

Ending Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Girls: a Call for International Standards

A Case Study of Thomson Reuters' Pro Bono Partnership with Equality Now

OVERVIEW

Online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA) is growing at an alarming rate globally. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that online enticement of children globally has increased 98% since the start of the pandemic, and instances of forced labor and sex trafficking have skyrocketed. International and national laws have not kept pace with changing technology, and this needs to change. Using thorough legal research conducted through the Thomson Reuters Foundation's TrustLaw program, [Equality Now](#) and a team of lawyers examined the laws relating to OSEA, focusing on five countries. With the research in hand, Equality Now then partnered with the Thomson Reuters Social Impact Institute to bring the issue to the forefront with a breakthrough [report](#).

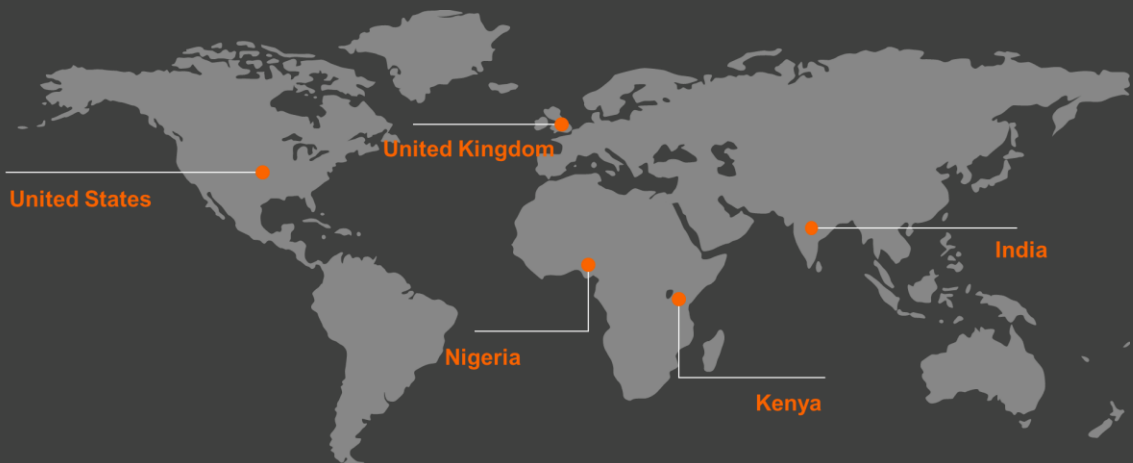
APPROACH

Scope: Examination of OSEA in five countries: Kenya, Nigeria, India, United States, United Kingdom

Quantitative research: Comparative evaluation of the laws related to OSEA and digital service regulations in each country, as well as regionally and internationally

Qualitative research: Interviews with children, adolescent girls and women who are survivors of OSEA, as well as subject matter experts from the U.S. Department of Justice, Centre for Cyber Victims Counselling, Center for Clinical Care and Clinical Research, and Eastern Africa: Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organized crime.

Extrapolation: Analysis of common trends and challenges across jurisdictions





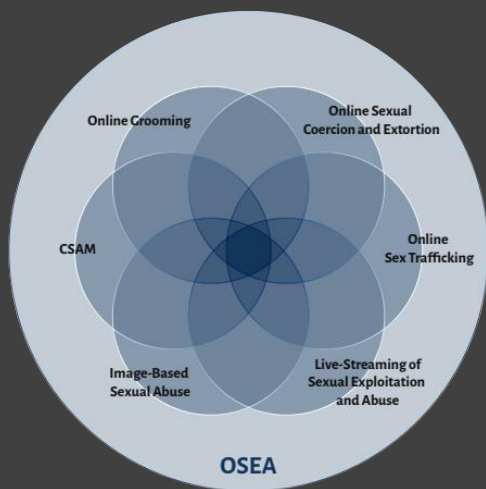
Challenges may arise in the identification and collection of digital evidence across jurisdictions. Cloud computing poses a particular challenge because cloud data can be fragmented and stored across multiple locations and multiple countries.

—United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



CHALLENGES

Defining OSEA: Online sexual exploitation and abuse takes many forms. There is no single, internationally accepted definition of OSEA. We adopted a broad definition that includes the following sexually exploitative and harmful behaviors:



Laws lag behind changing technology: New platforms for online engagement are continually being invented – from social media to smartphone apps to online gaming. Unfortunately, national and international laws have not kept pace with the ever-evolving nature of the internet, often leaving it up to internet communities to identify perpetrators. This has made it easier for online sexual predators to victimize with impunity. OSEA has spiked at an alarming rate as a result.

Digital service providers: The prevention and detection of OSEA tends to fall to individual service providers and platforms. There are no overarching rules to protect against OSEA, or even a consistent definition of harmful content. This has led to weak enforcement.

Jurisdiction: Online criminal activities are especially challenging to prosecute, because offenders, victims, and platforms may all be based in different countries. This presents issues regarding which country's laws apply in holding offenders responsible. In addition, international standards of cooperation surrounding multi-jurisdictional crimes are lacking.

Freedom vs. safety: Internet users have certain rights to free expression and privacy. However, these can sometimes be at odds with mechanisms designed to protect users from harm. Determining how to balance these conflicting interests by law is a challenge. This is especially true given the lack of a global definition of OSEA as well as adequate laws to criminalize it.



PROJECT RESULTS



Time

Thomson Reuters employees contributed more than 460 hours of service to this project.



Value

This totals more than \$90,000 in pro bono consulting services for Equality Now.



Growth

More than half of the consultants stated they were able to hone their expertise in a new way.

OUR WORK

Drawing on their deep legal and editorial expertise, the Thomson Reuters TrustLaw and Practical Law teams helped to craft a report, which put the survivor at the center to illustrate the impact of OSEA. This included legal analysis, country studies, and survivor stories.

Lending design and copywriting support, along with photography from the Reuters catalogue and promotion from Thomson Reuters communications experts, this multidisciplinary team invested over 460 hours of pro bono work to create a bold call to action that is now being heard by lawmakers and technology companies around the world.



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A Call for International Standards**

This project has been nominated for a TrustLaw Collaboration Award for exemplifying the power and practices of pro bono.

PROJECT IMPACT



Awareness raising: This project has enabled Equality Now to bring OSEA to the forefront of the online safety and security discussion. It has formed a basis for different stakeholders to come together and begin to talk about these issues, challenges faced, and possible ways forward.



Legislative action: The report has allowed Equality Now to put forward clear recommendations on the laws and policies required nationally and internationally to address OSEA, with an emphasis and international and feminist-informed standards.



International influence: Equality Now has used this research to influence decision makers around the world – from government officials to advocacy groups to civil society organizations. The report has facilitated multi-jurisdictional cooperation to effect positive change.