

Policy brief: Addressing Peer-to-Peer Online Sexual Violence Among Youth

Youth-Led Recommendations for Prevention and Response

Summary: The rise of social media platforms and increased internet usage have aggravated many issues, including peer-to-peer online sexual violence (POSV) among youth. POSV is manifested in various ways, such as non-consensual sharing of intimate images (revenge porn), sexual harassment through social media or messaging applications (Apps) and sexual coercion and threats for sexual favors.

The research conducted with 93 young people aged 13-19 from Albania, Canada and Kenya showed that 47% of respondents had witnessed or experienced something they would call online sexual violence and only half of them reported it to someone. Furthermore, 43% of the youth agreed that POSV is accepted and seen as normal behaviour among young people. Only one quarter of respondents reported having experienced online sexual violence from a peer, but 59% stated that a friend had experienced sexual harassment from another young person. The most common experience was having received sexual or nude photos or videos, followed by receiving inappropriate or sexual comments online.

“I think that online abuse usually leads to offline sexual abuse. Often children start fighting online and then continue fighting physically at school. Also, girls may be contacted online, attracted, and manipulated and later abused sexually offline”. – young boy from Tirana.

This policy brief outlines the impact of POSV on youth and proposes targeted strategies to mitigate and prevent it. Effective interventions, as proposed by young people themselves, require coordinated efforts among youth, family, educators, policymakers, and technology companies.

Findings

Impact of POSV on Youth

The consequences of POSV are severe and broad, affecting the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of young individuals. Among others youth listed:

- **Psychological trauma:** Stress, anxiety, and depression.
- **Social isolation:** Detachment from peers and school or community activities.
- **Self-harm:** Increased risks and incidents of self-injury and suicidal thoughts.

Youth-Definitions

Dissing- This is a situation whereby someone abuses you verbally or by using the comment section to talk ill about you.

Revenge porn – The youth shared that in this case it is mostly done by partners who have broken up and are bitter. The youths also noted that it can be an act whereby someone uses the Internet or AI to edit a porn video for it to look like you.

Sextortion / blackmail – This is whereby someone uses a nude picture of you, or with the help of AI creates a nude picture of you then starts threatening you to do something, especially giving money or they expose it to the public.



Youth reported experiencing significant psychological impacts from the things said to them online and from exposure to harmful content. The effects are even more severe when the violence also occurs offline.

Youth report that children aged 13 to 18 are at a higher risk of online sexual violence as they experiment more and are frequent internet users. They also expressed concerns about their safety while using any of the apps as they are susceptible to online sexual violence.

In Albania, youth are more likely to experience cyberbullying and psychological violence, with girls being more prone to sexual violence.

"I think that children often experience profound distress when they encounter mean comments on their posts, especially those related to body shaming and physical appearance – aspects that cannot easily change. It is crucial for us to provide strong support to peers who feel down due to such comments, recognizing that they may be struggling with depression and are at risk of harming themselves". – Young girl from Shupenza.

Current Challenges

- **Lack of Awareness and Education:** There is insufficient understanding among youth, parents, educators (teachers, psychosocial workers) and public about what constitutes POSV and its consequences. Also, information regarding online safety measures and prevention of abuse.
- **Inadequate Legal Frameworks:** Existing laws are not robust enough to address the nuances of online sexual violence among minors. The penal code in Albania has shortcomings regarding the classification of the exploitation and sexual abuse of children online as a crime.¹
- **Technological Barriers:** As per youth experience, social media platforms and messaging apps frequently lack adequate reporting mechanisms and effective content control measures, making them unsafe places to navigate.
- **Limited Support Systems and Lack of Information on Support Services:** In terms of resources and services available to individuals who have experienced sexual violence, issues remain insufficient funding, geographical gaps in service availability, lack of specialized care for diverse populations (e.g., children, immigrants), and barriers to accessing services due to stigma or discrimination. Youth participants from Albania declared that they don't have information on concrete support services that are provided to youth, victims of online abuse, even though there are existing hotlines, counselling services and shelters in the country.
- **Lack of profound and diverse research on POSV:** There remains a significant gap in comprehensive and varied research on the subject. Desk review findings show that the existing studies are limited in scope, often focusing on specific demographics or geographic regions, and fail to capture the full range of experiences and impacts. Additionally, there is a need for diverse research methodologies and approaches to better understand the prevalence, causes, and consequences of this form of violence.

¹ ECPAT International (2020). ECPAT (ECPAT Country Overview: Albania)

A Vision of an Online Safe Space from Albanian Youth

A place free of viruses, ads, scams, and bots. Without kids being addicted and wasting their time by sharing private information or abusing others' online private space. A place without hate speech, bullying, inappropriate photos and videos displaying violence and sexual materials.

Methodology: The research utilized a comprehensive and mixed methods methodology, starting with a thorough literature review to summarize existing findings. A Youth Advisory Council, consisting of six young people from Albania, Canada, and Kenya, guided the research design and implementation. Participatory youth workshops were held in three locations in December 2023: one rural and one urban location in Albania and one urban location in Kenya, involving 35 youth aged 13-18 and several adult advocates. These workshops facilitated introductions, established guidelines, and engaged participants in data gathering and analysis. In January 2024, Albanian youth conducted peer-to-peer research in their respective schools, further analyzing and summarizing findings in a concluding workshop in February 2024. A survey was distributed to 93 youth across the three countries (*41% were youth between 13-15, 49% were between 16-18 and 11% were 19 or older; 22% were male, 76% were female and 3% self-described*), focusing on their online experiences and digital safety ideas. Additionally, each country explored local risks and available resources, platforms, services, institutions, NGOs, and key stakeholders involved in child protection and youth support.

Albanian youth participating in the research

- ✓ 2 youth advisors
- ✓ 25 youth co-researchers
- ✓ 35 youth respondents in the online survey

Policy Recommendations: To prevent and address peer-to-peer online sexual violence, youth recommended the following actions:

Invest in mass education and awareness campaigns - Comprehensive Education Programs

- Develop public awareness campaigns targeting both youth and parents to foster a better understanding of POSV. Educate parents and families on risks that children face online, type of violences, first signs of violence, consequences, where to refer and report, institutions and services providing support for children and protection from violence.
- Prioritize advertisements which help informing youth on online sexual violence.
- Integrate digital literacy and online safety modules into school curricula, focusing on recognizing, preventing, and responding to online sexual violence.
- Develop youth positive development programs to increase youth self-esteem, sense of belonging, empathy, and engagement in healthy relationships with their peers.



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- Promote healthy relationships and sexuality education for children and youth. Include sexual education in school curricula at both primary and high school.

Strengthening Response and Protection Services:

- Update and enforce laws for social media and for child protection and rights to specifically address POSV, ensuring perpetrators are held accountable while providing protection and justice for victims.
- Collaborate with experts to create clear guidelines for schools and communities on handling POSV incidents.
- Provide specialized services, advice and counselling to youth victims and perpetrators.
- Establish or promote further dedicated helplines and online resources for victims, offering confidential counseling and legal advice.

Enhanced Online Safety Through Strategic Technology Partnerships:

- Partner with technology companies to improve the efficacy of reporting systems on social media and other online communication platforms.
- Also, to enforce privacy rules and notify users if an online material is inappropriate for children. As well, to detect and immediately delete online hate speech and harmful contents.

Community and Parental Engagement:

- Encourage parents to engage in open dialogues with their children about online behavior and sexual violence.
- Organize community workshops to equip parents and caregivers with the skills to monitor and guide their children's online activities.
- Engage community in awareness raising programs to prevent violence, as well as talking about it and reporting cases of abuse.

Project: Youth's Experience of Peer-to-Peer Sexual Violence Online, Social Norms and Youth-Led Recommendations for Prevention and Response: A Cross-Regional Study (February 2023-January 2025)

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