

Through the Lens

Insights into Image-Based Child Sexual Violence

With a Regional Focus on Central Asia



Project Lens

Project Lens is an initiative led by Protect Children in collaboration with the University of Eastern Finland and with support from child-rights organisations in Central Asia, which aims to understand and prevent emerging forms of image-based sexual violence against children. Project Lens will build a robust knowledge base to inform and implement a comprehensive, system-wide response to image-based child sexual violence.

Learn more: <https://www.protectchildren.fi/en/project-lens>



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Glossary of Terms

The language we use to discuss child sexual violence is important. Our terminology reflects definitions drawn from a range of sources, including the *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2nd Edition)*.¹ We recognise that language evolves over time, and we are committed to continuously reviewing and updating the terms we use.

Child Sexual Violence	Any physical or virtual act of a sexual nature, either completed or attempted, perpetrated against a child (anyone under the age of 18) by an adult, including for exploitative purposes. ² This is an umbrella term encompassing child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. ³
Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)	Any visual depiction of child sexual abuse or material that sexualises a child. This includes images, videos, livestreams, or any other material, and can feature real or synthetic children.
Image-Based Child Sexual Violence	Any act related to the non-consensual creation, possession, distribution, or threatened distribution of sexual images, videos, or other visual material depicting a person under the age of 18.
Peer-on-Peer Image-Based Child Sexual Violence	A form of harmful sexual behaviour where image-based child sexual violence takes place between children of a similar age or stage of development. ⁴
Child-on-Child Image-Based Child Sexual Violence	A form of harmful sexual behaviour where image-based child sexual violence takes place between children of any age or stage of development. ⁵
Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)	Developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive. ⁶
Child Sexual Exploitation	The coercion, manipulation, or deception of a child into sexual activity in exchange for money, goods, services, attention, or other benefits. ⁷
Sexual Extortion of Children	The blackmailing of a child to extort sexual acts or material, money, or other benefits from them. For example, under the threat of sharing sexualised images, real or synthetic, of that or another child. ⁸
Livestreamed CSAM	Sexual violence against a child, or explicit acts performed by a child who is forced, extorted, or deceived into participating, broadcast in real time.
AI-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material (AI-CSAM)	Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) that was either edited or fully created with the help of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI).
AI-Generated Sexual Images of Children	When AI-CSAM is created by children, we refer to it as AI-generated sexual images or videos of children.
Self-Taken Sexual Images of Children	Sexual images or videos created by children themselves, sometimes referred to as “nudes”. When created and shared consensually between children of a similar age or stage of development, such content is not necessarily illegal or harmful.
Self-Taken CSAM	When the creation, use, or dissemination of self-taken sexual images of children involves an adult or a child of a non-similar age or stage of development, it constitutes self-taken CSAM and is considered child sexual violence.

Introduction

Globally, an estimated one in eight children is a victim of image-based child sexual violence.⁹ Child sexual violence can have lasting effect on children, families, and communities. When sexual violence is recorded, shared, or used to threaten or control a child, it becomes a complex and ongoing form of abuse that subjects victims and survivors to repeated victimisation.

This report examines the growing and evolving threat of image-based child sexual violence. It seeks to deepen understanding of how this form of abuse manifests, to amplify the voices and experiences of victims and survivors, and to highlight the urgent need for improved prevention and protection measures in Central Asia and beyond.

Definition

Image-based child sexual violence refers to any act related to the non-consensual creation, possession, distribution, or threatened distribution of sexual images, videos, or other visual material depicting a person under the age of 18.

This includes real and synthetic or altered material, whether recorded, livestreamed, or generated, and whether shared through digital or offline means. It also covers acts such as coercing or blackmailing a child to create sexual content.

Project Lens aims to understand and respond to the rapidly changing landscape of image-based child sexual violence. Recognising the global data gaps in this field, the project focuses on generating new, context-specific research on child sexual violence in Central Asia, a region where up-to-date and representative data remain scarce.^a

This report explores the **experiences of victims and survivors** of image-based child sexual violence, based on responses to a global survey. It identifies **key global trends and emerging threats**, including the normalisation of early exposure to sexual content online, the escalation of peer-on-peer abuse, and the diversification of image-based sexual harms driven by new technologies. We also explore the commercialisation and the hybridisation of harms. Finally, it focuses on **Central Asia, the regional focus of Project Lens**, to examine the current situation, challenges, and needs.

Together, these insights aim to strengthen understanding, inform prevention efforts, and support the global fight against image-based child sexual violence.

^a Project Lens focuses on the following countries located in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Experiences of Victims and Survivors

To understand the threat and impact of image-based child sexual violence, it is important to listen to the experiences of **those who have been directly impacted**. We explore the experiences of **3,958 victims and survivors of image-based child sexual violence** who responded to the Global Our Voice Survivor Survey.

Methodology

The **Global Our Voice Survivor Survey**, conducted by Protect Children with support from the Justice Initiative, aims to amplify the voices of adult survivors of childhood sexual violence. Participants are recruited online to voluntarily answer the anonymous survey. The survey has received nearly 25,000 responses in 35 languages.^b

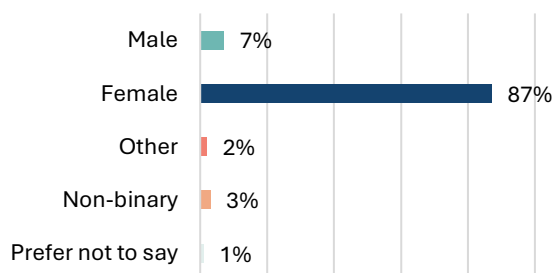
We focus on 3,958 respondents who experienced one or more of the following forms of image-based abuse: forced exposure to sexual acts or material^c (n=2,789, 70%), online genital exposure^d (n=1,213, 31%), and production of sexual images or videos^e (n=1,124, 28%). This group makes up 16% of the total 24,811 responses to the survey, collected between 4 November 2023 and 28 October 2025.

Insights from survivors

Demographics

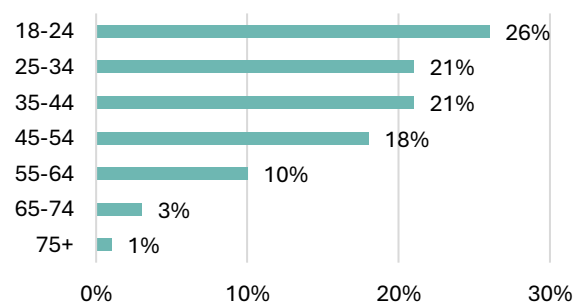
Gender

A majority of respondents are women, consistent with all forms of abuse in the survey.



Age

Many respondents are under 34 years, highlighting the growing impact on young generations.



^b A detailed overview of the survey methodology can be found here: <https://www.suojellaanlapsia.fi/en/post/our-voice-global-report>.

^c Forced exposure to sexual material was defined in the survey as: "You watched sexually explicit acts or material due to the other person(s) allowing it to happen or asking/manipulating/forcing you".

^d Online genital exposure was defined in the survey as: "The other person(s) showed their genitals virtually (i.e. online/on a live video chat/in a picture or video) or you showed your genitals to the other person(s) virtually due to the other person(s) allowing it to happen or asking/manipulating/forcing you".

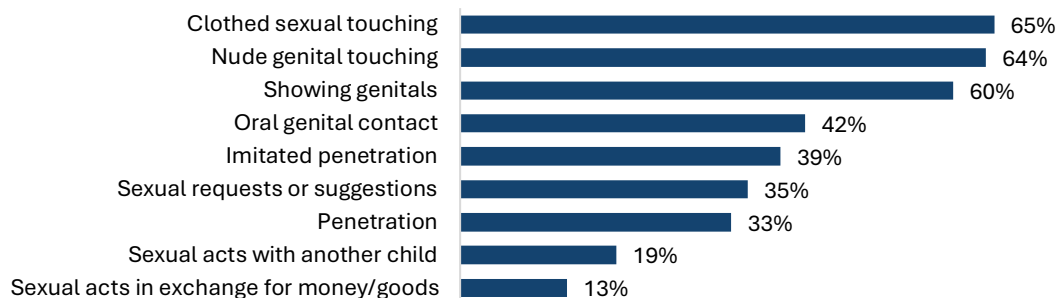
^e Production of sexual images or videos was defined in the survey as: "The other person(s) produced images or videos during the abuse or you produced images or videos of yourself nude or in a sexually explicit manner due to the other person(s) allowing it to happen or asking/manipulating/forcing you".

Age at first instance of abuse. 67% of survivors of image-based sexual violence reported being first subjected to violence before the age of 10, 35% when they were 3-6 years old.

Characteristics of violence

Repeated abuse. 93% of survivors of image-based sexual violence experienced abuse on more than one occasion, reaching 95% among non-binary/other survivors.

Intersection with other forms of sexual violence. Image-based child sexual violence often occurs in conjunction with other forms of sexual abuse. The most common forms that survivors reported, on top of the image-based abuse, were clothed sexual touching (65%), touching of nude genitals (64%), and exposure of genitals (60%).

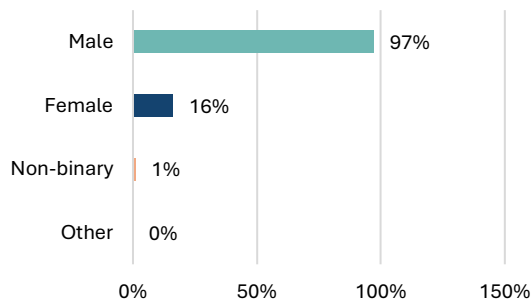


10% of survivors said that the sexual violence was related to trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation, rising to 14% among non-binary/other survivors.

About the perpetrators

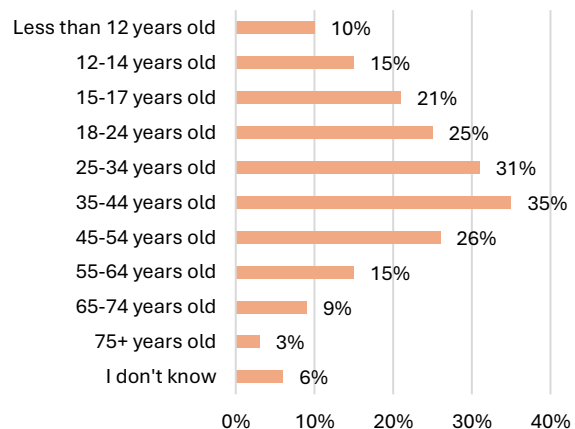
Perpetrator gender

The majority of perpetrators were male, which is consistent across all forms of child sexual violence in the survey.



Perpetrator age

The perpetrator was under 18 in nearly half of cases, highlighting the scale of peer-on-peer image-based child sexual violence.



Number of perpetrators. 58% of survivors said the violence involved several perpetrators.

Proximity of the perpetrator. 92% of survivors reported the perpetrator was someone they knew from before. 54% indicated the perpetrator was from their social circles, including a relative, a friend, family friend or other close person, and nearly half of respondents (47%) reported the perpetrator lived in the same household. 17% met the perpetrator online.

Long-term impact of image-based child sexual violence

Similarly to other forms of child sexual violence, image-based abuse has profound and devastating long-term impacts, with 91% of survivors reporting negative physical, psychological and social consequences. Many survivors report having experienced multiple different long-term consequences as a result of the sexual violence, with each survivor reporting 6.5 consequences on average.

A survivor shared: *“He took photos during the abuse, which he shared with others. This was in the late 80s, so the photos were sent by mail to his “friends”. The pictures have recently been scanned and digitized.”*

Long-term impacts differ by gender

Survivors of image-based child sexual violence reported high rates of depression (69%), anxiety disorder or panic attacks (69%), and difficulty in forming and maintaining personal relationships (66%). The long-term impacts faced by survivors differ by gender.

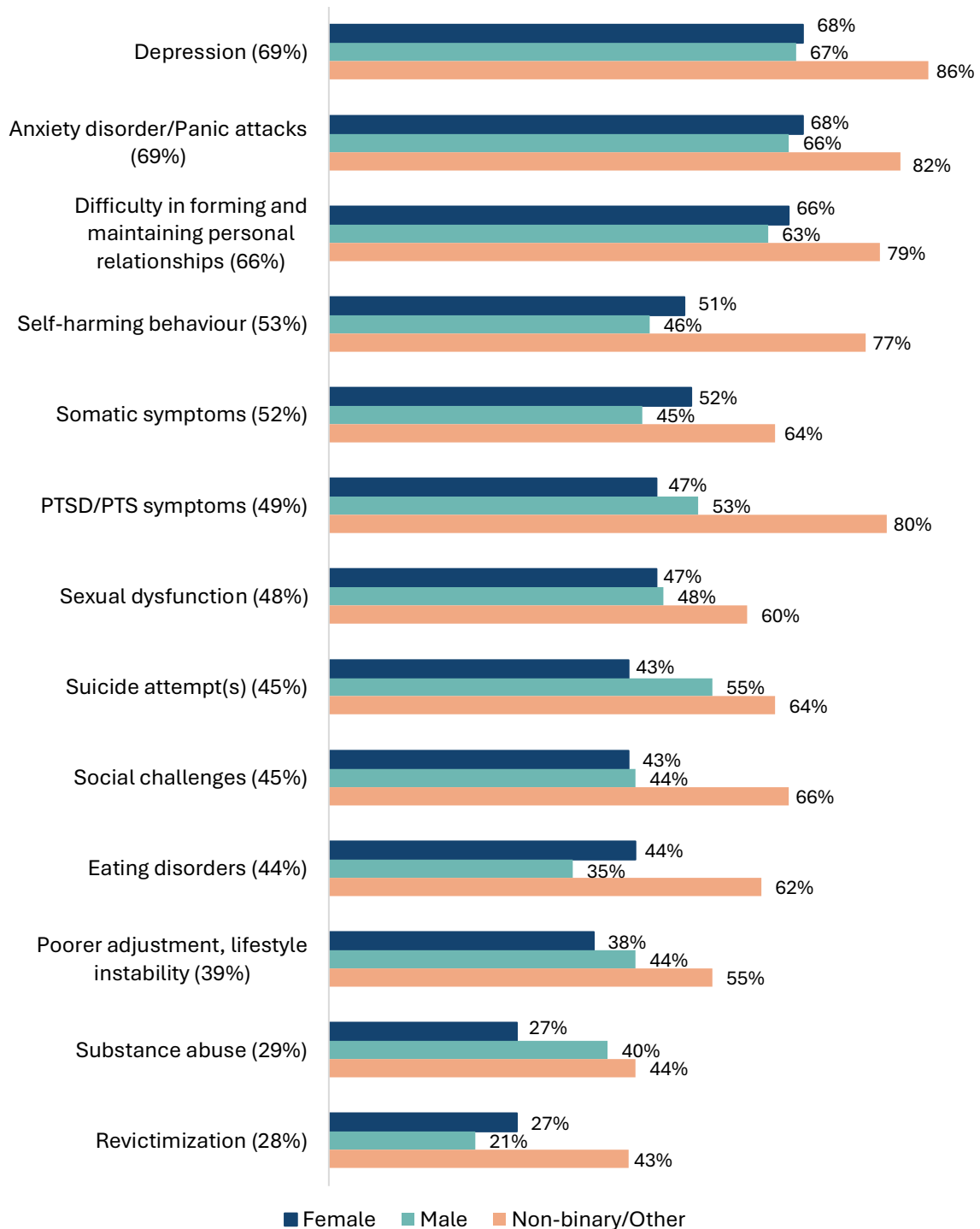
- **Female survivors** reported slightly higher rates of self-harming behaviour, somatic symptoms and eating disorders than male survivors.
- Compared to female survivors, **male survivors** were slightly more likely to report suicide attempts, PTSD/PTS symptoms, and substance abuse.
- **Non-binary/other survivors** reported consistently higher percentages across all consequences, including depression, PTSD/PTS symptoms, anxiety, self-harming behaviour and suicide attempts, compared to other genders.

These findings highlight the need for an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to research, prevention initiatives, and survivor support.

The full data presented in this report can be found in the Data Annex, available here: <https://www.protectchildren.fi/en/post/through-the-lens-report>

Long-term consequences of image-based child sexual violence by gender

The graph presents the long-term consequences of image-based child sexual violence in order of overall prevalence, based on the combined responses of all genders. It also shows how the prevalence of each consequence varies by gender. Respondents could choose multiple consequences.



Global Trends and Emerging Threats in Image-Based Child Sexual Violence



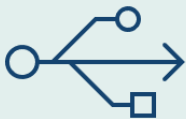
1. Normalisation of Early Exposure to Sexual Content

Children are growing up in online spaces saturated with sexualised and explicit content, where constant exposure is reshaping their perceptions of what is normal and acceptable.



2. Escalation of Peer-on-Peer Image-Based Sexual Violence

As exposure to sexual content becomes normalised, peer-on-peer and child-on-child image-based sexual violence is increasing.



3. Diversification of Image-Based Child Sexual Violence

Rapid technological innovation has multiplied the forms image-based child sexual violence can take, from AI-generated imagery to live-streamed abuse and virtual exploitation.



4. Commercialisation of Image-Based Child Sexual Violence

The production and circulation of CSAM is increasingly driven by financial gain, with offenders purchasing, trading, and extorting sexual content involving children.



5. Hybridisation of Harms

Image-based child sexual violence now overlaps with other online harms, including radicalisation, organised abuse networks, and digital coercion.

1. Normalisation of Early Exposure to Sexual Content

Children are growing up in online spaces saturated with sexualised and explicit content, where constant exposure is reshaping their perceptions of what is normal and acceptable.

Children's lives are increasingly lived online, where they socialise, play, express themselves, and learn about the world. Within these digital spaces, sexual content has become widely available and easily accessible. Technology companies profit from high monetisation and retention rates of sexual content, encouraging its creation and circulation even on platforms frequented by children. Sexual content extends beyond pornography, encompassing implicit sexual references, age-inappropriate and violent material, and sexualised representations commonly used in various forms in advertisements, social media, messaging apps, games, marketplaces, and video platforms. Exposure to age-inappropriate or violent sexual content is increasingly discussed as an adverse childhood experience – a traumatic event that imposes long-term negative impact on the child.^{10 11}

Routine exposure to sexual content contributes to the **normalisation of age-inappropriate sexual material and behaviour** among children.

Children encounter age-inappropriate and violent sexual content online

The average age of exposure to pornography among children is 13 years old,¹² with most seeking it intentionally, and nearly one in three encountering it accidentally.¹³ Adolescents view pornography more often on mainstream social media and messaging platforms than on dedicated pornography sites.¹⁴

A survivor of image-based child sexual violence, who experienced abuse for the first time between the ages of 3 and 6, shared the following: *“Pornography is very readily available to minors, and in my case, it entered my life.”*

Early and frequent exposure to pornography increases the likelihood of encountering harmful, violent, and/or illegal content, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Around half of children who have seen pornography report exposure to at least three forms of sexual violence such as degradation, aggression, and coercion.¹⁵ An analysis of three mainstream adult content websites revealed that one in eight titles shown to first-time users describe sexual violence.¹⁶

Algorithms amplify age-inappropriate content and behaviour

Algorithmic recommendations on mainstream platforms further amplify this exposure. Algorithms optimise for engagement by analysing users' emotions and behaviours, often leading children toward increasingly shocking and violent content. With time, algorithms may resort to delivering not only increasingly tailored, but also shocking, age-inappropriate, or violent sexual content to stimulate engagement.¹⁷

Algorithms may turn one encounter with age-inappropriate or violent sexual material into an **endless stream of harmful content**. This creates a significant algorithmic bias – an impression of some content being more prevalent and normal than it is. Over time, **algorithmic bias and desensitisation** may contribute to risky online behaviours.

Many children consider it normal to exchange self-taken sexual images

Exposure to sexual content and its normalisation have also contributed to shifting norms of youth dating culture, with many children taking and sharing self-taken sexual images. In a survey by Thorn, 27% of children aged 9-17 and nearly 40% of children aged 13-17 consider it normal to share self-taken sexual images with each other.¹⁸ 11% of children aged 9-17 report to have shared their own sexual images.¹⁹

While this content often originates from consensual relationships as part of normal sexual development, significant harms emerge if the content is reshared without consent, if it is shared with an adult or a child of a different age or stage of development, or if it is taken as a result of catfishing, grooming, coercion, or extortion.²⁰ Alarmingly, one in three children who have shared self-taken sexual content report that they believe the recipient was an adult.²¹ In 2024, the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) found that 91% of reports involved self-taken imagery, 94% of which depicted girls.²²

Children commonly face other unwanted sexual interactions online

Beyond exposure to explicit imagery, more than one in ten children globally have experienced non-consensual sexting, unwanted sexual requests, or exposure to sexualised communication from peers or adults.²³

The **pervasiveness of sexual content and interaction in online spaces** that children visit daily lowers their defences, distorts perceptions of consent and intimacy,²⁴ encourages **risky behaviours**,²⁵ and increases their **vulnerability** to image-based sexual violence.²⁶

2. Escalation of Peer-on-Peer Image-Based Sexual Violence

As exposure to sexual content becomes normalised, peer-on-peer and child-on-child image-based sexual violence have sharply increased.²⁷

Research shows that requests for sexual images, and their subsequent misuse, most often come from other children rather than adults.²⁸ The normalisation of sharing sexual content, combined with gendered expectations and online misogyny, has fuelled a rise in harmful sexual behaviours such as non-consensual image sharing, digital coercion, sexual extortion, and misuse of artificial intelligence (AI).

One in seven children have non-consensually reshared sexual images

Nearly one in four children aged 9-17 report having seen non-consensually reshared self-taken sexual images of other children, and one in seven admit to having non-consensually reshared them.²⁹ Motivations include peer pressure, pranking, social validation, or revenge, often without understanding the seriousness of the act.³⁰ Misconceptions about consent and accountability remain widespread, with nearly 40% of children blaming the victim rather than the resharer.³¹ Beyond severe psychological effects, resharing increases victims' risk of further sexual exploitation, including by adult offenders.

Gender norms play a significant role in the resharing of sexual images

Girls face greater pressure to share sexual images and harsher consequences when they are shared without consent.³² Some report that even rumours of such images can cause reputational harm as severe as the images themselves.³³ As one survivor shared: *"When I was 12, an older classmate threatened me into letting him take nude pictures of me, then distributed the images."*

AI technologies are intensifying the issue

Around 13% of children have encountered, created, or shared AI-generated sexual images of children,³⁴ and in some countries up to 60% have used nudification software.³⁵ Such material can cause equally severe harm as other forms of online sexual violence. Boys and vulnerable children are more likely to be exposed.³⁶

According to a study by Internet Matters, **many children fear AI-altered images more than non-consensual resharing** due to loss of control, anonymity of offenders, and the risk that others may believe the fabricated material is real.³⁷

3. Diversification of Image-Based Child Sexual Violence

Rapid technological innovation has multiplied the forms image-based child sexual violence can take, from AI-generated imagery to live-streamed abuse and virtual exploitation.

New technologies have increased the ways of producing CSAM and sexual content of children. This can be attributed to the accessibility of these technologies, their growing sophistication, and legal frameworks that struggle to keep up with fast-paced technological development.

Live streaming of child sexual violence

Live streaming plays a significant role in the production and dissemination of CSAM. Between 2020 and 2022, nearly two thousand live-streaming platform users targeted over 270,000 children to view or produce live-streamed CSAM.³⁸ Previously, such abuse was constrained by limited access to expensive equipment or webcams. Today, the widespread use of smartphones and tablets, combined with the live-streaming features of social media, messaging apps, video platforms, and online games, has dramatically increased the risk. Now, live-streamed CSAM does not require a physical proximity of the offender, as perpetrators can coerce, trick, or extort children into streaming.³⁹ Live-streamed abuse is especially dangerous due to its hidden nature. Once it is over, there is little opportunity and evidence for platforms or law enforcement to investigate it.

AI-generated child sexual abuse material always harms children

AI-generated CSAM is harmful for many reasons. It victimises or revictimises children whose likenesses are used, it sustains demand for CSAM, it fuels cognitive distortions and harmful fantasies, it **hinders investigations and victim identification**, and it may increase the likelihood that a perpetrator will attempt to contact a child. Ultimately it **infringes on the rights of the child**.^{40 41 42}

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly being misused to create CSAM, both through the modification of existing CSAM or non-sexual images of real children, and through the generation of entirely new content.⁴³ In 2024, the IWF reported a 380% increase in reports containing AI-generated CSAM compared to the previous year.⁴⁴ Generative AI tools are often trained on real images of children, and some training databases have even been found to contain CSAM.⁴⁵ It has become nearly impossible to distinguish AI generated imagery, which severely hinders investigations and victim identification.⁴⁶

A survivor shared: *“Because generative AI can easily generate large quantities of images that are indistinguishable from real photos, anyone can become a victim of fake nude images, obscene images, or sextortion, and it's easy to become a perpetrator. I believe that this alone makes it necessary to mandate the display of generative AI images, and I hope that more people will learn about this issue, think about it, and speak out.”*

Image-based child sexual violence is permeating eXtended reality

Immersive technologies such as eXtended reality are creating new risks for child safety. Augmented and Mixed Reality, which integrate digital content into real-world environments, can be misused to view, create, livestream, and disseminate sexually abusive depictions of real or synthetic children.⁴⁷ Virtual Reality, which immerses users in fully digital environments, presents risks of grooming and sexual extortion within its interactive social spaces.⁴⁸

The immersive nature of these technologies, combined with lifelike interactions and blurred boundaries between the real and virtual worlds, can intensify the psychological trauma experienced by victims.⁴⁹ In 2024, British authorities investigated the first reported case of child rape in the Metaverse, where the victim displayed trauma comparable to that of children subjected to contact sexual abuse.⁵⁰

Diversified means of CSAM production facilitate sexual extortion

Altogether, the expanding range of technologies used to produce CSAM have intensified the risk of sexual extortion. Sexual extortion involves coercing or blackmailing children to extort sexual acts or material, money, or other benefits from them.⁵¹ Offenders frequently threaten to share real or fabricated sexual images of the victim to force compliance.⁵² With the use of AI, offenders can now manipulate or generate realistic sexual images of children, making sexual extortion easier to carry out and further increasing the scale and severity of this abuse.

A survivor shared: *“When I was 15, I had an online partner who, at one point, pressured me to send him sexual photos. He imposed very extreme fetishes involving degradation, and once he blackmailed me, saying that if I didn't delete our chat, he would send my photos to my mother.”*

One in five adolescents report having been victims of sexual extortion.⁵³ Boys and LGBTQI+ children face elevated risks, partly due to higher likelihood to engage in communication with strangers and sexting.^{54 55} Sexual extortion is a deeply traumatic experience that often causes intense fear, shame, and distress, and may lead to isolation, depression, self-harming behaviour, or suicide.⁵⁶

4. Commercialisation of Image-Based Child Sexual Violence

The production and circulation of image-based sexual abuse are increasingly driven by financial gain, with offenders purchasing, trading, and extorting sexual content involving children.

Image-based child sexual violence increasingly acquires transactional and commercial elements due to, among other things, the growing demand for tailored content, technological advancements, and access to children online.

Offenders purchase customised synthetic and real CSAM

Diversification of technological means to produce and distribute CSAM has increased opportunities in exchange and trading, allowing offenders to access material they cannot find online or do not have the skills to produce. Offenders pay for personalised scenarios of child sexual abuse on Metaverse,⁵⁷ specific AI-generated content,⁵⁸ and directed live-streamed sexual abuse.⁵⁹ Alarmingly, there have been reports of children generating and selling AI-generated CSAM.^{60 61}

An ability to access and purchase **customised CSAM commodifies it in the eyes of offenders**. This makes it increasingly difficult for offenders to acknowledge its violent nature and impact on children, strengthening cognitive distortions, escalating severity of viewed CSAM, and increasing the risk of other forms of abuse.⁶²

Virtual goods escalate the risk of sexual extortion and commercial exploitation

Offenders also record or extort self-taken or livestreamed child sexual abuse material directly from children online by offering in-platform gifts, currencies, and items in social media, messengers, and online games.⁶³ These transactions have a very discreet nature, making them challenging to prevent and detect. Once a child has shared one image, offenders may turn to blackmailing, extorting more material. A survivor shared in the Global Our Voice Survivor Survey: *“Private video recordings were made, some of which were watched by the users themselves or lent/sold. Later on, there were also live-streams, and I was sold online to adults who then participated in the abuse in real life.”*

Virtual goods or items provided by online platforms **enable and gamify the production and sharing of self-taken child sexual abuse material**, making it very difficult for the child-victim to understand the serious nature of the situation.

5. Hybridisation of Harms

Image-based child sexual violence now overlaps with other online harms, such as radicalisation, organised abuse networks, and digital coercion, creating complex and multifaceted threats to children's safety.

Adolescents, particularly boys, face heightened risks of radicalisation and perpetrating image-based sexual violence against their peers.^{64 65 66} One of the most alarming developments is the hybridisation of child sexual abuse, exploitation, terrorism, and far-right extremism within violent online networks known as “The Com”. These groups glorify violence and seek to destabilise society through the exploitation of vulnerable populations, especially children.⁶⁷

In the complex social and political climate of the online environment, **other harms intersect with child sexual violence**, surging risks for child safety.

In 2024, NCMEC received over 1,300 reports linked to a violent online group, representing a 200% increase from the previous year.⁶⁸ The Com operates internationally, primarily within online games, gaming-related platforms, and messaging apps with community features.⁶⁹ Offenders groom and lure children off-platform, then coerce them into acts such as drug use, animal torture, self-harm, sexual violence, and even suicide or murder.^{70 71} Perpetrators exert extreme control over victims, enforce loyalty through intimidation, and share personal data with other offenders.⁷²

Violent online networks and the cycle of exploitation

A core element of the network's operations is forcing victims to livestream or record abuse, producing some of the most egregious CSAM found online.⁷³ This material is later used to doxx^f and blackmail victims, trapping them in cycles of ongoing exploitation.⁷⁴ Some victims are subsequently recruited into the network, perpetuating the cycle of harm.⁷⁵

The structure, secrecy, and psychological manipulation within such networks make intervention and victim recovery extremely difficult. These cases highlight the urgent need for enhanced cross-sector collaboration and specialised capacity-building among professionals to detect, disrupt, and respond to these evolving forms of abuse.

^f Doxxing refers to the process of harvesting and disseminating someone's personal information to inflict harm.

Briefing: Child Sexual Violence in Central Asia

Central Asia, specifically Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, is the primary regional focus for Project Lens. It is a diverse and quickly developing region with a population of over 83 million people, that faces complex challenges of child sexual violence. While this chapter aims to provide background information about child sexual violence in the region, we acknowledge the differences between these countries and the need for in-depth country-specific analysis.

In order to understand the landscape of child sexual violence in **Central Asia**, Project Lens has established a **strong collaboration with expert child-rights organisations in the region**. Project Lens aims to co-produce innovative research with local stakeholders, guided by their first-hand experience and knowledge.

There is a lack of up-to-date data on child sexual violence in Central Asia

Available international resources commonly combine Central Asia with adjacent regions, hindering access to disaggregated data.^{76 77} An estimated prevalence of sexual violence against children in the region varies from 6% to 28% for girls and from 3% to 15% for boys.⁷⁸ National resources are scarce and suffer from under-reporting, which, among other things, stems from the profound societal shame and stigma related to sexual violence and low trust in law enforcement and confidentiality of reporting.⁷⁹ The lack of reliable data is also a result of the government control and political sensitivities related to sexual violence.⁸⁰

Gendered dynamics have a strong impact on child sexual violence

Existing studies report a high rate of gender-based violence in the region, highlighting unique challenges related to early marriages and bride kidnapping, often interlinked with sexual violence against girls.^{81 82} Sexual violence against children is frequently enshrouded in stereotypes and strong victim-blaming sentiments.⁸³ Pervasiveness of gendered roles, expectations of masculinity, and homophobia silence experiences of boys.⁸⁴ Altogether, rigid gender norms negatively impact victimisation, hindering disclosure, reporting, and access to support among victims and survivors.

Child sexual violence in Central Asia intersects with other pressing issues

Patterns of labour migration caused by the levels of poverty and the related phenomenon of parental absence escalate risks of victimisation for children.⁸⁵

Image-based child sexual violence in Central Asia mirrors global patterns

With the increasing digitalisation of children's lives, children globally face threats of sexual abuse and exploitation online. While the prevalence and nature of specific risks vary between countries, the borderless nature of the internet and the widespread absence of effective safety measures enable similar trends to emerge worldwide. Central Asia is no exception, and, despite limited data, available evidence indicates the rise of similar patterns of image-based child sexual violence in the region.

It is important to highlight the politicised nature of discussions related to online child safety in Central Asia, its intersection with restrictions of the right to freedom of expression and information, and impact on the lack of data.^{86 87 88} The access to some online games, social media platforms, messengers, and websites, including adult content pages, in the region is limited.

Increasing exposure to age-inappropriate sexual content among children. Existing evidence,^{89 90 91} and the international nature of online trends signify that children in Central Asia are also faced with an abundance of age-inappropriate and violent sexual content online, which affects their wellbeing and behaviour.

Escalation of peer-on-peer image-based sexual violence. Reports of sexual extortion and non-consensual image resharing perpetrated by adolescents have appeared in news outlets in Kazakhstan,^{92 93} Kyrgyzstan,⁹⁴ and Uzbekistan.⁹⁵

Diversification of image-based child sexual violence. There have been cases of new forms of image-based child sexual violence involving virtual exploitation in Kazakhstan,⁹⁶ Kyrgyzstan⁹⁷, and Uzbekistan⁹⁸.

Commercialisation of image-based child sexual violence. In 2014, ECPAT International reported that the unique challenges faced by Central Asia as a region create a heightened risk for commercial sexual exploitation of children, including its image-based forms.⁹⁹

Hybridisation of harms. While there is no present indication of The Com network permeating Central Asia, these countries have been facing other issues related to youth violent extremism and radicalisation, highlighting the need to closely monitor this threat.¹⁰⁰

Next Steps

Image-based sexual violence has become an **acute threat to children's wellbeing and safety**. The pervasive online element in image-based forms of sexual abuse and exploitation has turned it into a **borderless and international crime** that affects children regardless of their location.

The complex nature of the online environment combined with the lack of child safety mechanisms in existing and emerging technologies have escalated risks of image-based sexual violence, presenting such challenges as **1)** the normalisation of exposure to sexual content among children, **2)** the escalation of peer-on-peer image-based sexual violence, **3)** the diversification of image-based sexual violence through emerging technologies, **4)** the growing commercialisation, and **5)** the hybridisation of harms.

The novel nature and the rapid evolution of image-based sexual violence against children hinder effective data collection and timely development of prevention and support resources. With strong support from child-rights organisations in Central Asia, Project Lens will conduct comprehensive research on child sexual abuse and exploitation in the region, addressing this pressing gap.



Listening to the voices of survivors of child sexual violence.

Project Lens will develop and launch a new survey exploring experiences of survivors of child sexual violence and its image-based forms in Central Asia, by listening directly to their voices and wisdom.



Exploring experiences of parents and caregivers.

Project Lens will conduct interviews with affected parents and caregivers in select Central Asian countries to explore the social, physical, psychological, financial, and practical challenges faced by the whole family.



Investigating experiences of frontline staff.

Project Lens will also conduct interviews with professionals working with child victims in Central Asia to explore their attitudes, experiences, and perspectives on identifying, investigating, and addressing image-based child sexual violence.

The comprehensive insights collected from survivors, families, and frontline professionals will serve as a basis for the development of effective, tailored, and up-to-date intervention and prevention resources to protect children from sexual violence before it takes place.

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