

PANDEMIC FUELLED RISE IN CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ONLINE: REPORT

Relevant for: Polity | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Children - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

The Global Threat Assessment report 2021, by WeProtect Global Alliance, launched on Tuesday, said COVID-19 had contributed to a significant spike in child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

WeProtect Global Alliance is a global movement of more than 200 governments, private sector companies and civil society organisations working together to transform the global response to child sexual exploitation and abuse online.

The report was a meta study that distils findings from multiple international studies on the issue. The findings show that in the past two years, the reporting of child sexual exploitation and online abuse has reached its highest level. "COVID-19 created a 'perfect storm' of conditions that fuelled a rise in child sexual exploitation and abuse across the globe," it stated.

"This sustained growth is outstripping our global capacity to respond. Child sexual abuse remains a chronically underfunded issue," said Iain Drennan, executive director, and Ernie Allen, chair, WeProtect Global Alliance, in their foreword.

The rise in child 'self-generated' sexual material is another trend that challenges the existing response, with the Internet Watch Foundation observing a 77% increase in child 'self-generated' sexual material from 2019 to 2020.

As part of the report, a global study of childhood experiences of more than 5,000 young adults (aged 18 to 20) across 54 countries was done by Economist Impact. About 54 % of the respondents had experienced at least one online sexual harm incident during childhood. More than a third of respondents (34%) had been asked to do something sexually explicit online they were uncomfortable with during their childhood. Respondents who identified as transgender/non-binary, LGBQ+ and/or disabled were more likely to experience online sexual harms during childhood, it said. The report also featured a survey of technology companies that showed most were using tools to detect child sexual abuse material, but only 37% currently use tools to detect online grooming.

During the pandemic, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) indicated 106% increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation to its global CyberTipline. During the lockdown, there was a 95% rise in searches for child sexual abuse material, the NCMEC reported.

The report calls for prioritising prevention activities against abuse, creating safe online environments for children, besides calling on all with a role to protect children to work together to improve the response.

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