

Protecting Vulnerable Groups

Understanding Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Kenya

Background

ZanaAfrica, with support from Safe Online, conducted a study to explore the online experiences of children and youth with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in Kenya. The research aimed to identify the risks they face online, particularly regarding online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), and to propose actionable solutions to mitigate these risks. The study engaged 88 children, 48 parents/caregivers, and 10 subject matter experts, alongside government and community stakeholders.

Key Findings

1. Platforms Used:

Children and youth with intellectual disabilities frequently use platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, and gaming sites for communication, learning, entertainment, and social networking.

2. Risks Identified: Participants highlighted significant risks, including online grooming, exposure to inappropriate content, cyberbullying, sexting, and livestreaming of abuse. Children with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable due to difficulties in recognizing exploitative behavior and communicating distress.

3. Caregiver Challenges:

Parents and caregivers often feel overwhelmed and under-equipped to monitor their children's online activities, especially given their demanding schedules and lack of awareness of available tools and resources.

Recommendations



For the Tech Industry:

- Ensure meaningful participation of children with disabilities in app development and safety measures.
- Improve age verification systems, strengthen content moderation, and develop child-friendly apps with universal design principles.
- Invest in targeted research to better understand and address OCSEA risks for children with intellectual disabilities.



For Government:

- Create awareness campaigns and strengthen laws, policies, and guidelines to combat OCSEA.
- Improve complaint, investigation, and justice mechanisms to ensure accessibility for children with disabilities.
- Provide integrated victim support services and implement teacher training on child protection and trauma-informed approaches.



For Communities:

- Develop co-created sensitization programs tailored for children with intellectual disabilities.
- Establish peer mentorship programs and safe community spaces (e.g., churches, schools) to support online safety.
- Enhance caregiver support through training on parental controls and safer online platforms.

Conclusion

The study underscores the urgent need for a multi-sectoral approach to protect children with intellectual disabilities from OCSEA. By implementing the recommended measures, Kenya can lead the way in ensuring a safer online environment for all children, particularly those with intellectual disabilities.