# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RESEARCH ON INCIDENCE, NATURE AND SCOPE OF ONLINE/CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN (OVAC), AND THE MECHANISMS THAT RESPOND TO CASES OF ONLINE/CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA

## Introduction

The digital/cyber landscape of Sri Lanka has been on a rapid transformation since the dawn of the new millennium, and virtually is on an accelerated growth since the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. Contemporary studies conducted in the Asia –Pacific, Americas and Europe have indicated that new forms of online/cyber abuse against children are on the rise such as cyber sexual exploitation, cyber bullying and extortion, online grooming and cyber/digitally enabled extremist/violent radicalization of children, among many others. In recent sporadic studies and statistics it has become evident that those types of cyber violence have been committed against the children of Sri Lanka over the span of the last decade. However, due to the lack of systematic studies on the issue, it has been hindering the policy makers and implementers from grasping the exact nature, scope and the impact of the problem. Therefore in 2019, the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs of Sri Lanka together with Save the Children International, World Vision Lanka and LEADS (project partner organizations) commissioned this research study on the **incidence, nature and scope of online violence against children, and the mechanisms that respond to cases of online violence against children in Sri Lanka.** This research is a part of a project supported by the GPEVAC that aims to end all forms of online violence against children in Sri Lanka.

This study has been based on three key objectives:

- To assess the incidence, magnitude and impact of online/cyber violence against children in Sri Lanka.

- To assess the nature and effectiveness of response and support mechanisms currently available for children in responding to incidents of online/cyber violence committed against them.

- To learn and incorporate the views and proposals of children on measures required to prevent online/cyber violence, and a responsive and impactful response mechanism, that addresses both the effective and efficient enforcement of the law, as well as provision of appropriate and effective psychosocial support.

- The research design and the research questions were developed in order to achieve the aforementioned three key objectives.

# Methodology

This research has employed a fusion of both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to grasp a clear picture of the issue of online/cyber violence against children in Sri Lanka. The original research design included a survey of 2400 children covering all 25 districts. However, due to the Covid 19 pandemic this design was reformed under a contingency plan. The largest portion of the data has been derived from a quantitative, one-to-one survey conducted with 1911 children covering all 25 districts of Sri Lanka (965 boys; 946 girls). Other tools included focus group discussions with children, key informant interviews with children and international experts cum national/provincial level stakeholders, and an intensive context/literature review cum legal gap analysis.

The research team together with the project partner organizations ensured that in the conduct of the research that the principles of 'no harm to children' and 'in the best interest of the child' were strictly observed. In order to ensure this all the personnel involved in the research were trained in child safeguarding and, perhaps for the first time in Sri Lanka, a Guideline on Conducting Research with Children was developed under the guidance of the Technical Working Group formed by the project partner organizations. Furthermore, a Child Risk Assessment Framework, especially designed for this research by the research team and the project partner organizations

has been employed. The research methodology received the approval of both the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, and the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.

# The Incidence, Nature and Scope of Online/Cyber Violence against Children (OVAC) in Sri Lanka

The findings of the study revealed that over 28% of children have experienced some kind of online violence. In other words **three out of every ten children** interviewed in the study have experienced some sort of online violence. Irrespective of gender all children have suffered from online violence; however girls (29%) have suffered slightly more from online violence compared to boys (27%). These online violence include receiving an indecent message (28%), receiving indecent links and advertisements 26% and having an indecent link/message being shared in a group. In addition, 27% of children have experienced cyber bullying and extortion while nearly 20% have had an indecent image of them being shared on the internet. The findings suggest a significant prevalence of online violence against children in Sri Lanka.

**Research on the incidence, nature and scope of online violence against children and the mechanisms that respond to cases of online violence against children.**

**03** out of **10** children who participated in the study have experienced some sort of online violence.
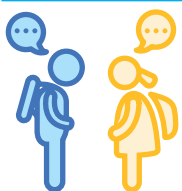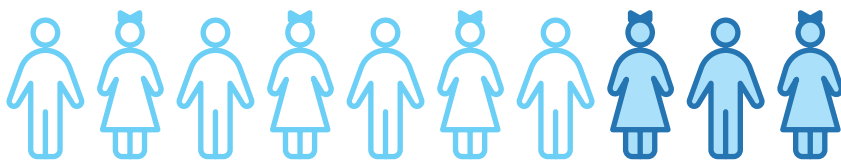
**24**% of children had confided in a friend about their experience of online violence instead of parents, teachers or adults.

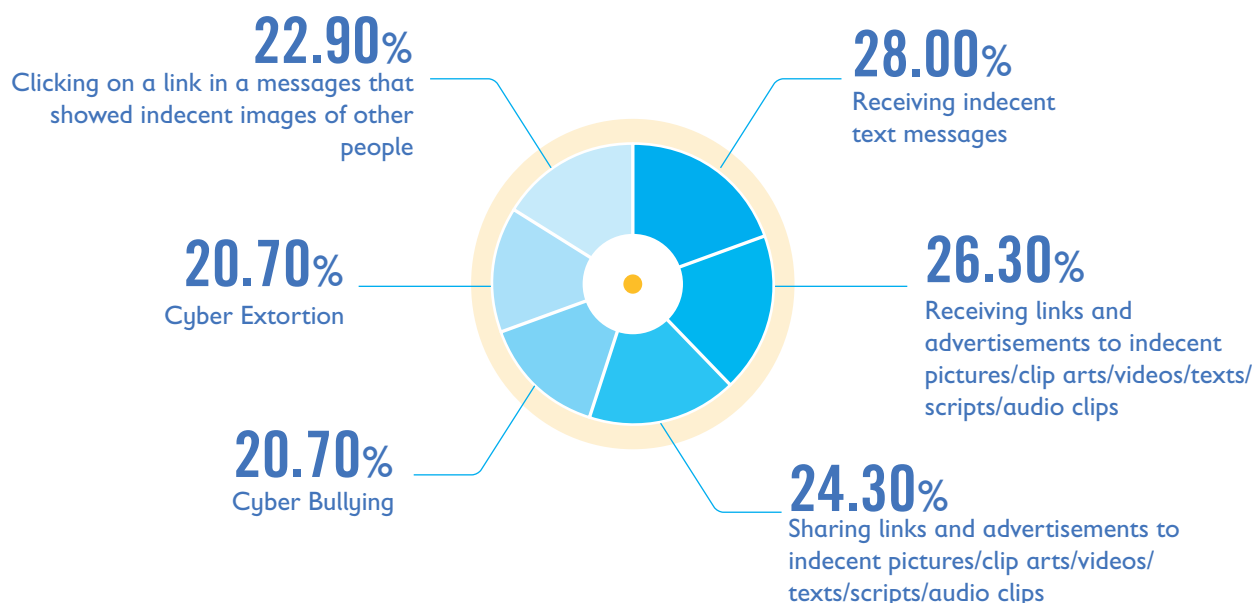More girls are victims of online violence compared to boys.

**29**%　　**27**%

**Types of Online Violence**

**22.90%**
Clicking on a link in a messages that showed indecent images of other people

**28.00%**
Receiving indecent text messages

**20.70%**
Cyber Extortion

**26.30%**
Receiving links and advertisements to indecent pictures/clip arts/videos/texts/scripts/audio clips

**20.70%**
Cyber Bullying

**24.30%**
Sharing links and advertisements to indecent pictures/clip arts/videos/texts/scripts/audio clips

Children have experienced online violence most while using Facebook (Boys – Nearly 74% / Girls – Nearly 58%), Instagram (Boys – Nearly 41% / Girls – Nearly 52%) and Twitter platforms (Boys – 25%/ Girls – Nearly 41%). This reveals that children using all social media platforms are vulnerable to online violence. Children are more likely to share an experience of online violence with a peer than an adult as the majority (nearly 81%) of children who have experienced violence had confided in a friend around his age about the incident. The children had rarely informed an adult about an instance of online violence and children identified generation gap and being afraid of being further victimized by adults deters them from revealing the experience of online violence to adults. Majority (61%) of the children who had experienced violence stated that they were too scared to complain to an authority. Twenty five children stated they were threatened with revealing their personal information if they reported to authorities. Sixteen children stated they were threatened with their life. Another fourteen children stated they were given gifts to keep the online violence as a secret.

The children and the key informants identified characteristics that makes children vulnerable to online violence. The gender of the child is a key characteristic as the finding revealed that girls have a higher tendency to experience online violence (29%) than boys. Another characteristic was lack of parental supervision. Children and key informants agreed that lack of parental supervision allows perpetrators to exploit children. Moreover, sharing personal data and pictures publicly was also seen as a characteristic. Children felt that sharing these information publicly could lead to online violence such as edited pictures and identity theft.

Children identified impacts to be interrelated and complex. The key impacts identified by children includes isolation from family and peers due to shock and shame , decrease in academic performance, mental health issues and changes in behavioural changes. The level of impact of online violence varies according to subjective factors such as the personality of children, family background, support available to children at home and schools.

# Awareness on Online/ Cyber Violence

Children stated that majority of parents (73%) find it difficult to supervise children's internet as they lack awareness of how internet works and how children can be exposed to online violence against children. They also added that parents also lack an understanding of how to take legal measures when children experience online violence (69%) and majority of the children stated they would not confide in a parent if they experience an online violence. Moreover, ninety five percent of children believe educators have awareness about online violence. However children stated that they would not confide in a an educator as educators often blame and victimize the child for the online violence (67%), as educators do not protect confidentiality and privacy of children (19%) and nearly 10% of children stated that their educators/ teachers would create issues at school, while nearly 9% said they are afraid of their educators/teachers.

**73**% of parents find it difficults to supervise children's use of internet as they lack awareness of how the internet works and how children can be exposed online violence against children.

**Characteristics that make children vulnerable to online violence.**

- Trusting people you meet in online platforms too much
- Sharing personal information publicly on social media platforms.
- Lack of awareness of online violence
- Lack of supervision by parents
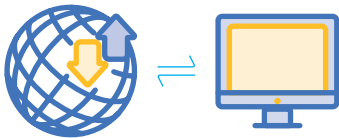
**71**% of children stated that internet service providers do not have a good understanding of online violence as they do very little to curb online violence. The key informants added to this criticism on two grounds; one is that the ISPs have failed to take responsivbiliy for the internet service they provide, and secondly the ISPs' lack of support to law enforcement authorities.

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# The Role of Mass Media

Children also commented on the role of mass media in the battle against online violence. Over eighty four percent of children stated Sri Lankan mass media is aware of online violence. Nearly sixty six percent of children stated that (1254) media do not report cases of online violence ethically. According to the children there are number of factors pointing to irresponsible reporting of online violence. Nearly 64% of children stated mass media organizations do not protect the identity of children while reporting and nearly 10% stated media organizations try to make profits by reporting online violence. Moreover, children stated Over 4% media organizations broadcast programmes that sexualizes children and another 4% stated media reports sometimes can lead to cyber bullying and further harm to victimized children.

of children stated that the media does not report cases of online violence ethically. Children felt that mess media does not protect the identity of children while reporting and they try to make profitby reporting online violence. In addition, children stated that media organizations broadcast programmes that sexualize children and such reports head to further harassment.

# Views of the Children regarding the Existing Legal Mechanisms

The study also explored the legal dimension of online violence against children in Sri Lanka. Findings suggest that majority of children (65%) found the existing laws against online violence to be inadequate and requires further improvements. The key informant also agreed with the premise and suggested to amend existing law to efficiently address online violence. Due to the inadequacy of law and efficient legal procedures 92% of children stated that they would not seek legal support when faced with online violence. They also identified other factors that deter children from seeking legal support such as fear of the perpetrator (3%), as they consider online violence to be less of a harm (38%), because taking legal can action can create issues in the future as legal procedures take a long time to resolve a case (31%) and as children try to resolve the issues by themselves (28%).

# Existing Technology Driven Response Mechanisms

In addition to the sociological and legal dimension the study explored the cyber security dimension of online violence against children. The findings revealed that Sri Lanka needs to take new and robust action to curb online violence. The key informants suggested that open source software's can be utilized to track down Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The study identified that the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) has taken many steps including establishing a cybercrime unit to fight OVAC and introducing a help line etc. However, further improvement has to be made to respond to OVAC efficiently and effectively.

# Recommendations:

### Policy Reforms and Civic Awareness

The findings of the study reveal that online violence against children has become a serious issue in Sri Lanka. In this light, the study recommends to adopt multiple measures to mitigate and eradicate online violence against children in Sri Lanka. These include introducing an educational reform to include lessons on online violence to Civic Studies subject and making it a mandatory subject at least up to GCE O/L classes, introducing new online awareness raising programmes, increase the awareness of parents and increasing the sensitivity of educators on handling cases of online violence.

# Legal Reforms

In addition, to rectify the gaps in the legal system this study suggests that the Sustainable Development Council of Sri Lanka (SDCSL) to formulate relevant State policies and address the SDG targets related to OVAC, to include a specific section on OVAC to National Policy on Child Protection (NCPA, October 2019), to establish a uniform system and structure and coordination among the relevant agencies and authorities, harmonization of terminology used to OVAC, adopting the Budapest Convention, disseminating Conventions and Agreements, national policies on OVAC to all the levels of implementation authorities, SLCERT must function as the focal point for cyber-security in Sri Lanka should introduce systematic categorization of their complaints by age and gender, introducing hard law instruments to protect child victims, technical and legal revision of Penal Code sections: 286A, 286B, 288A, 288B, 308, 308A, 360B, 360C, 365, 365A and 365B, 368, implementing recommendations of The National Plan of Action for Children in Sri Lanka (2016-2020), incorporating offences related to child pornography, commercial sexual exploitation of children, cyber-enticement, online grooming, cyber-sexual harassment, cyber bullying and