

UN: Call for submissions: COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women

Suojellaan Lapsia ry (Protect Children) works to ensure that no child is subjected to sexual harassment, grooming or becomes a victim of any kind of sexual violence. Child sexual violence is recorded, stored, sold, and spread on the internet. These are serious crimes against children using the digital environment to perpetrate the crimes (Child sexual abuse and exploitation in digital media, Modern Slavery). The COVID-19 pandemic has had everyone spending more time on the internet; there will be a time lag but this will become evident in the number of reported child sexual crimes and in the number of sexual images appearing online.

When we speak of child sexual violence in the digital media, we mean situations where a child becomes a victim of sexual violence that is also photographed or videotaped and then stored and spread or sold online. The COVID-19 pandemic has markedly increased the amount of time people spend on the internet which has resulted in many more reports of evidence of sexual abuse on the internet. We must remember that each illegal image or recording of sexual abuse (CSAM) is not a mere recorded image, it is evidence of a serious crime against a child. Sexual violence against children is an escalating issue globally. We should recognize that this phenomenon does not stop at a country's borders. In the past few years Finland has been one of the countries that has produced and spread illegal child sexual abuse material to the rest of the world.

Protect children works with international partners to analyze sexual images to aid law enforcement in recognizing victims, saving them faster from an abusive situation and helping bring the perpetrators to justice. The goal is to help take down illegal CSAM from the digital media as fast as possible. It is worth noting that our specialists find that the largest part of this material consists of images of children under the age of thirteen. A significant number of the material is evidence of sexual exploitation of young girls. Studies show that the younger the child is, the more likely the perpetrator is someone they know. Our specialist has noticed that a large part of the CSAM of small children has been produced in home-like environments. It is important to note though, that a part of the CSAM has been produced in studio-style settings and is clearly meant for illegal commercial purposes. Some of the CSAM are in real time, in so called live-stream situations (Child trafficking for sexual purposes, Modern Slavery). The amount of CSAM has grown globally according to law enforcement, technology companies and child protection agencies. Sexual crimes against children is like a shadow pandemic and most of the crimes stay hidden from authorities which means it is very difficult to compile statistics on them. Furthermore, the full effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the increase of sexual crimes against young women and girls will not become evident until much later, once the evidence of the crimes is discovered on the internet.

It is difficult to prevent sexual crimes against girls and young women in the digital media since it is very much a hidden crime that is difficult to compile statistics on. It is a crime perpetrated for the most part against children and young people who are vulnerable and powerless to defend themselves. The number of cases that come to the attention of the authorities are merely the tip of an iceberg. The phenomenon is considered marginal due to the lack of statistics on its actual prevalence. As technology improves the criminals learn new ways of hiding the evidence of their child sexual crimes. This makes it much more difficult to catch the perpetrators as well as estimate the risk of continued victimization or to compile statistics. We will not see the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of sexual crimes against women, young girls and children until after a quite a long time-lag.

Studies show that when digital recordings of the sexual crime have been made, the victim is much less likely to tell anyone about the abuse (double silencing). Knowing that the material exists increases the feelings of shame and fear, especially the fear of someone recognizing them from the images. Online child sexual abuse is a very serious crime. More often than not, children are unable to tell anyone about the crime due to being in a subservient position, receiving threats or fearing violence from organized crime. Due to the isolation and lack of a safe network during the COVID-19 pandemic, young girls and women have been much more vulnerable when experiencing sexual violence and online grooming.

Every child has the right to be protected from all kinds of sexual violence and Protect Children urges to include prevention of CSAM in the planning of prevention of sexual crimes against women and implementing the Istanbul and Lanzarote Conventions globally.

Sexual violence against children is a global and far reaching social problem; we need international cooperation and action on several levels of societies. For example, Finland does not yet have an adequate judicial process for victims of child sexual crimes, nor does Finland have the resources to properly help victims of such crimes. The inequality in the available social and health services for the different regions of Finland hampers both prevention of child sexual crimes and providing effective treatment for the victims of crime. Finland is also lacking a fast lane in the judicial process for child survivors of sexual crime that would better serve their needs and recovery.

From the judicial point of view the child victim of sexual violence crimes is in a compromised position. The CSAM keeps getting circulated on the internet, this results in the police repeatedly contacting the guardians of the victim to ask if they want to press charges or file for damages. As the material circulates online and the police keep reminding the family and the victim of the crime, the child is continuously re-victimized, and the healing process slows down. Once the victims reach legal age, she becomes responsible for responding to such inquiries herself. Only very few victims have the financial ability to hire an attorney to handle such a long-term process.

In addition to the above, Protect Children recommends the following concrete steps toward preventing human trafficking:

- The steps in the Non-Violent Action Plan (Finland) must be taken into serious consideration in the prevention of violence against women and girls (Chapter 11, Vaaranen-Valkonen and Laitinen).
- The professionals in the social and health services sectors should receive more education and training regarding the phenomenon of child sexual violence online.
- Taking CSAM into consideration during basic social and health services: Adding routine questions to find out if digital images or records of sexual abuse exist online.
- Acknowledging the importance of recognizing the phenomenon as a serious, hidden crime that causes long term trauma for the victim and underlining the need for technological help.
- Guaranteeing resources for: Health and social services, creating a fast lane for the judicial process, research, engaging in international partnerships, taking down CSAM from the internet using the most effective AI technologies.
- Highlighting the victims' voices in order to better understand the phenomenon of CSAM. The repeated, long term traumatization of the victim by the illegal images of the crime circulating the internet must be admitted as fact when determining damages in the judicial process.

We can reduce the risk of young girls and women becoming victims of sexual crimes in the digital media through education and widespread collaboration across different disciplines. Examples for issues to work on: Improving children's rights, implementing, and following through on international human rights concerning children, child friendly practices, multidisciplinary scientific cooperation and research on how to prevent child sexual trafficking. We can learn a lot from the survivors of such crimes in how to recognize and understand the phenomenon and how to better help the victims and prevent these serious crimes against children.

Protect Children's specialists would be glad to provide further information on the subject.

Additional information and source material:

Non-Violent Childhoods – Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Children 2020-2025:
http://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161899/STM_2019_27_J.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

The fastest technology to date for taking down child sexual material from the internet:

<https://projectarachnid.ca/en/>

About 100 child protection organizations signed an open letter to Facebook CEO asking for more protection for children. Protect Children took part:

<https://suojellaanlapsia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Letter-to-Mark-Zuckerberg.pdf>

Lanzarote Convention :

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-convention>

COE Guidelines to respect and fulfill the rights of the child in the digital media:

<https://rm.coe.int/guidelines-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-rights-of-the-child-in-th/16808d881a>

OPSC guidelines:

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRC/CRC.C.156_OPSC%20Guidelines.pdf



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Europol:

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/covid-19/covid-19-child-sexual-exploitation>

Interpol:

<https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Crimes-against-children/International-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-database>

Europol and **Protect Children's** campaign to increase awareness

<https://suojellaanlapsia.fi/2020/06/08/suojellaan-lapsia-ry-protect-children-launches-international-online-safety-campaign-to-raise-awareness-on-childrens-online-safety-and-reporting-the-online-crimes-to-police/>

A case study of online child sexual violence against girls that lasted over ten years:

<https://www.theleader.com.au/story/6787413/jonathan-doig-charged-with-directing-and-viewing-images-of-child-abuse-in-philippines/>

A case study from Denmark:

<https://www.thelocal.dk/20180115/danish-police-announce-case-against-1000-for-distributing-sexually-sensitive-material>

A case study from Finland:

<https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11402452>