrounds including law enforcement, financial services experts, online platform providers and child protection agencies. Interviews were also conducted with Local Caseworkers – individuals working in Filipino communities with victims, offenders and affected families where OSAEC crimes are commonplace – to understand how and why these crimes are occurring in their communities and what they believe needs to be done to address the problem and protect children through prevention. A descriptive analysis was also conducted on case files of convicted OSAEC facilitation cases held by IJM, a global organisation that supports the Philippine authorities in bringing OSAEC survivors home to safety, providing aftercare and prosecuting these crimes.

**Phase Two:** This phase built upon the findings from Phase 1 and involved the analysis of interviews with convicted and incarcerated OSAEC facilitation offenders. Analyses of financial transactions linked to OSAEC and chat log interactions between foreign perpetrators and local facilitators of OSAEC were also conducted. This allowed us to better understand the varied individual, family, community, social and technological issues that motivated offenders to facilitate OSAEC in the Philippines, to understand how these crimes were facilitated and, crucially, to identify ways in which they can be better detected, deterred and prevented.

Our findings corroborated and reinforced the results of previous studies of OSAEC in the Philippines, while offering important novel insights that complement and expand previous work in this area.

## Corroboration with previous studies

- The study confirmed that the Philippines is indeed a 'hotspot' for OSAEC, with OSAEC activity taking place in both rural and urban areas.
- The majority of OSAEC facilitators were found to be females aged 25-50, usually a family member or a trusted neighbour/friend of the victims, and many of them – including those involved as older minors – were themselves victims of abuse and exploitation in the past. These facilitators tended to prey mainly on girls, who were more frequently abused and exploited than boys; when boys were the victims of OSAEC, child-on-child or sibling-on-sibling abuse was common.
- Our findings suggested that facilitators' motivation to engage in OSAEC was primarily economic - with most convicted facilitators reporting to be living in extreme poverty and/or needing to support extended families. However, economic need was not the only identified motivation for OSAEC involvement: the lure of making 'easy money' was also a powerful motivator, especially when the earnings from this type of activity were perceived to be much higher than those obtainable from regular employment or other sources of income.
- Contextual and/or contagion effects were found to play an important role in facilitators' decisions to engage in OSAEC activities - in areas where there were precedents of OSAEC activity, facilitators learned about the financial 'advantages' of this type of criminal endeavour from other community members, particularly in neighbourhoods where levels of trust in authorities was low and reporting was unlikely.

## Novel insights

Importantly, our analysis offers a number of key insights that expand previous work in this area, for example:

1. At the individual level, both foreign perpetrators and local facilitators of OSAEC relied on strategies for offence minimisation that enabled and sustained abusive and exploitative practices. These included offence-supportive beliefs that the financial payments foreign perpetrators made to local facilitators 'helped' victims and the pervasive fallacy of 'no touch, no harm' held by facilitators; that is, because the abuse and exploitation did not involve physical contact with the foreign perpetrator, the impact of OSAEC activities on the child was diminished.
2. These psychological 'justifications' for OSAEC were compounded by cultural norms that acted as barriers to crime reporting, and a long-standing history of inter-communal tensions that undermined cooperation between regions on OSAEC-related issues in some instances. These factors, together with challenges inherent to the reporting process itself created obstacles to the prevention, disruption and deterrence of OSAEC facilitation in the Philippines.
3. A strong contagion effect was found to exist in communities that extended beyond facilitators learning about the financial 'advantages' of committing OSAEC crimes from other community members. While facilitators reported that OSAEC activity has its roots in economic deprivation and poverty, communities were found to provide a conduit to involvement in OSAEC activity, e.g. new facilitators being actively inducted to OSAEC activity and mentored by friends, neighbours or family members who were involved in these crimes.
4. Cultural stigma attached to the loss of virginity, regardless of whether this was through OSAEC or other forms of abuse and exploitation, was also identified as a pathway factor for involvement in OSAEC. The importance of family relationships in this context was highlighted, with the stigma attached to OSAEC victimisation bringing embarrassment to survivors and the family. In some cases, the cycle of abuse and exploitation continued as the survivor felt little option but to become engaged in sex work as they moved into adulthood, without the opportunity for rehabilitation or recovery from early victimisation experience.

5. In some instances, the cycles of abuse and exploitation linked to OSAEC were seen to perpetuate, as children exposed to OSAEC in the community grew up to engage in OSAEC activity themselves. In addition to these intergenerational cycles of abuse and exploitation, our convicted facilitator interviews also illustrated the transfer of criminal knowledge around OSAEC perpetration between generations, in what was effectively a "cottage industry" in communities – reported to be fuelled by few, if any, opportunities for employment that allowed a living wage, that would support a family, to be earned.
6. The harmful impact of incarceration on the family was a strong theme reported by convicted OSAEC facilitators. These harms ranged from: facilitators' children or child relatives experiencing trauma, social and other severe challenges linked to the impact of arrest, prosecution and the absence of the facilitator in the home due to incarceration, to the loss of income to the family left behind where the facilitator had fulfilled the role of sole breadwinner. In some cases, this could be seen to feed into the systemic vulnerability of communities, causing some children to assume responsibility for providing for themselves or the family as breadwinner (in some cases the most seemingly lucrative earning opportunity available was involvement in illegal sex work themselves).
7. Convicted facilitators offered insights into the facilitation of OSAEC by outlining the various modus operandi for the 'supply' of minors for OSAEC victimisation by foreign perpetrators. These ranged from: the use of adult online sex industry services and dating websites, to meet foreigners interested in OSAEC, to the hiring of 'models' who were also minors who they 'promoted' online to foreigners; to providing children in online chat to participate in both pre-recorded and live camera 'shows'.
8. Efforts to address OSAEC in the Philippines have involved a strong criminal justice response, with a focus on local facilitation in which convicted offenders - mainly women - receive lengthy sentences, most commonly 15 years but in some cases extending to life imprisonment. There is evidence to suggest that the crime of trafficking for which such harsh sentencing applies is broad in definition, encompassing a wide range of activities from, for example, the supply of nude photographs to trafficking children from remote and rural areas to urban locations for abuse and exploitation. These heavy penalties sit in stark contrast with those handed down to demand side offenders in foreign countries who commission the trafficking of OSAEC in the Philippines, where sentences and other penalties do not reflect the seriousness of the trafficking offence taking place in the Philippines and are not serving to disrupt demand for OSAEC in this country.
9. In addition to the normalisation of the crime in vulnerable communities, additional enabling factors for OSAEC facilitation crimes were outlined by convicted OSAEC facilitators. These included befriending staff of financial institutions who would turn a 'blind eye' to potentially suspicious payments or payment patterns.
10. The existence of a variety of social media platforms and the ability to easily move from public online platforms (whether adult sites or social media platforms) to more private spaces to conduct OSAEC activity was identified as a key enabling factor by convicted facilitators. This involved the progression from 'chatting' with foreigners on such platforms to a 'show'. Some of the women interviewed reported that once they agreed to exit a general chat area and move to a private chat room, foreigners asked for a 'show' involving OSAEC activity with a child. This presented an opportunity to make 'easy money' online in that it offered opportunity for a quick payment, with the expectation that money would be deposited directly into the local facilitator's account. Convicted facilitators also referred to the culture in these communities of 'sharing' - whether that is social media accounts, bank accounts and/or mobile devices, further enabling OSAEC crimes to be conducted with relative ease.





## RECOMMENDATION 1: Reduce the re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation

A suite of child-centred interventions is recommended to reduce the re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation of children linked to: their experiences of reporting; arrests for OSAEC facilitation where children are present; children's experiences of subsequent prosecution proceedings; and family separation. Examples of recommended interventions are as follows:

- Extend Assessment Centres as 'one-stop shops' for managing OSAEC victimisation reports, rescue operations and aftercare;
- Form and strengthen Multi-disciplinary Team (MDT) capacity in each locality to enable MDTs to respond without delay and with child-centred interventions to OSAEC reports;
- Psychoeducation and government support for non-offending family members of OSAEC survivors;
- Extend long-term support for the care, recovery and healing of OSAEC survivors such as in-family care, fostering, or, where this is not possible, access to long-term care arrangements; and
- Establish a comprehensive 'whole country' approach in collaboration with the national hotline and other jurisdictions with expertise in Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) detection, notice and takedown procedures to ensure swift detection and takedown of CSAM linked to OSAEC survivors.



## RECOMMENDATION 2: Address the contagion effect and vicious cycle of abuse and exploitation

A range of awareness and educational campaigns are recommended to respond to the contagion effect and vicious cycle of abuse and exploitation within affected communities. Examples of these include:

- Develop public awareness and education campaigns (online and offline) in the Philippines alongside key stakeholders to develop greater community understanding of the scope and harm of OSAEC to children, dispel offence supporting beliefs and fallacies, reduce associated stigma and encourage reporting - thus enabling better detection of the crime and deterring potential offenders at the level of OSAEC-affected communities:
  - Community level campaigns should focus on illustrating the scale, nature and illegal characteristics of OSAEC crimes in the Philippines, public sensitisation to tactics used by foreign perpetrators and OSAEC facilitators, effective reporting avenues, harms suffered by children, as well as the impact of prosecution (e.g. economic) on families; and
  - Targeted education campaigns based on best evidence should be developed for populations 'at risk' of involvement in OSAEC facilitation offences (e.g. online sex workers and children in vulnerable communities etc.) with an emphasis on prevention and reporting.



## RECOMMENDATION 3: Address the enabling environment of online platforms

A range of recommendations are made to address the enabling environment of online platforms implicated in the facilitation of OSAEC. These include:

- Bespoke product managers and programmes should be established within online platforms to lead on projects to combat the abuse of online social platforms and products implicated in the facilitation of OSAEC in the Philippines. Notwithstanding the sheer scale of OSAEC facilitation crimes in the Philippines, this analysis reveals that use of technology to facilitate OSAEC crimes has a specific country-level presentation and characteristics. Given this, Policy, Investigations, Trust and Safety and Safety by Design efforts to detect, report, investigate and prevent OSAEC on-platform should be developed with specific attention to state-of-the-art evidence and intelligence concerning the insignia of OSAEC facilitation crimes against Filipino children as well as OSAEC survivors;
- Relatedly, concerted action is required to target online dating sites and adult webcam services identified in this analysis as being implicated in OSAEC crimes (e.g. used to foster and develop foreign perpetrator-local facilitator connections to commission OSAEC, subsequent live streaming of OSAEC and other OSAEC crimes against Filipino children). These actions should, inter alia, encompass regulation and investigation of these platforms and services and targeted, platform-level activity to detect and report potential on-platform OSAEC; and
- Intercept and disrupt payment pathways between foreign demand side perpetrators and Philippines-based facilitators is imperative for better OSAEC detection and deterrence. Moreover, approaches based on OSAEC payment interception hold potential in terms of alleviating the reliance on often re-traumatising victim testimony in the context of prosecutions.



## RECOMMENDATION 4: Strengthen the global response

Finally, an urgent call for a more concerted global response is made through the following recommendations:

- Demand side countries must enact swift, certain and targeted action to tackle the global demand for OSAEC in the Philippines. A concerted, targeted suite of measures at the level of demand side countries is proposed to shut down the market for OSAEC activity emanating from foreign countries, for example:
  - Enhance targeted regulation, interception and reporting of Philippines-linked OSAEC activity at the level of online social platforms and products implicated in these offences;
  - Step up regulation, detection and suspicious transaction reporting in financial services used to transact payments linked to OSAEC crimes;
  - Extend financial restitution and compensation funds for victims deriving from prosecutions in demand side countries;
  - Enhance action at the level of OSAEC-linked social and financial platforms and law enforcement in demand side countries to detect and prosecute OSAEC crimes that attract higher sentences, such as live streaming of OSAEC. Targeted, coordinated action is required to reduce demand by ensuring that the most serious OSAEC offence is detected and prosecuted in demand side offending cases, and sentencing for OSAEC-linked crimes in demand side countries reflects the seriousness and life-course impact of Filipino children's victimisation;
  - Strengthen relevant legislative frameworks in demand side jurisdictions, including online safety legislation, to include targeted measures that respond to the presentation of OSAEC facilitation offences, and emphasise the adoption of evidence-led interventions to disrupt the market for OSAEC in the Philippines. For example, the forthcoming revision of the European Directive on Combating the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse Material offers significant potential to strengthen legislation in this way in the European region.

## Key Terms and Definitions

**Age of Sexual Consent** - this term refers to 'the age below which, in accordance with national law, it is prohibited to engage in sexual activities with a child,' (EU Directive 2011/93). The legal age of consent in the Philippines increased from 12 to 16 years in March 2022.

**Child (or Minor)** - under law in the Philippines, a child refers to 'a person under eighteen (18) years of age or those over but are unable to fully take care of themselves or protect themselves from abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation or discrimination because of physical, mental intellectual or sensory disability or condition,' (Republic Act No. 11930, 2022).

**Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Material or Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAEM/CSAM)** - under law in the Philippines, this refers to 'any representation, whether offline, or by, through or with the use of ICT, by means of visual, video, audio, written or any combination thereof, by electronic, mechanical, digital, optical, magnetic or any other means, of a child engaged or involved in real or simulated sexual activities, or depicting acts of sexual abuse or exploitation of a child as a sexual object. It shall also include materials that focus on the genitalia or other private body parts of a child,' (Republic Act No. 11930, 2022).

**City Fiscals** - are designated law officers of the province or city to which they belong and whose responsibilities include matters relating to the investigation and prosecution of all crimes including misdemeanours and violations of city or municipal ordinance. These individuals are further empowered, under specified legislation, to act in a capacity as legal advisors to municipalities and municipal districts of the province.

**Dark Web** - a part of the internet that is only accessible through the employment of specialised software, enabling individuals to access and operate websites whilst remaining anonymous and untraceable.

**Facilitator** - also referred to as a Supply-side Offender or Trafficker - an individual whose conduct facilitates or aids and abets the (sometimes commercial) contact sexual offence against the child (Greijer & Doek, 2016).

**Information and Communication Technology (ICT)** - under law in the Philippines ICT refers to 'the totality of electronic means to access, create, collect, store, process, receive, transmit, present and disseminate information,' (Republic Act No. 11930, 2022).

**Livestreaming of Child Sexual Abuse** - this is a form of child sexual exploitation whereby children are forced to perform sex acts on themselves or each other, are abused by an adult or are exploited in other violent ways. This CSAM is transmitted to a viewer/s in real time through live video calls while the offender watches, engages, and even directs the abuse while it is occurring (IJM, 2023).

**Money Transfer Agency** - an agency or platform that provides international money transfer and payment services between individuals and or institutions (IJM, 2023).

**Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC)** - under law in the Philippines OSAEC refers to 'the use of ICT as a means to abuse and/or exploit children sexually, which includes cases in which offline child abuse and/or exploitation is combined with an online component. This can also include, but is not limited to, the production, dissemination and possession of CSAEM; online grooming of children for sexual purposes; sexual extortion of children, sharing image-based sexual abuse; commercial sexual exploitation of children; exploitation of children through online prostitution; and live-streaming of sexual abuse, with or without the consent of the victim,' (Republic Act No. 11930, 2022).

**Perpetrator** - also referred to as a Demand Side Offender - an individual based in a demand side country who offers financial and or material compensation to an OSAEC Facilitator in a supply side country for the production of any form of CSAM or in-person sexual exploitation of children (IJM, 2023).

**Survivor** - often used interchangeably or in combination with the term - "victim," - to describe an individual who has suffered harm and victimisation (Greijer & Doek, 2016).

# 1. Introduction

Rapid growth in high-speed internet connectivity and technological innovation has brought children around the world increased opportunities for educational and social development. It has also made children more vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation than before. Increased availability of mobile devices and access to online payment mechanisms have given adults with a sexual interest in children access to victims and to adult facilitators, in countries where protections to counter this threat have not kept pace with these developments.

Despite concerted efforts on the part of some governmental agencies in recent years, for low-income countries in particular, technological change has dramatically outpaced the development of educational, law enforcement, and regulatory responses to combat exploitation. Livestreaming of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) has been identified as a particularly concerning and growing phenomenon emerging in these conditions, with unique detection challenges due to limitations on its forensic traceability and allied resourcing constraints.

Factors such as widespread poverty and socio-economic disparity between foreign perpetrators and local facilitators are believed to fuel the supply of children for online abuse and exploitation in Filipino communities. The increasing availability of advanced anonymisation tools and end-to-end encryption is also providing foreign perpetrators with easier and more secure access to vulnerable children and to the networks of people who share an interest in facilitating their sexual abuse and exploitation. Vulnerability to OSAEC further heightened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with stringent lockdowns providing customers and facilitators unprecedented levels of access to Filipino children. Increased economic hardship in developing countries such as the Philippines, and the inability of foreign offenders to travel due to restrictions, are also believed to have increased the prevalence of OSAEC activity during the pandemic.

Furthermore, children in the Philippines are more vulnerable to OSAEC victimisation due to a number of reasons specific to the country, including high rates of English language ability in the population, good and widespread broadband capacity and a comparatively low cost of living, which makes exploitation of children possible at a relatively low cost.

OSAEC victims are reported to suffer higher levels of post-traumatic stress, lower self-esteem, educational delays, an increased risk of entering prostitution, and longer-term effects on their mental, physical, sexual, and social wellbeing as a result of the added trauma associated with the recording of abuse and exploitation and its distribution. These impacts - together with the rapidly growing scale of OSAEC in the Philippines, ongoing technological innovation, the movement towards increased anonymity, and heightened socioeconomic vulnerability due to pandemic effects underline the urgency for more effective responses to this crime.

This project is the first of its kind focusing on the dynamic of supply of OSAEC in the Philippines with the goal of helping government entities (including law enforcement, regulators, and policy-makers), private industry (such as technology and financial sector companies), NGOs and other practitioners better understand and more effectively respond to the problem.

Existing research on OSAEC has tended to focus on demand side offending in the West, with little attention to 'how' and 'why' facilitation of OSAEC proceeds in the Philippines. Over recent

years, the Philippines has focused legislative, law enforcement, judicial and regulatory efforts on implementing strict sentencing for Filipino based facilitators of OSAEC. As a result, a population of convicted OSAEC facilitators and an allied cohort of case data now exists that makes this research possible.

As a result, in 2022, Justice and Care joined with the International Justice Mission (IJM) and Principal Investigator, Dr. Maggie Brennan of Dublin City University to address this research gap and to extend the existing body of literature on the facilitation of OSAEC in the Philippines, with particular attention to the accounts of those convicted of these offences. In collaboration with De La Salle University researchers, Dr. Melvin Jabar, Dr. Maria Caridad Tarroja, Dr Zaldo Collado, Dr Elaine Byrnes of Dublin City University and Prof. Derek Perkins of Royal Holloway University London, this study of convicted OSAEC traffickers in the Philippines has been developed to enhance understanding of methods of OSAEC offending, particularly offence motivations, enabling factors and offence trajectories. Here the ambition is to inform practical strategies related to law enforcement investigation and technological and financial facilitation of this crime, and improve the efficacy and impact of detection, deterrence, and preventative approaches to this phenomenon.

## 2. Literature Summary

According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC, 2023), most reported OSAEC victimisation originates in the Asia-Pacific region, with the Philippines linked to the second highest number of country-level reports of suspected online child sexual exploitation in the world. NCMEC documented 801,272 reports in the Philippines to its CyberTipline in 2019. This increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic to 3,188,793 reports in 2021.

The Philippines has been described as ‘the global epicentre of the live stream sexual abuse trade’ where ‘many of the victims are children’ (Brown, 2018; Gill, 2021). Similarly, the country has also been labelled ‘the centre of child sex abuse materials production in the world’ (Tarroja et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2016). According to the Scale of Harm Report produced by IJM, as of 2022 nearly half a million Filipino children were trafficked to produce new child CSAEM. Furthermore, this report detailed that almost a quarter of adult Filipinos were engaged in this trafficking.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this exploitation, as vulnerable children were left isolated, and facilitators were provided with potential new avenues of income, due to increased online activity. Studies have already established a link between feelings of isolation and loneliness in children and their likelihood of being targeted by online predators (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2020). For OSAEC facilitators, research published by IJM in 2021, found that lockdowns incentivised offenders to engage in alternative forms of CSAM production, such as live streaming. This adaptation is suggested to be due primarily to enforced working from home and increased, unrestricted access to the internet. During this period it has been reported that there was a 106% increase in OSAEC activity online globally (Europol, 2020), with the Department of Justice in the Philippines reporting a 264% increase in OSAEC reports during the pandemic (AMLC, 2020).

A Global Online Kids Study (2016) surveyed 114 Filipino children aged 9-17 years and conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions involving 90 children and parents. This study found that all of the child participants reported being exposed to ‘adult cybersex, sexual materials and messages, sexual grooming in different forms and modes... sexual tweets, and sexual games.’ The results of this empirical investigation suggest that Filipino children are distinctly vulnerable to being exposed to different forms of sexual abuse and exploitation online. Subsequent research suggests that this vulnerability can be linked to widespread internet connectivity, data service availability and lax parental restrictions (Blancaflor et al., 2022), compounded by complex socio-economic conditions (Roche et al., 2023).

Varrella (2017) outlined the economic and socio-cultural determinants contributing to the high level of OSAEC in the Philippines. These included: English language competence; ease of access to, and widespread availability of, internet-based technologies; established international financial transaction flows linked to OSAEC activity; and the absence of conflict between established social norms and acceptance of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Similarly, Ramiro et al. (2019) conducted a study focusing on the drivers of OSAEC in the Philippines, with an emphasis on examining community norms linked to these criminal activities. Their findings



indicated that there is a spectrum of activities linked to OSAEC victimisation in communities, from showing child sex photos online through to live online sex videos as well as sextortion. Participation in OSAEC was normalised by some young people involved in these activities, yet at the same time regarded with disgust. Participants outlined that OSAEC activity was a source of 'easy money,' justified by the perceived anonymity involved and the lack of physical contact with purchasers. Furthermore, they disclosed that these online practices were more widely tolerated in communities and were, therefore, unlikely to be reported to authorities.

The impact on child victims of the varied forms of child sex trafficking, including online forms, was examined by Miller-Perrin and Wurtle (2017), who reiterated that the children who fall prey to these types of sexual exploitation and abuse were of particular concern because of their vulnerability and the developmental impact of these experiences into adulthood.

Hernandez et al. (2018) conducted a review of readily available news articles and reports related to OSAEC in the Philippines. This review found that in the four years from 2011 to 2015, there were 55 reports and articles from nine regions of the country, with victims ranging in age from 18 months to 17 years old. The review further identified three types of abuse: live streaming of child sexual abuse; CSAM; and sextortion using minors.

A systematic review by Ali, Haykal and Youssef (2021) reiterated that the primary gateway to access vulnerable children is online. The findings of this review underscore the global use of digital platforms in propagating OSAEC activities such as CSAM production and distribution. The review also established that many online platforms are implicated in scheduled OSAEC sessions, including live streaming, yet these crimes often remain unidentifiable to law enforcement agencies.

The majority of OSAEC related material is accessible through the surface web on common image hosting sites (Europol, 2020; Napier et al., 2021). However, law enforcement authorities stress the prevalence of such material on the dark web, and the numerous logistical issues that arise when investigating exploitation through the dark web relating to the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and cryptocurrency (Shekhar & Vincent, 2022).

A recent study by Rosa et al., (2023) involved interviews with a number of OSAEC survivors aged 15-17 years old. Additionally, focus groups were conducted with key informants including barangay officials, law enforcement agencies and social workers. This study found that exploitation occurred or was instigated through a number of social media, dating and gaming platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. The platforms included Cybora, Roblox, and Facebook Messenger (Rosa et al., 2023). These findings align with previous research conducted by Terre des Hommes (2013), which found that contact between victims and foreign perpetrators is frequently initiated on well-established social platforms. While a large portion of foreign perpetrators in this study were categorised as foreign, it is noted that some consumers of this CSAM were locals (Rosa, et al., 2023). With regards to the prevalence of OSAEC at a community level, this study found evidence in support of an apparent community contagion effect, whereby children were being actively coerced and encouraged to produce sexually explicit online content by their friends and parents. This finding highlights the normalisation of such activities within communities by both parents and young people.

A scoping review conducted by Drejer et al., (2024) reported that for live streamed OSAEC, negotiation between the foreign perpetrator and the victims or facilitator was a common practice. The price ultimately agreed upon has been reported to be dependent on the number of victims involved, their ages and the degree of severity of the abuse (Varrella, 2017). The Philippines Anti-Money Laundering Council (AMLC) recorded a total of 10,633 suspicious transactions related to OSAEC in 2019, with 20,448 reported in the first half of 2020 alone (AMLC, 2020). Of all OSAEC related transactions detected between 2015 and June 2020, 81% of these totalled between 1,000 and 10,000 PHP (AMLC, 2020). Prices for confirmed OSAEC cases have been found to range on

average between 10 USD and 250 USD, depending on the nature of the content produced (Napier et al., 2021). In the Philippines, the monetary transactions related to live streamed abuse are found to largely favour remittance services (Varrella, 2017). It is suggested that this preference is due to the perceived anonymity under which such services operate (Terre des Hommes, 2014). However, Drejer et al., (2024) note inconsistency in extant literature regarding payment methods for live streamed OSAEC, and that more empirical research on the profile of OSAEC-linked payments is required.

## Context for the Research

Even though OSAEC in the Philippines is an acknowledged issue, little research has examined how OSAEC facilitators operate, and what can be done to better detect, disrupt and ultimately prevent OSAEC; whether on the ground in Filipino communities or in the online spaces where foreign perpetrators and local facilitators meet, money changes hands and children are victimised. This is a substantial gap in our knowledge of OSAEC offending. Without research to fill this gap and inform the design of strategies for prevention, disruption and intervention, Filipino children cannot be adequately protected from the serious harm that OSAEC presents to them, and those who seek to harm children cannot be prevented from offending nor brought to justice.

To inform this fundamental knowledge gap, the current study sought to provide a robust knowledge base on how and why OSAEC facilitation offending takes place in the Philippines.





# 3. Phase One

## 3.1 Methodology

### Overview of Methodology

The research proceeded in two consecutive phases: Phase One and Phase Two. A mixed methods research design was implemented, comprising both quantitative and qualitative components, for both phases of the research. The rationale for this approach was that it was both descriptive and exploratory in purpose. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Dublin City University and the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee, the external review committee for De La Salle University. Due to the nature of the study, the application underwent a full ethics board review in both locations.

This phase was designed to produce a broad profile of key features of supply-side OSAEC offending in the Philippines and the offence context, with attention to possible determinants of these offences and avenues to offence disruption and prevention. Data were collected from three major sources: case file records of convicted OSAEC facilitators based in the Philippines; in-depth interviews with key informants, nationally and internationally; and Local Caseworkers. For the purposes of this study, Local Caseworkers were individuals working across a number of specialist areas in Filipino communities where OSAEC offences are prevalent.

### Key Informant Interviews: Data Collection and Analysis

This element of the study was qualitative in design. The sample for Key Informant interviews was recruited purposely in order to ensure that those interviewed maintained expert knowledge in relation to OSAEC facilitation. Having read a Plain Language Statement comprising details of the proposed research interview, participants completed an informed consent form before proceeding to the interview stage.

In total, 21 domain expert interviews took place with 26 participants: eleven female and fifteen male. In the interest of participant convenience, three of the interviews had two participants present and one interview involved three participants - in these cases, the interview schedule was adapted to facilitate focus group discussion. Interviews were held by Zoom and were scheduled for times that were convenient for participants. The interviews were recorded with prior consent and ranged from 53 minutes to 2 hours 24 minutes in duration.

At the outset, the purpose of the interview was re-iterated as well as an assurance that participants could withdraw at any time. Participants were reminded that if there were any questions they were not comfortable with, they did not have to answer them. Participants were again advised that they would be referred to by their general area of expertise to protect their identities, and permission to proceed was given by all.

A semi-structured interview schedule guided each Key Informant interview session. This comprised a focused set of questions mapping on to the overall research questions (Tashakkori & Cresswell, 2007). Questions included: general descriptive queries on the participants' assessment of the profile OSAEC in the Philippines, before and during the pandemic; questions about the characteristics of facilitators and victims; and the circumstances that may contribute to engagement in OSAEC facilitation crimes and OSAEC victimisation, including questions on victim characteristics and vulnerability. The schedule concluded with a series of questions specific to the Key Informants area of expertise to capture stakeholder-specific knowledge on the topic of OSAEC facilitation.

This interview approach was described by Rubin and Rubin (2011) as being 'on target while hanging loose,' meaning that interviewers were guided by the schedule, but not rigidly so and flexibility was adopted in its administration.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time in taking part. Data were transcribed by a member of the research team for subsequent analysis using NVIVO and analysed using Inductive Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

### Local Caseworker Interviews: Data Collection and Analysis

In this research, Local Caseworkers (LCWs) were classified as those involved in the detection and prosecution of OSAEC cases locally, as well as those who provide rehabilitation services to the child victims/survivors and their families (including aftercare services) at community level.

Twenty-one interviews with LCWs were conducted; three male and eighteen female. Ten of the informants were from Cebu, and 11 from Metro Manila. Nineteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face. Two informants had to be interviewed via Zoom due to time availability. Of that number, six worked as government social workers (i.e., as a local social worker, rehabilitation centre social worker or court social worker). Two other interviewees were social workers affiliated with non-government organisations that provide services to OSAEC survivors. Two interviewees were representatives from the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children and a further two officials from the Local Council for the Protection of Children participated in the interviews. Two interviews were conducted with city links from the Conditional Cash Transfer Program (known as 4Ps). Two representatives from the Recovery and Reintegration Program for Trafficked Persons (RRPTP) were interviewed, as were two family court judges and a City Fiscal. Finally, two representatives (police officers) from the local women and children protection centres were interviewed for this element of the study.

Participant informed consent was elicited in each case in a manner consistent with the Key Informant interviews, and the semi-structured interviews took place using an aligned procedural protocol.

Participants were debriefed and thanked for their time at the conclusion of the interview. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using Inductive Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

### Case File Review: Data Collection and Analysis

This dataset comprised 36 de-identified post-conviction case files relating to OSAEC facilitation in the Philippines. The conviction case files ranged in date from 2011 to 2019, with 20 conviction cases preceding 2017 and 16 cases following 2017.<sup>1</sup> A descriptive and thematic analysis of these files was undertaken to identify socio-demographic characteristics and patterns in relation to victims, convicted facilitators, and foreign perpetrators, as well as themes and patterns related to law enforcement practice, judicial procedures and sentencing.

<sup>1</sup> In 2017 the Philippines ratified the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Convention against Trafficking in Persons.

## 3.2 Phase One Findings

Data collected during Phase One both confirm the findings from previous research, and offer novel insights and contributions beyond the state of the art. Composite main findings from the Key Informant and Local Caseworker data analysis are presented first, followed by those from case file data analysis. These findings informed the direction for further research in Phase Two of the study.

### Key Informant and Local Caseworker Data Analysis

Three overarching themes were identified in the data collected from Key Informants and Local Caseworkers, with subsequent ancillary findings from the analyses of case file and financial transaction datasets:

1. Facilitation of OSAEC crimes in the Philippines
2. Extent of OSAEC in the Philippines
3. Challenges to Detection/Deterrence/Prevention of OSAEC in the Philippines

#### 1. Facilitation of OSAEC crimes in the Philippines

Findings from interviews with Key Informants and Local Caseworkers related to characteristics of Filipino based facilitators and their victims were consistent with the case file data analysis; some concurred with previously reported findings (e.g. IJM, 2020; UNICEF, 2020), whilst others signal new avenues for investigation and possibilities for detection and prevention.

#### Characteristics of Facilitators

While some male involvement was reported, the majority of facilitators were reported to be female, usually a family member - mother, aunt or older sibling; if not a family member, then a trusted neighbour or family friend. The child's perceived trust of the facilitator was reported as a very important element of this type of abuse. The participants reported that the average age of facilitators is between 25 and 50 years. In the experience of Local Caseworkers who participated in this research, some facilitators may themselves have been victims of OSAEC, which may be a pathway factor in the commission of new offences. Whilst most participants reported that children and young people themselves do not initiate OSAEC in the absence of a trafficker, two of the key informant participants working in an aftercare capacity with victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation reported that some older youth were engaging in OSAEC of their own volition, recording highly sexualised content on social media platforms and sharing it as a recruitment strategy for engaging with 'foreigners', that is, foreign perpetrators in other jurisdictions offering payment for OSAEC.

#### Characteristics of Victims

Analysis of interview data supported the contention that girls are more likely to become victims of OSAEC than boys, and that where boys featured in the abuse, child-on-child or sibling-on-sibling abuse was common. Participants expressed concern that younger OSAEC victims were presenting more frequently (specifically, young, prepubescent children, aged 10 years and under).

### Motivation for Facilitators to Engage in OSAEC

**'.....they are not worse people than anybody else. But it's just if you don't have...if you have nothing, and this is a way of getting something, it's... understandable.'**

Child Protection Officer (Philippines)

The primary reason offered as to why people facilitate the exploitation and abuse of children was economic necessity. Extreme poverty was cited as a root cause, particularly in rural areas. Participants explained that many families are large and resort to OSAEC activities in order to support basic needs such as food, shelter and education. However, poverty and economic disadvantage was not seen as a sufficient explanation of motivation to engage in OSAEC activity. In other instances, participants reported that the lure of making 'easy money' motivated individuals (including older minors) to engage in OSAEC.

Furthermore, contextual and/or contagion effects also play an important role in facilitators' decision to engage in OSAEC activities, with motivation to engage in OSAEC reported to arise where precedent exists in relation to OSAEC activity in a neighbourhood, particularly where it is impoverished. In these instances, family members, neighbours and youth themselves may learn about the financial 'advantages' associated with OSAEC activity from other community members, often within neighbourhoods where levels of trust in authority is low, and reporting is unlikely.

Interview participants reported that strategies for offence minimisation dominate the purchaser-facilitator interaction presentation. Relationships between the foreign perpetrators and facilitators were reported as being 'transactional' in nature in many instances, where minimisation of the impact and severity of the crime and offence-supportive rationalisations predominate. Participants described how foreign perpetrators claim to be merely watching a screen at significant geographical remove from the child or children, or 'helping' the child by providing for their needs. Meanwhile, many facilitators viewed OSAEC as a way to earn money from geographically distant 'foreigners' in alignment with the 'no touch no harm' fallacy (this is reported by parents in particular) regarding the impact of online sexual exploitation and abuse on children. Like foreign perpetrators, participants reported that facilitators also maintain a certain level of detachment in their rationalisation for these crimes, given the geographical location of foreign perpetrators outside the Philippines.



## 2. Extent of OSAEC in the Philippines

***'The Philippines is the number one producer of online child exploitation materials'***

Law Enforcement Officer (Philippines)

There was general agreement that the Philippines is a 'hotspot' for OSAEC, with some interviewees agreeing it is the 'epicentre' of international OSAEC criminality. Participants reported that OSAEC takes place in both rural and urban areas, with links to economic vulnerability in rural areas and a long-standing civil conflict. Participants reported that OSAEC is more difficult to detect in rural areas due to resource and capacity constraints, yet some perceived it as more common in these communities.

### Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

***'.....it was an ideal situation. It was a perfect storm'***

International Intelligence Analyst

Interviewees described how the COVID-19 pandemic provided the 'perfect storm' of conditions for OSAEC proliferation in the country, as people were confined to their homes with stay-at-home orders. Participants reported that schooling took place online with a requirement to attend classes, with the effect that traditional protective education structures and avenues to reporting were compromised, while limited resources were available to purchase the devices or online access necessary to facilitate schooling. Many economic opportunities were severely curtailed; for example, the tourism industry, upon which many communities depend for economic support, was decimated, with diminished opportunities to engage in paid employment.

### Drivers for Engagement in OSAEC Facilitation

***'They just need a mobile phone and an internet connection. And.....they can basically send these materials abroad.'***

Law Enforcement Officer (Philippines)

The primary drivers of engagement in OSAEC activities in the Philippines is that the country has a largely English-speaking population, with a rich history of cultural connection to Spanish and United States colonial influences - including a history of sex work and sexual exploitation linked to U.S. military and navy presence. Furthermore, participants reported that it is also a popular tourist destination due to its comparatively cheap tourist service offerings and lower cost of living. Additionally, participants reported that at a national level, widespread internet access is available that does not require technical expertise, which coupled with relatively inexpensive devices can enable engagement in OSAEC, regardless of an individual's means.



## 3. Challenges to Detection/Deterrence/ Prevention

A number of challenges were identified by interviewees related to the detection, deterrence and ultimate prevention of OSAEC perpetration in the Philippines. These centre on legal constraints related to the right to privacy and confidentiality, as well as challenges in detection for law enforcement agencies and other child protection actors.

### Legal Constraints

***'It's not a binary; privacy and child protection should not be a binary'***

Director, International NGO

While it is generally acknowledged that the Philippines has a robust legal system in terms of the breadth of protective privacy laws, there are a number of challenges inherent to this protection. One of the reported challenges was that individual privacy is protected in the Philippines, and this extends to offenders, including those who have been involved in OSAEC, even in cases where children's privacy, bodily autonomy and wellbeing has been seriously compromised in the commission of OSAEC-related offences. Participants reported that a challenge remains in terms of balancing individual rights to privacy (particularly in criminal cases) with the need to respect individual and collective rights to protection from harm, particularly for children.

### Law Enforcement

***'We as law enforcement....there are rules of law that we should follow. But these bad guys bend the law and the rules. That's why they (facilitators of OSAEC in the Philippines) are always one step ahead of us.....'***

Law Enforcement Officer (Philippines)

Participants reported a substantial discrepancy in the number of reported cases vs. actioned cases resulting from the requirement of law enforcement verification (some referred to this as having 'personal knowledge') that an offence took place and the slow turnover of prosecutions - on average taking three to five years to complete - often with significant secondary victimisation attaching for OSAEC survivors. The challenges to prosecution arising from the requirement for law enforcement to have 'personal knowledge' that an offence has been committed (as opposed to just reported) have been addressed in the Republic Act 11930. However, challenges remain in investigating facilitators and perpetrators, as surveillance over a period of time may be necessary to secure evidence - across a large population with limited resources. Moreover, OSAEC victims/survivors are often separated from their families for many years while prosecutions proceed, with variable access to temporary or medium-term shelter, separation from siblings, disruption to education, and significant impacts on their psychosocial, educational, health and developmental prospects into the long term.

### Nature of the Crime

***'.....it's like emptying the sea with a bucket....'***

International Law Enforcement Officer

Due to the reported scale and clandestine nature of the crime (taking place 'behind closed doors'), coupled with the requirement for evidence to secure convictions, the current response from the authorities in the Philippines is largely reactive rather than proactive. An intelligence-led approach to offence disruption and prevention, with parallel emphasis on financial investigation for offence detection, was identified by participants as being optimal to support a more proactive approach - but, by the same token, was acknowledged as severely challenging to implement in the current context.

## The Position of Children Implicated in OSAEC and Barriers to Reporting

### **'Children will not speak against their parents here'**

Government Department Employee (Philippines)

The participants reported an - understandable - reluctance by victims and survivors to report their OSAEC experiences due, in part, to their age and dependence on parents/other trusted adults implicated in the OSAEC activities. Indeed, participants reported the presence of a 'bi-directional dependence' between facilitators and victims, where each was dependent on the other for the provision of material 'advantages' that participation financially-linked OSAEC could deliver. An added challenge reported by participants was the difficulty for children in disclosing a crime committed by a parent or family member, linked: to the inherent fear of compromising a critical familial relationship; the deleterious consequences of same for the child and family (where earning capacity is removed, for example), and the culture of respect and obedience towards older family members that prevails in Filipino culture. Another reported barrier to disclosure, and potential factor in the OSAEC offence pathway, was the impact of disclosure on the child victim/survivor in communities where OSAEC participation is heavily stigmatised, particularly the public knowledge that a child's virginity has been lost, even at the hands of a sexual abuser. Finally, participants described how procedurally difficult it is for victims/survivors or other community members to make a report, even where they wished to do so, owing, for example, to the requirement to present at multiple offices to file a report, often without options to do so in a way that protects their identity, or recourse to the support of advocates to assist in filing a report.

## Case File Data Analysis

Analysis of the de-identified case file data showed patterns related to two distinct areas - the socio-demographic profiles of both victims and Filipino facilitator offenders of OSAEC; and also procedures related to law enforcement and the judiciary.

## Socio-demographic profiles of victims and Filipino facilitator offenders

From the data analysed, there were 159 victims identified, of which 144 were minors. The average age of victims across this dataset was 10 years. This finding would appear to support the concerns raised by Key Informants and Local Caseworkers in interviews regarding the increased frequency with which young, prepubescent children were presenting as victims of OSAEC. In addition, all identifiable victims were Filipino. Of the cases where victim gender was specified, 96 were female and 19 were male, while in eight of 36 cases both male and female children were victimised. These findings would appear to lend credence to the contention that girls are more likely than boys to become victims of OSAEC.

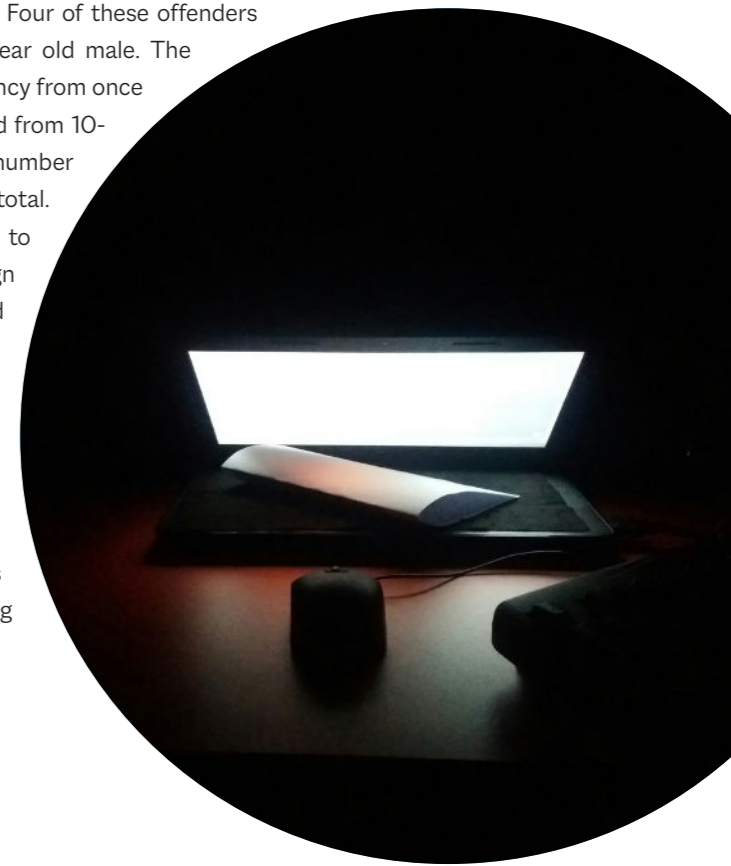
In five of the cases, an identifiable direct blood relation between one or more of the victims and the perpetrator of the abuse was recorded, most commonly a mother or auntie. The average age of

victims in cases where a blood relative was identified as a perpetrator was 11.8 years; this is above the average victim age in the dataset. In addition, in one other case, it was suggested that the victims may be neighbours of the perpetrator. In this instance, the average age of victims was 12.6 years. One additional case clearly specified that the offenders were not related to the victims, however exact victim ages were not provided. However, our ability to make valid inferences about the average victim age in intrafamilial and extrafamilial OSAEC facilitation cases was limited by the fact that victim-facilitator relationship and victim age were inconsistently recorded in the case file dataset. The types of abuse and exploitation detailed in these OSAEC cases ranged from the production of CSAM, child-on-child abuse, adult-on-child abuse, rape, forced prostitution, arranged child marriage and debt-bondage.

Fifty eight OSAEC facilitation offenders featured in this dataset. While men were actively involved as facilitators in these offences, the case file data suggested that the majority of convicted OSAEC facilitation offenders were female. In cases, where gender was recorded, 39 (67%) facilitators were female, and 12 (21%) were male. In the remaining 7 (12%) cases, the gender was unknown.

There were seven cases in which male and female offenders were jointly involved in the victimisation of children. In cases where both male and female offenders were involved, the average age of victims was 10.77 years. This finding suggests that when male and female offenders are involved in OSAEC, the victims may be younger in age. Female offenders ranged in age from 18-42 years while in two recorded cases males ranged between 36-37 years. The average recorded age of offenders was 29.8 years. The majority of identifiable offenders were Filipino, however, in two distinct instances, a Japanese national and an Australian were identified as facilitators of OSAEC. Eleven distinct regions within the Philippines, urban and rural, were linked to OSAEC facilitation crimes in this analysis.

Notwithstanding some limitations owing to inconsistency in the recording of case details across the dataset, some demographic information was available regarding foreign perpetrators in source countries engaging in the purchase of OSAEC. Analysis of this dataset identified nine foreign perpetrators located in a diverse range of source countries. Four of these offenders were confirmed as male, with one specified as a Caucasian 58 year old male. The payments made by foreign perpetrators for OSAEC ranged in frequency from once off payments to multiple and continuous payments. Amounts ranged from 10-420 USD for one off payments. However, in certain cases spanning a number of years, amounts transferred ranged from 13,694 to 16,954 USD in total. There was also evidence of continuous, weekly payments made to facilitators totalling 1,200 PHP (approximately 21 USD). Four foreign perpetrators were located in Europe, three in North America and two in Australia, one in the Queensland region, the other in Sydney. It is worth noting that the offender in Sydney was a convicted child sexual offender. Individual countries from which foreign perpetrators were located have been identified as the United States, Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden. An additional unnamed Nordic State was also referenced. A composite description of the OSAEC demand side countries and regions identified in this analysis is reported later, based on analysis of all data sources collected during Phase One and Phase Two of the study.



## Procedures related to law enforcement and the judiciary

It is important to acknowledge that a number of these prosecutions were made possible due to international criminal justice agency co-operation and 'tip-offs'. 10 cases from this analysis involved international referrals/requests or 'tip-offs.' Through this analysis it was found that referrals and 'tip-offs' were received from US, UK, Swedish, Australian and German-based criminal justice entities. In addition to official international law enforcement cooperation, two referrals were made by civilians, namely a Belgian investigative journalist and an unidentified member of the community.

A recurrent theme in the case file data was that the use of photographic and digital evidence (e.g., videos recovered during the police procedures) rendered convictions significantly easier. The use of videos to record (typically underage) victim testimonials seems to become more common after 2017; IJM case files highlight this development as crucial for both avoiding victim re-traumatization in the prosecution process and in facilitating convictions.

This dataset suggested that plea bargains were also common in OSAEC facilitation cases. Typically, such plea-bargains resulted in offenders being convicted of the lesser offence of Attempted Trafficking, rather than Qualified Trafficking. The range of prison sentences in the dataset extended from four months to up to life imprisonment. The modal sentence was 15-20 years imprisonment – this result appeared to be largely driven by the fact that most offenders in the case files enter plea bargains.

Notwithstanding the insights available from these facilitator case files, it should be noted that the validity of the inferences made above is limited by gaps and inconsistencies in the recorded data; further investigation to validate and (dis)confirm these findings is undertaken in Phase 2 of the study. Furthermore, the cases in this dataset do not comprise a random selection of OSAEC cases, so selection biases may also be present.

## Financial Dimensions of OSAEC Facilitation

A preliminary analysis of payments made by foreign perpetrators who had been subject to a conviction for OSAEC activity in a foreign country was undertaken in Phase 1, in order to inform the convicted facilitator interview design and their subsequent analysis under Phase 2. Further analysis of financial transactions (payments) linked to OSAEC (together with chat log analysis) was conducted subsequent to these convicted facilitator interviews in order to verify and strengthen interview findings. The results of this final financial analysis can be found on page 35.

## 3.3 Phase One: Contributions beyond the State of the Art

A number of findings provided insights beyond those reported in current literature:

- There is some evidence of **older youth themselves recording and posting highly sexualised content on social media platforms as a recruitment strategy** for engaging with foreigners for OSAEC-linked activity.
- There is emerging evidence of a **contagion effect in communities where OSAEC is prevalent** that also has the capacity to scale the activities relatively quickly. This reflects community support for engagement in associated abuse that involves children being sexualised from an early age, as well as being **mentored and incentivised to participate**.
- There is **limited trust in authority**, a practice of Omertà\*, and an unwillingness to report known OSAEC activity by neighbours, as it provides benefits and rewards throughout the community.
- Strategies for **offence minimisation are employed by both offenders and facilitators and appear to enable and sustain the commission of OSAEC related victimisation**. For example, foreign perpetrators maintain an offence-supportive belief that financial payments they make to the facilitators 'help' the child by contributing to education expenses or other material needs. For facilitators the strongly held belief of 'no touch, no harm' appears to prevail; that is, if a child is not being physically abused by the foreign perpetrator in the context of OSAEC activity, then the child has come to no substantive harm.
- Novel insights into **barriers to reporting by victims included the bi-directional dependence of children and facilitators**. Fear of disclosure at the level of OSAEC victims is two-fold. Firstly, victims/survivors fear the prospect of removing the family earning capacity if the facilitator is a close family member. Secondly, a strong culture of respect for older family members also contributes to a fear of reporting their engagement with OSAEC to the authorities.
- A further barrier to reporting is the **challenge inherent to the process of reporting itself**, whether in commencing the reporting process with the requirement to present at multiple offices to file a report, concerns about privacy and the uncertain support of advocates to assist in the reporting process.
- The Philippines is a staunchly Catholic country. In some communities, pre-marital sex is discouraged, and virginity is highly valued. Even when virginity has been taken in the context of sexual abuse or exploitation, there is still a stigma attached to its loss for the victim. **Loss of virginity**, whether voluntary (with consent, where this can be provided) or involuntary (in the context of abuse or exploitation), **carries with it such significant stigma that it can have deleterious effects**, particularly on young girls' sense of self-worth and self-esteem, or feelings of eligibility for marriage. Our participants reported this as a pathway factor to involvement in sex work, that some affected girls become involved in the sex work as they regard themselves as sullied.
- There is a long history of Spanish and U.S. colonial and post-colonial influence in the Philippines, while regional conflicts persist in certain islands and provinces. While some colonial influences have been welcome, there remain **long-standing civil tensions in the country between different regions that can contribute to a lack of cooperation on OSAEC related issues and increase vulnerability** to OSAEC in affected areas.
- Interviewees offered novel insights into the **contractual and transactional nature of the relationship** between the foreign offenders and local facilitators that warrant further investigation. With facilitators interacting with multiple foreign offenders in some cases, there is a need to better understand, for example, the processes involved in financial interactions between facilitators and foreign perpetrators, possible aggregation of payments by facilitators and financial disbursement of OSAEC-linked payments in communities.

\*This practice originated among the Italian Mafia and is a code of silence about criminal activity, particularly in relation to law enforcement

# 4. Phase Two

## 4.1 Methodology

Phase Two involved interviews with convicted facilitators of OSAEC incarcerated in the Philippines. The objective of these interviews was to understand the rationale, motivation and route to involvement in the crimes. Access to the correctional institute was provided to a research team for the first time to conduct interviews with Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs).

This phase involved analysis of de-identified, post-conviction data sets donated by international law enforcement agencies. These data sets comprised chat logs between demand side offenders convicted of OSAEC crimes and associates based in the Philippines (who were not necessarily convicted/incarcerated), as well as children interacting directly with perpetrators.

Additionally, a smaller dataset detailing financial transactions data between foreign perpetrators convicted of OSAEC crimes and associates based in the Philippines was analysed.

### Interviews with PDLs (Persons Deprived of Liberty): Data Collection and Analysis

This element of the study was qualitative in design. At the outset, the local research team, based in the Philippines, sought permission in writing from the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Corrections, and the Correctional Institution for Women to undertake the study. The Bureau of Corrections, and Correctional Institution for Women were requested to identify persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) - convicted of OSAEC offending, that was matched against casefile records obtained during Phase One for inclusion in the study. As such the sample for PDL interviews was sought purposively to ensure that those invited to participate had experience of OSAEC facilitation. No incarcerated men agreed to participate in the study.

The team visited the Correctional Institution for Women (CIW) to lead an information session outlining the rationale for the project and the requirements of the PDLs as participants in the research. Following this, informed consent forms were distributed to attendees. Full details of the consent process, steps taken to maintain the anonymity of participants and the protection and the well-being of interviewers and participants involved in the study are detailed in Appendix A.

A total of forty-four consent forms were distributed. Twenty three PDLs consented to participate; seven declined to participate and the remaining 14 did not provide any response.

Specialist training was provided on interviewing PDLs incarcerated at the Correctional Institute for Women (CIW), with a focus on the specific sensitivities regarding OSAEC facilitation. Interviewers, who were all psychologists, underwent a two-day training to familiarise them with the interview aims and objectives. This was led by project consultant - Professor Derek Perkins of Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Principal Investigator - Dr Maggie Brennan of Dublin City University.

### Non-disclosure agreements were signed by each interviewer.

At the outset, the purpose of the interview was reiterated as well as the assurance that the participants could withdraw at any time. All were conducted in person, and recorded with consent. Interviews were conducted in Filipino languages.

Participants were also informed that the focus was to be their life experiences in general. They were given the freedom to initiate discussions about the reasons for their incarceration. Additionally, the PDLs were instructed not to identify individuals or refer to offences or crimes other than those related to their own incarceration.

They were further reminded that if there were any questions they were not comfortable with, they did not have to answer them.

Participants were again advised that their identities would be protected in any subsequent data analysis and reporting of findings, and permission to proceed was given by all interviewees.

Consistent with Key Informant and Local Caseworker interviews, a semi-structured interview schedule guided each PDL interview session comprising a focused set of questions mapping on to the overall research questions. Following questions related to socioeconomic backgrounds, general descriptive queries were asked related to their family and home life, individual assessments of their personalities as well as themselves as a parent, child, sibling, relative, as relevant. Further questions were asked of the quality of their relationships with family, friends and neighbours, and of intimate relationships.

The interview questions then focused on OSAEC experiences, from their own conviction and related offences - to the characteristics of the child victims, motivation for involvement and their actual experience. Finally, post-OSAEC experiences were queried, as well as their recommendations to discourage engagement in such activities.

Consistent with Key Informant and Local Caseworker interviews, the interview schedule was used as a guide but not followed rigidly, providing flexibility that allowed the participant's voice to be heard in subsequent data analysis. Following the conclusion of the interviews, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

A debriefing session was also held with interviewers after initial PDL interviews had been conducted. This was with a member of the research team who is a clinical psychologist. The purpose of a debrief at this stage was two-fold. Firstly, as a support for the well-being of interviewers, allowing them to share their initial interview experiences. Secondly, to inform the development of techniques in rapport building to encourage discussion of OSAEC offences.

The team visited the Correctional Institution for Women for project closure. During this activity, interview participants were trained in a variety of self-care activities related to coping and stress management strategies. They were also informed that psychological support was available, if required, following their participation in the research.

Following the conclusion of PDL interviews, data were transcribed and translated to English at this stage. All transcription files were encrypted and accessible by assigned team members. Each transcriber signed a non-disclosure agreement form. This agreement also included instructions for the deletion of all related audio and associated data on completion of transcription.

PDL interview data were analysed using qualitative Descriptive Analysis (Doyle et al., 2020) and Inductive Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Data collected during Phase 2 from interviews with PDLs incarcerated in the Philippines was triangulated with secondary data donated by international agencies. These data included chat logs between convicted foreign perpetrators and local facilitators based in the Philippines, as well as data related to financial transactions between convicted foreign perpetrators and local facilitators in the Philippines. A qualitative Descriptive Analysis was used to establish the following socio-demographic characteristics of the PDLs, as well as features of devices, platforms and financial institutions used in facilitation.

# 4.2 Phase Two Findings

## Characteristics of PDLs

The following demographic characteristics of the PDLs were noted; these were consistent with Key Informant and Local Caseworker data from Phase One:

- The women's ages ranged from **25 - 61 years**. Almost two-thirds of the sample (**65% of the PDLs**) were **under 40 years of age**, with the remaining 35% aged between 40 and 60 years.
- Many experienced **complicated family backgrounds**, including being raised by extended family - e.g. grandparents, coming from a 'broken' home, cohabitation (either unmarried or following a marriage breakdown), remarriage, single parenthood (often with dependents) and **experience of domestic and sexual violence in childhood and/or adulthood**.
- More than one-fifth (20%) of the 23 PDLs reported that they were engaging in online sex work as children (commencing aged between 10 and 12 years) - and, as such, had **OSAEC victimisation histories**.
- **All had an internal migration history** (intra-island or inter-island), e.g. moving from a remote rural area to an urban location.
- **Education attainment was limited for almost all of the women**. One PDL did not complete a basic level of education. Three completed elementary school. Six graduated, and six others dropped out during high school. One obtained a vocational degree, another a qualification in hospitality. Three dropped out of college courses. One PDL achieved a college degree. Another did not confirm their level of education attained.
- Six were the sole breadwinners for their families.
- **Over half (twelve) of the 23 PDLs were sex workers at the time of arrest** (either in the online sex industry or prostitution) with over a quarter (six) of the 23 presenting as procurers or pimps.
- **In addition, the prior employment experiences of eight of the PDLs related to the online sex industry, prostitution, and the club entertainment industry.**
- **A range of modus operandi were used by the PDLs** in the facilitation of OSAEC activity, including: setting up personal accounts on websites relating to the online sex industry, hiring minors as models, sending sample videos of naked children to foreign perpetrators and following up with more on request, facilitating children naked for the customer online, as well as live video shows and recordings of such shows.
- **Locations in which OSAEC activity was reported to have taken place varied** and included the facilitator's house, a rented apartment, a daughters bedroom, a hotel and an internet cafe.
- Descriptive analysis further showed that PDL's included managers (of adult cybersex workers), models (who themselves hired young girls as models), conduits (such as a friend or relative), computer shop owners, mentors (who teach survivors to become facilitators themselves), employers (of online sex workers) and middlemen (pimp/procurer).



## Relationship between the Victim, Facilitator and Perpetrator

Further analysis of PDL interview data showed there were five distinct relationships between the victim, facilitator and perpetrator.

### 1) Parent/Relative Facilitator

In this triad, the child was either a son/daughter or otherwise related to a facilitator who engaged and transacted with a foreign perpetrator.



### 2) Co-Facilitator working alongside Facilitator

In this triad, the child may or may not be a relative or related by blood to the facilitator. The facilitator (parent, relative, neighbour, or anyone not related to the child) transacted with the foreign perpetrator(s). However, in these instances the facilitator worked with a conduit or another facilitator (the 'co-facilitator' who could be a relative, a sibling, or a friend).



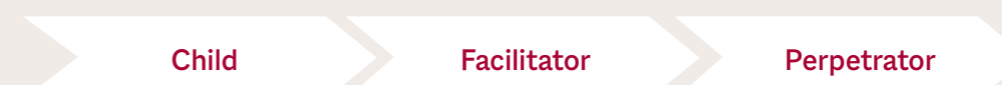
### 3a) Non-biological Facilitator

In this triad, the child 'worked' for an 'employer' (e.g. computer shop owner) who facilitated OSAEC-linked transactions with foreign perpetrators. In this arrangement, the child was not biologically related to the facilitator ('employer').



### 3b) Non-biological Facilitator and Child Model

Again, in this triad, the child 'worked' as an online model and was managed by a facilitator, who negotiated and transacted directly with the foreign perpetrator. The child was not biologically related to the facilitator/manager.



### 4) Child transacting directly with Perpetrator

This dyad only involves the child who directly interacted and transacted with foreign perpetrators in OSAEC exchanges. No facilitator exists.



## Thematic Analysis of PDL Interviews

Following the qualitative descriptive analysis, an Inductive Thematic Analysis was undertaken that allowed the PDL typologies to be better understood and explained as well as identifying themes and associated sub-themes throughout the dataset.

### Typology of PDLs

Three distinct groups of PDLs were identified through the thematic analysis. The first group of facilitators conformed to a Traditional Trafficker/Denial Presentation; members of this group denied committing the index OSAEC offence and/or heavily minimised their involvement and culpability. The second group, Accepting Facilitators, comprised those facilitators who accepted committing the index facilitation offence, and who may themselves have been victims of OSAEC. Thirdly, there was a smaller cohort of PDLs, Ambivalent Facilitators, who did not fall into either category - making ambivalent statements in relation to their involvement or responsibility regarding the facilitation offence.

**Traditional Trafficker Presentation/Denial Facilitators:** differed in their reactions to incarceration or their route to prison. Some referred to a 'misunderstanding' with the authorities. Others were adamant that no children were involved in their sexual activities and, as such, questioned why they were sentenced for OSAEC-related crimes.

A 'blame game' of offence minimisation or denial was also apparent in some instances, particularly when there was a co-accused. For example, some reported that the alleged facilitator of the crime used the PDL's bank account to facilitate OSAEC-linked payment collection without their knowledge as to the purpose of the payment. Others reported that their (the PDL's) mobile phone was used by another facilitator to upload CSAM or to engage in other OSAEC-linked criminal activity, and that they were wrongfully convicted of the offence.

This cohort further asserted their innocence, or certainly lack of direct involvement, and made references to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as happening to be present during an entrapment, or that they were 'set up' by authorities or others, including the child survivors involved.

Other PDLs further minimised their offences, speaking of sending nude pictures of themselves or of putting on 'shows' for foreigners that involved dancing and some nudity. However, they did not reference hardcore or explicit sex acts or the violation of others involved in the shows which merited conviction - regardless of whether those involved were under the age of consent.

**Accepting Facilitators:** seven of the participants (30%) willingly shared their experiences during the interview. They also expressed regrets and repentance. Some of them entered into a plea bargain agreement in court thinking that it would lessen their penalties.

This cohort acknowledged shame at having engaged in these activities, while on the other hand, recognising that revenue from them helped the family by, e.g. feeding children or educating their siblings. Others were enticed by the lure of 'easy money'. However, the ease with which this money was achieved did not necessarily mean that it would be spent frivolously. According to these participants, it was primarily spent on feeding their children/extended family, education, medicines etc.

The most overwhelming feeling articulated by these PDLs was the loss of their children while incarcerated. They also referred to continued support and visits, where possible, by family members. Thoughts of being reunited with family and children on release were used as a coping

mechanism by some of the women. Regardless of sentencing, most were hopeful of being released and reunited with their families. Also, many who found comfort in religion following incarceration were thankful to have either found, or reconnected with, their faith in prison.

**Ambivalent Facilitators:** these PDL's differed from those who accepted what they had done and those who were in outright denial in that they acknowledged an awareness of what they were doing in their role as facilitators and neither denied their involvement nor blamed an accomplice or another person. However, they also did not accept the part they played nor that they deserved the sentence handed down. For example, one PDL didn't believe her sentence matched the crime but that does not necessarily mean that she is in denial of involvement in wrongdoing.

### Emerging Themes

Three themes were also identified through the thematic analysis of interview data with PDLs. These themes were further explored in the analysis of chat log data between foreign perpetrators convicted of OSAEC crimes and associates based in the Philippines (who were not necessarily convicted/incarcerated) and the analysis of financial transaction data also related to convicted foreign perpetrators in order to provide both verification and additional context.

The three themes and associated sub-themes were:

- 1. Motivation for Involvement in OSAEC**
  - Poverty was a Powerful Driver
  - Community and Environment
  - Rationalisation of Online Sex Work
- 2. Relationship between Foreign Perpetrator and Filipina Local Facilitators**
  - Building Relationships
  - How Children and Minors were Recruited
- 3. The 'Business' of OSAEC and Remuneration**
  - Business Models and Set Up
  - Payments





## 1. Motivation for Involvement in OSAEC

### Poverty was a Powerful Driver

***'All I could think of was to help the family'***

PDL 13

Overwhelmingly, poverty drove the perceived necessity to engage in OSAEC. Primarily, participants referred to a responsibility to provide materially and financially for family members, that is parents, siblings and their own children. Despite reference to it being an 'easy' way to make money, there is little evidence in transcripts that this money was spent frivolously. Instead it was typically used to purchase food, as well as contributing to children's education and needs.

While participants' marital status may be described as 'Married/Cohabiting', many were no longer in a relationship - some being abandoned, with their former partner married to or cohabiting with another person. This leaves the PDL as the sole breadwinner for their family.

Poverty was not only a driver of engagement but also a recruitment strategy with PDLs outlining being lured by the promise of how easily they could earn money by presenting themselves naked for foreign clients. One described being offered the work by a classmate's mother in Grade 6, aged 11-12 years old. This points to recruitment taking place in school settings and environments. Children are vulnerable by virtue of the fact that they are in proximity to the offspring of a supplying offender.

### Community and Environment

***'Our place was well known for this kind of work. I saw a potential to earn money in the most convenient way. I was just 10 years old at that time.'***

PDL 13

Community influence was also a facilitating factor in engagement in OSAEC and in habituation to the activity. Adult cybersex work was a common source of income in such impoverished communities, with little perceived opportunities to earn enough money to provide for a family. Word of mouth and encouragement by neighbours contributed to the initiation of children into what has been described as a 'cottage industry' in these communities. PDL13 further estimated that '80%' of her community was involved in some way in adult cybersex work.

Community knowledge of arrests related to the online sex industry also influenced the facilitator's ability to avoid detection. PDL 14 was a minor online sex worker at the time of some arrests. She laid low at this time. But - when raids resulting in arrests stopped, she began to work again.

For many participants, engagement in online sex activities was a way of life and part of their normality. That it was borne of necessity was a consistent narrative.

### Rationalisation of Online Sex Work

***'I also thought I wasn't being touched, and there wasn't any sex on top of it being easy money'***

PDL 2

Interview participants rationalised their involvement in online sex work in different ways, one being that as they weren't being touched or didn't have to engage in sexual relations with the foreigner, it was an easy way to earn a living that could be used to support their parents and provide an education to siblings.

However, for some, this then progressed to hiring minors, as foreigners requested younger girls. A rationalisation and justification for this was — while acknowledging that the recruits were minors, they were no longer 'virgins', with some having 'live-in partners'. And - others volunteered themselves for induction.

There is some evidence of the opportunity for progression in online sex work, particularly if a relationship develops with a foreign 'manager', who will finance, for example, a computer and internet connection enabling access to child victims for the foreign perpetrator, and an opportunity to earn a living for the local facilitator.

Online sex work was further rationalised by invoking the 'no touch, no harm' fallacy when they were children themselves and as adult facilitators, underpinned by a common inference that these 'shows' involve nudity only. The minimisation of the virtual experience on camera as opposed to in person was also an enabling factor.

An extension of this was the argument of '...only doing what I was told' - referring to giving the foreign perpetrator what they 'want' in an online sex show; the foreigner was directing what was being shown to, or performed for, them. Further justification was given that this was not trafficking as the minors were already 'involved' in adult cybersex work.

## 2. Relationship between Foreign Perpetrators and Local Facilitators

### Building Relationships

***'The foreigners are the ones who offered to send money. Maybe they're just trying to help people in need....'***

PDL 4

There are references to 'chatting' to foreigners through social media platforms or dating websites such as Filipino Cupid, Cherry Blossoms, and Asian Dating. Invariably, communication with foreigners began through chat and video calling. These encounters were typically presented as innocuous in nature - initially.

It is unclear if the reference to foreigners as 'friends' is euphemistic or a genuine belief that, in return for 'shows' foreigners will 'help' women on a daily basis.

However, there is an acknowledgement that there is a transactional nature to the 'help'.

The preference for minors of some foreigners was also described, suggesting that the recruitment of minors is a response to market requirements.

The foreign perpetrators, primarily from the USA, UK, Germany, Australia and Canada were described by one participant as 'nice', supportive and helpful when it came to payment, indicating that this represented a regular income stream for her. There were also references to Norway, Italy, India, Malaysia and the Middle East (generally) as countries of origin for perpetrators. In general the relationship between the foreigner and facilitator is a business arrangement.

Some PDLs refer to the foreigners as 'my boyfriend' even though they may not have met. This seems to reflect regularity in engagement with the foreigner and also in payments by them.

Deception or 'tricking' foreigners was also referred to by other participants.

## How Children and Minors were Recruited

***'I didn't hire them, they came to me voluntarily and asked if I could give them a job.....said yes if they had the consent of their parents'***

PDL 12

A consistent thread with participants was the differentiation between 'children' and 'minors'. Minors were seen as fellow online sex workers, as they had either been working in the industry or were willing to do so and approached the PDLs.

This is consistent with how they themselves started, and also reflective of the continuing practice of sex work in certain communities and neighbourhoods. However, reactions to suggestions of children being recruited or used was, for the most part, denied or discounted by participants.

Foreigners sometimes requested girls by name and knew them, i.e. had engaged in OSAEC activities with them previously.

PDL 5 had progressed to starting her own online sex industry business and hired minors. However, she insisted that the girls were not 'forced' to work; they did so voluntarily. Similarly, the owner of an online sex industry café asserted that she did not actively seek minors to work. Again, they voluntarily engaged in the work.

There is some evidence both in the transcripts of interviews with the PDLs and chat log data analysis of children as volunteers, that is as agents of their own abuse.

PDL 3 explained how she progressed to hiring minors:

***'I hired them at that age because that's what foreigners look for' (some were 16 years old; youngest was 14 years old).***

The rationalisation and justification in her mind for this was:

***'...even though they were young, they were not virgins anymore. They had live-in partners. They actually volunteered and asked me to hire them because they needed money, and they used it to go on trips with their boyfriends'***

## 3. The 'Business' of OSAEC and Remuneration

***'really become emotional thinking that small amount of money got me into this situation'***

PDL 8

### Business Models and Set Up

There is some - albeit limited - evidence of the operation of an enterprise that involves a 'middle person' or 'pimp'. During the analysis of chat logs between perpetrators and facilitators, an explanation was given by a Filipina facilitator of one such enterprise she was aware of and how it operated.

There were also references by some PDLs in their interviews of the progression from being managed themselves to becoming self-employed. This was the result of a decision to cut out

the 'middle person' who distributes a portion of the earnings. As their business developed and the 'middle person' was dispensed with, the relationship became directly between the foreigner and PDL.

The process of 'setting up' as, effectively, a sole trader was explained by PDL 2.

When starting out she used the services of a 'computer shop' and rented a computer. There is some evidence from accounts by the PDL's, which corroborates with previous findings that these establishments were a 'front' for OSAEC activity.

Subsequently, she was given the 'loan of a webcam' by her 'gay neighbours', who had originally introduced her to 'cyber activities' and started with a foreigner who had been a client of theirs. The foreign perpetrator agreed to finance a device for her, as well as pay for her internet connection. This facilitated the expansion of her business, where in a day she could have 6-7 'clients'.

A natural progression from being managed by someone referred to as 'a manager' was described by some of the PDLs. When they had 'learned' the business, they started to work for themselves and, in turn, hired and managed 'girls'.

PDL 12 described operating a fairer and more equitable system when she progressed to managing 'models', in which payment was disbursed '50/50' between her as a facilitator and the girls as models. She had received a fraction of this when managed by another.

## Payments

Foreign perpetrators used a variety of payment facilities and methods to transact with facilitators. These included well-known Filipino and international: payment gateways operated by intermediary service providers, more traditional payment processing services provided by banks and remittance services, and smart card service providers. The selection criteria for the institution were typically whichever was most convenient or 'easiest'.

A description was given of the simple and straightforward process of payment collection and disbursement between women who worked closely with another, either a relative or friend. For most, there was no 'middleman' - an ATM account was simply set up into which all 'earnings' were made by money transfer from foreign clients. For those who work with another, this was then divided evenly between them.

There was some discrepancy between the control that PDLs reported during interviews they had relative to the perpetrators in the negotiation of payment, and that was reflected in the chat log data analysis. For example, PDL 12 confirmed transactions were always:

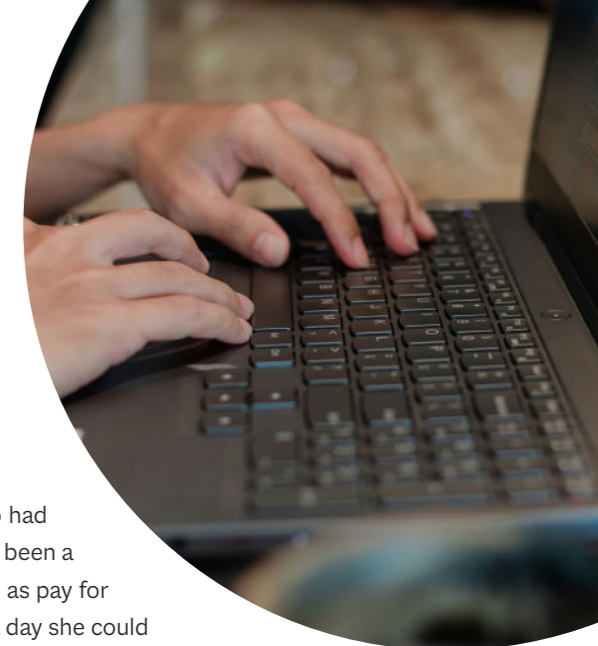
***'Money first before show'***

However, chat log data analysis showed the balance of power during negotiation was with the foreign perpetrator - with the local facilitator accepting the amount being offered following a back and forth that was invariably revised down with little evidence of hard bargaining by the facilitator.

PDL 14 described how adult women were also earning through 'meetups' (traditional prostitution) with foreigners who visited the Philippines. For these encounters:

***'We were the ones who were naming our price for every meetup'***

The price ranged from 10,000 to 15,000 PHP (approximately 180 - 270 USD), with the meetings primarily with American and Canadian tourists.



## Chat Log Analysis

De-identified chat log data was donated by two international law enforcement agencies - four logs from one (Dataset 1) - 25 logs from the other (Dataset 2).

Dataset 1 contained chat log data during the time period June 2017 to November 2018. All conversations were between male foreign perpetrators and female associates.

Dataset 2 contained chat log data during the time period June 2013 to January 2017. Of the 25 chat logs contained in Dataset 2, one was discounted as it constituted a conversation between two foreign perpetrators, leaving 24 chat logs for analysis from this dataset. Two of these logs were between adult females (i.e. over the age of 18) and foreign perpetrators.

The remaining twenty two logs were between children (i.e. under the age of 18), the oldest of whom were 17 years old - the youngest 13 years old. Two of the children were boys, the remainder girls.

This analysis of these chat logs was found to broadly align with the thematic analysis of the PDL interviews - mapping onto and enriching the emergent themes in the following ways:

### 1) Poverty was driving the perceived necessity to engage in OSAEC

Analysis of chat logs showed repeated requests for 'help' from the young adult/child based in the Philippines - either for themselves, a parent or sibling. This help involved being able to purchase food, 'fix' a roof on the family home, or support the school activities of a sibling, for example. The framing of requests for financial support ranged from suggestion and cajoling to more directed imploring and, in some instances, begging.

### 2) Community

There were numerous conversations between the young adults/children and local facilitators about other members of the community known to both, who were also involved in OSAEC activities. Additionally, for the adult facilitators, there is a certain competition in establishing themselves with the foreign perpetrator as the favoured or preferred 'friend'. Some of the logs involve the establishment/confirmation that the child is related to another acquaintance of the foreign perpetrator - with whom he is also 'chatting'. This supports the finding within the PDL interviews that this behaviour has been normalised within certain communities.

### 3) Relationship between foreigners and local facilitators

Chat log analysis between foreign perpetrators and adult local facilitators based in the Philippines shows that relationships between them are often complicated and also mean different things to both protagonists. For the foreign perpetrator, the local facilitator is someone who is providing a service (i.e. the procurement of children for abuse); as such, for the local facilitator, the relationship with the foreigner is a source (or potential source) of income.

### 4) How children and minors are recruited

Chat log analysis shows that the female supplier of children is either their mother, who facilitates 'shows' for the foreigner, or someone known to a child who offers them to the foreigner - i.e. that a show can be arranged.

## 5) Payments process

There are repeated references by foreign perpetrators to being 'ripped off' by Filipina facilitators. These are often people known to the facilitator with whom they are chatting. There are also repeated references during the chats of the perpetrators of the inability to pay the requested amount, with excuses such as waiting for payment from an employer, or not having been paid for a period of time. Analysis further shows that the payment process can be protracted with the facilitator suggesting a price and the foreigner invariably negotiating down - there is little evidence in the dataset of the facilitator holding out or firm for a particular amount of recompense.

## Financial Dimensions of OSAEC Facilitation

In order to verify and strengthen findings from our PDL interviews, analysis was conducted of financial transaction data related to payments made by perpetrators convicted of OSAEC activity in a foreign country. This analysis revealed a number of features of the relationship between these perpetrators and of OSAEC associates based in the Philippines. They showed consistency with other profiles of OSAEC-linked payments in the extant literature. In particular, the data supported a finding from earlier studies that the relationship between foreign perpetrators and local associates was typically many-to-one and one-to-many. One of the datasets showed three foreign perpetrators transacting with as many as 93 local associates, while another dataset showed transactions between one associate and 57 foreign perpetrators.

There were conflicting findings in extant literature related to the timing of payments, with some arguing that these were made during evening hours, others noting they were essentially random. Analysis of these datasets aligned most with early evenings in the Philippines.

The majority of perpetrators used more than one payment provider (i.e. money remittance services) to transact with facilitators. Foreign perpetrators who entered into most transactions used as many as four different payment platforms. Conversely, when the same associate transacted with many foreign perpetrators, platform use varied, suggesting that local associates did not exercise control over platform selection. Even if foreign perpetrators used just one provider, there was variety in payment type, i.e. debit card, credit card, and mobile phone transactions.

In terms of establishing pricing, analysis showed some variation in the transaction amount made by one perpetrator to multiple associates, with variations in amounts made to each associate across time. This aligns with the finding from the chat log analysis that the price was very much subject to negotiation.

### 4.3 Phase Two: Contributions beyond the State of the Art

- The indicators of a **contagion effect in communities where OSAEC is prevalent** were further evidenced in the analysis of PDL interviews and in the chat log data. This showed that in addition to the diverse pathways to engagement outlined, there is also a **culture of mentoring and induction to OSAEC** that is established as an opportunity to earn money in these vulnerable communities.
- The varied routes to involvement with OSAEC were also outlined during this phase. While having roots in economic deprivation and poverty, the various ways in which PDLs described how they became involved ranged from: being introduced by friends or family members who were involved in OSAEC and being mentored by them; the more obvious route through prostitution and online sex work; the **relevance of community was again reiterated as providing a pathway to involvement with the crime of OSAEC**.
- **The cultural stigma attached to the loss of virginity**, regardless of whether or not this is through OSAEC, was also brought into sharp focus, building on this finding in Phase One of the study. This stigma was more broadly described in this phase to include the associated loss of social capital in the community and the resulting impact on self-worth. The importance of family relationships in this context was also highlighted, whereby the stigma as a survivor of OSAEC brings embarrassment to the family. **In some instances, the cycle of abuse continues as the survivor/victim is pushed into sex work** as they see themselves as sullied by stigma, without an opportunity for rehabilitation or redemption from it.
- In some instances, the cycle of abuse was found to be perpetuated as children are exposed to OSAEC in the community and can grow up to engage in OSAEC and sex work themselves. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as sex work is 'in the home'. **In addition to intergenerational trauma, PDL interviews also illustrate the transfer of criminal knowledge intergenerationally**, in what is effectively a 'cottage industry' in impoverished communities. There are few, if any, opportunities for employment that allows a living wage to be earned in order to support a family.
- PDLs offered insights into the facilitation of OSAEC by outlining the various modus operandi for the supply of materials to the foreign perpetrators. These included their presence on **websites relating to the online sex industry used for meeting foreigners, the hiring of 'models' who were also minors**, and to providing children to participate in both pre-recorded and live camera shows, as well as being photographed nude for CSAM distribution.
- The **impact of incarceration on the family** was clearly illustrated by the PDLs. From their children not knowing the reason for their absence from the home to the challenges and resultant trauma of the loss of the PDL's presence. Associated with this is the loss of income to the family left behind where the PDL has fulfilled the role of sole breadwinner. This further feeds into the **systemic vulnerability of both poverty and environment, in which children assume responsibility for providing for the family as breadwinner**. As this **invariably necessitates a curtailment of their education**, the most seemingly lucrative revenue earning opportunity is through engagement in sex work themselves.
- There is a concerted effort to address OSAEC in the Philippines which has involved a strong criminal justice response. On the one hand this is necessary to demonstrate that the issue is being taken seriously and addressed. However, **the focus remains on the supply side offending in which convicted offenders - invariably women - receive lengthy sentences**, most commonly 15 years but in several cases extending to life imprisonment. There is also evidence to suggest that the crime of trafficking for which such harsh sentencing applies is broad in definition, encompassing a wide range of activities from, for example, the supply of nude photographs to trafficking children from remote and rural areas to urban locations for abuse and exploitation. **These heavy penalties sit in stark contrast with those handed down to**

**demand-side offenders in foreign countries who commission the trafficking and OSAEC children in the Philippines**, where sentences and other penalties do not reflect the seriousness of the trafficking offence taking place in the Philippines and are not serving to disrupt demand for OSAEC in this country.<sup>2</sup>

- In addition to the **normalisation of the crime in vulnerable communities**, further enabling factors to engagement in OSAEC were outlined by PDLs. These included **befriending staff of financial institutions who would turn a 'blind eye' to potentially suspicious payments** or payment patterns.
- The **existence of a variety of social media platforms and the ability to transfer from public platforms to more private ones to conduct OSAEC** were summarised by PDLs. **This involved the progression from 'chatting' to a 'show'**. Once the women agree to exit a general chat area to a private chat room foreigners ask for a 'show'. Typically, media messaging services were used for live chatting, with main streaming services and other live cam sites used for 'shows'. Devices used ranged from mobile phones (some PDLs used multiple devices), computers, laptops, SLR cameras and WiFi.
- This presented an **opportunity to make 'easy money' online in that it offered a quick payment turn-around**, with money deposited directly into an account of the local facilitator's instruction.
- PDLs also referred to the **culture in these communities of 'sharing' - whether that is social media accounts, bank accounts and/or mobile devices**, further enabling OSAEC crimes to be conducted with relative ease.



<sup>2</sup> Falling Short Report, 2020 <https://www.ijm.org.ph/assets/resource/IJM-Falling-Short-Demand-Side-Sentencing-for-OSEC-Full-2020.pdf>

# 5. Recommendations

The findings of this study identify a set of motivations and pathways for the commission of OSAEC facilitation offences. Further, they describe factors that enable and sustain offending, as well as facilitation offence types and presentations. Moreover, they signpost a set of practical possibilities for better detection, disruption and prevention of OSAEC facilitation in the Philippines. To this end, a set of high-level recommendations is outlined below.



**A suite of child-centred interventions is recommended to reduce the re-traumatisation and secondary victimisation of children linked to their experiences of reporting, arrests for OSAEC facilitation where children are present, children's experiences of subsequent prosecution proceedings and family separation. Examples of recommended interventions are as follows:**

- Extend Assessment Centres as 'one-stop shops' for managing OSAEC victimisation reports, rescue operations and aftercare – including interim accommodation provision for survivors and support for all relevant interventions, e.g. medical assessment, affidavits, therapeutic support, etc. A model of care exists for such centres in the Philippines, which should be extended into other communities where OSAEC victimisation is known to be occurring.
- Form and strengthen Multi-disciplinary Team (MDT) capacity in each locality (e.g. through training on Trauma-informed Care and OSAEC - specific vulnerabilities) to enable MDTs to respond without delay and with child-centred interventions to OSAEC reports.
- Provide psychoeducation and government support for non-offending family members of OSAEC survivors. Here the ambition is to prepare and enable the non-offending family to offer longer-term care and support for survivors (provided the family does not present a risk to the child), particularly in cases where the survivor is 'left behind' as the facilitator is a parent or relative with caregiving responsibility for the survivor.
- Extend long-term supports for the care, recovery and healing of OSAEC survivors such as in-family care, fostering, or, where this is not possible, access to long-term care arrangements such as those offered by the Preda Foundation, encompassing wraparound care, including long-term accommodation, therapy, education and other interventions for 'left behind' OSAEC survivors.
- Establish a comprehensive 'whole country' approach in collaboration with the national hotline and other jurisdictions with expertise in CSAM detection, notice and takedown procedures (e.g. the Canadian Project Arachnid and allied processes) to ensure swift detection and takedown of CSAM linked to OSAEC survivors.



**Demand side countries must enact swift, certain and targeted action to tackle the global demand for OSAEC in the Philippines. A concerted, targeted suite of measures at the level of demand side countries is proposed to shut down the market for OSAEC activity emanating from foreign countries, for example:**

- Enhance targeted regulation, interception and reporting of Philippines-linked OSAEC activity at the level of online social platforms and products implicated in these offences.
- Step up regulation, detection and suspicious transaction reporting in financial services used to transact payments linked to OSAEC crimes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aligns with IJM Scale of Harm Report (2023) Recommendation 5: Expedite detection, reporting, and blocking of suspicious financial transactions

- Extend financial restitution and compensation funds for victims deriving from prosecutions in demand side countries.
- Enhance action at the level of OSAEC-linked social and financial platforms and law enforcement in demand side countries to detect and prosecute OSAEC crimes that attract higher sentences, such as live streaming of OSAEC. At present, many OSAEC-linked prosecutions target only the 'low-hanging fruit' of OSAEC crimes, those which are easier to detect and attract shorter sentences, such as CSAM possession, and fail to intercept more serious concurrent OSAEC crimes, such as payment for OSAEC live streams. Consequently, prosecutions and sentences for OSAEC crimes in demand side countries do not serve as a disincentive to foreign perpetrators who commission OSAEC and drive the market for these crimes. Targeted, coordinated action is required to reduce demand by ensuring that the most serious OSAEC offence is detected and prosecuted in demand side offending cases, and sentencing for OSAEC-linked crimes in demand side countries reflects the seriousness and life-course impact of Filipino children's victimisation.
- Strengthen relevant legislative frameworks in demand side jurisdictions to include targeted measures that respond to the presentation of OSAEC facilitation offences, and which emphasise the adoption of evidence-led interventions to disrupt the market for OSAEC in the Philippines. For example, the forthcoming revision of the European Directive on Combating the Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Child Sexual Abuse Material offers significant potential to strengthen legislation in this way in the European region. Further demand side countries should implement online safety legislation and regulation that uses state of the art evidence and OSAEC survivor consultations to address the demand for OSAEC originating in their countries, enabling increased detection, deterrence and prevention of OSAEC in the Philippines and in other vulnerable jurisdictions.<sup>4</sup>



**Address the enabling environment of online platforms. These are a set of high-level recommendations for online social platforms and financial service providers that are implicated in the commission of OSAEC.**

- Intercepting and disrupting payment pathways between foreign perpetrators and Philippines-based facilitators is imperative for better OSAEC detection and deterrence. Moreover, approaches based on OSAEC payment interception hold potential in terms of alleviating the reliance on often re-traumatising victim testimony in the context of prosecutions. Our current findings signal a need for more consistent, evidence-led monitoring and reporting of suspicious patterns in accounts linked to possible OSAEC-related activity. Our empirical analysis of financial transaction data identified clear distinguishing patterns and characteristics that can help to detect and intercept OSAEC-related transactions from other types of payments.
- Formalise policy and practice recommendations to facilitate improved detection and disruption of OSAEC-related payments on financial platforms and identify associated training and resourcing requirements for key stakeholders (e.g., compliance officials, fraud detection and AML specialists and law enforcement liaisons).
- Enhance regulation of financial service providers to disrupt the flow of remuneration from foreign perpetrators to local facilitators of OSAEC in the Philippines. These regulations should ensure that financial institutions implement increased monitoring and reporting of accounts with suspicious activity potentially linked to OSAEC payments.

<sup>4</sup> Aligns with IJM Scale of Harm Report (2023) Recommendation 6: Demand side governments should urgently pass online safety legislation with survivor consultation

- Enhance regulation of financial service providers to disrupt the flow of remuneration from foreign perpetrators to local facilitators of OSAEC in the Philippines. These regulations should ensure that financial institutions implement increased monitoring and reporting of accounts with suspicious activity potentially linked to OSAEC payments.
- Suspicious transaction screening for potential OSAEC payments should move away from traditional minimum transaction thresholds traditionally used for screening in compliance (e.g. the threshold of minimum 100 USD transactions in anti-money laundering screening). These preclude screening of frequent, small-value payments (typically under 100 USD) that are often made in commissioning OSAEC activity.
- Instead, focus should be given to monitoring account activity of known facilitators and suspicious, atypical OSAEC-linked patterns and signatures in all payments from foreign accounts. This should include collaboration with financial industry representatives to develop state of the art OSAEC-linked payment detection typologies and reporting processes to be used by financial services on their platforms.

Bespoke product managers and programmes should be established within online platforms implicated in the facilitation of OSAEC in the Philippines to better detect, report, investigate and prevent OSAEC on-platform. Notwithstanding the sheer scale of OSAEC facilitation crimes in the Philippines, this analysis reveals that use of technology to facilitate OSAEC crimes has a specific country-level presentation and characteristics. Given this, programmes involving Policy, Investigations, Trust and Safety and Safety by Design efforts to detect, report, investigate and prevent OSAEC on-platform should be developed with specific attention to state-of-the-art evidence and intelligence concerning the insignia of OSAEC facilitation crimes against Filipino children as well as OSAEC survivors with lived experience of these offences.

Relatedly, concerted action is required to target online dating sites and adult webcam services identified in this analysis as being implicated in OSAEC crimes (e.g. used to foster and develop foreign perpetrator-local facilitator connections to commission OSAEC; subsequent live streaming of OSAEC and other OSAEC crimes against Filipino children). These actions should, inter alia, encompass regulation and investigation of these platforms and services and targeted, platform-level activity to detect and report potential on-platform OSAEC (e.g. at the level of Trust and Safety teams, law enforcement liaison, user reporting, etc.).



**Develop public health-based awareness and education campaigns (online and offline) in the Philippines alongside key stakeholders to create greater community understanding of the scope and harm of OSAEC to children, reduce associated stigma and encourage reporting - thus enabling better detection of the crime and deterring potential offenders at the level of OSAEC-affected communities:<sup>5</sup>**

- Community level campaigns should focus on illustrating the scale, nature and illegal characteristics of OSAEC crimes in the Philippines, public sensitisation to tactics used by foreign perpetrators and OSAEC facilitators, reporting avenues, harms suffered by children, as well as the impact of prosecution (e.g. economic) on families.<sup>6</sup>
- Targeted education campaigns based on best evidence should be developed for populations 'at risk' of involvement in OSAEC facilitation offences (e.g. online sex workers and children in vulnerable communities, etc.) with an emphasis on prevention and reporting.

<sup>5</sup> Aligns with IJM Scale of Harm Report (2023) Recommendation 1: Cultivate community based reporting

<sup>6</sup> Aligns with IJM Scale of Harm Report (2023) Recommendation 3: Implement robust community based efforts

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# Appendix A - Ethical Considerations

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The process of ethical review and approval is summarised below, including the process of obtaining informed consent for research participants, efforts to mitigate risks to research participants and researchers, and to protect confidentiality.

The research participants for this study included: domain experts and professionals with direct experience of working on OSAEC cases facilitated by Filipino offenders at national and international level ('Key Informants'); individuals working in Filipino communities with victims, offenders and affected families where OSAEC crimes are commonplace ('Local Caseworkers'); and convicted facilitators of OSAEC incarcerated in the Philippines - Persons Deprived of their Liberty ('PDLs'). Informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

This study followed Covid-19 Guidelines at all times, with researchers respecting Pandemic-related measures associated with in-person fieldwork. The timing of the in-person PDL interviews was selected based upon local regulations and travel restrictions imposed upon researchers. Preparations were made for conducting the PDL interviews via Zoom, should in-person interviews not be possible due to Pandemic Guidelines.

## Key Informant and Local Caseworker Interviews

Having read a Plain Language Statement comprising details of the proposed research interview, key informant and local caseworker participants completed an informed consent form before proceeding to the interview stage.

At the outset of the interview, the purpose of the interview was re-iterated as well as an assurance that participants could withdraw at any time up to the point of analysis of the data. Participants were reminded that if there were any questions they were not comfortable with, they did not have to answer them. Participants were again advised that they would be referred to with a pseudonym, and permission to proceed was given by all. The interviews were recorded with prior consent.


A semi-structured interview schedule guided each interview session. This comprised a focused set of questions mapping on to the overall research questions. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time in taking part. Data was transcribed by a member of the research team for subsequent analysis.

## Convicted OSAEC Facilitator ('PDL') Interviews

Prior to commencement of data collection during phase 2, the team sought approval in writing from the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Corrections, and the Correctional Institution for Women. The Bureau of Corrections and the Correctional Institution for Women were requested to identify persons deprived of liberty (PDLs) who were convicted of OSAEC offending.

Approval documents were submitted in support of the ethics application to the University of Mindanao Ethics Review Committee, the external review committee for De La Salle University. Due to the nature of the study and the characteristics of the informants, the application underwent a full board review. Ethical approval was granted (approval number UMERC-2022-142-001).

Prior to data collection, interviewers, who were all psychologists, underwent a two-day training to familiarise them with the interview aims and objectives. This was led by project consultant Professor Derek Perkins of Royal Holloway, University of London and the Principal Investigator, Dr Maggie Brennan of Dublin City University. Specialist training was provided on interviewing PDLs incarcerated



at the Correctional Institute for Women (CIW), with a focus on the specific sensitivities regarding OSAEC facilitation. Non-disclosure agreements were signed by each interviewer.

The team visited the Correctional Institution for Women (CIW) to outline the rationale for the project and the requirements of the PDLs as participants in the research. Following the information session, informed consent forms were distributed. PDLs were given a week to re-read the document before deciding to either sign signifying their participation or decline participation in the research. The forms were in both Filipino and Cebuano to ensure that they understood the content of the form.

PDLs were requested not to identify themselves in the informed consent form. A CIW staff member served in a liaison role between the research team and those who confirmed their consent to participate in the study.

Throughout the data collection phase, interviewers were unaware of the PDLs identities (i.e. names) to maintain anonymity.

A semi-structured interview schedule guided each PDL interview session. This comprised a focused set of questions mapping to the overall research questions.

During the interview participants were informed that the discussion would revolve around their life experiences in general. They were given the freedom to initiate discussions about the reasons for their incarceration. Before the interview started, the PDLs were instructed the following:

1. Not to mention real names of individuals
2. Not to mention offences or crimes other than those related to their incarceration

After the initial interviews, interviewers had a debriefing session with a member of the research team; a clinical psychologist. The purpose of this was for the interviewers to share their initial interview experiences. A further aim was to ensure the well-being of the interviewers following their interaction with the PDLs, encouraging the building of rapport in a way that allowed disclosure of OSAEC offences, by PDLs to their own level of comfort.

Transcription of recordings took place following each interview. All transcription files were encrypted to ensure that only members of the team had access to the data. Transcribers also entered into a non-disclosure agreement. As part of this, they were instructed to delete audio and transcription files from their assigned recorder, inbox, sent items, email, and desktop trash bins once advised it was safe to do so.

Following data collection, the team visited the CIW for project closure. During this activity, PDLs who participated were trained in self-care activities to encourage management of their stress more generally without referencing the reasons for their incarceration. They were also informed that psychological support was available if necessary as a result of their participation in the research.

Throughout the data-gathering procedure, the research team, including interviewers and transcribers, were mindful of the importance of both privacy and confidentiality. A short programme further explained to the PDLs practical options available should they want to seek psychological help as a result of their participation in the interview.





Justice and Care  
Suite 139  
210 Upper Richmond Road  
London  
SW15 6NP

[www.justiceandcare.org](http://www.justiceandcare.org)  
[@justiceandcare](https://twitter.com/justiceandcare)

