

**Silent Voices:**  
Testimonies of Child  
Victims of Online  
Sexual Exploitation



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Oficina de Defensoría de los  
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## **Silent Voices: Testimonies of Child Victims of Online Sexual Exploitation**

*ODI is a Mexican Ngo that for over 20 years has litigated in representation of child and adolescent victims. At present we find a worrying disconnect between 3 elements of central importance for the eradication of online sexual exploitation of children: criminal tendencies in the production of CSAM; international efforts to combat these crimes; and the ability to identify and protect victims.*

*International efforts mainly focus on a "from the CSAM to the victim" approach for detection and protection of children. However, as this criminal activity becomes more complex, the materials produced by the exploitation of children are ever more ephemeral. Electronic materials, live streaming and virtual reality, present significant challenges to the important "from the material to the child" strategy. In a parallel fashion, domestic justice systems are constantly in contact with the victims of OSEC but do not identify them as such. Child testimonies are not properly heard and children are not believed. To those who are in daily contact with victims, crimes of OSEC remain invisible.*

## An ever more complex crime.

Online sexual exploitation of children has spiraled. Technological advancement is exponential and along with this vertiginous trend, criminal activity mutates. Access to CSAM in private settings and the ease of networking with other perpetrators have been catalytic in normalizing sexual interest for children<sup>1</sup>. Echo chambers amongst perpetrators and the anonymity that is possible online, not only has meant an increase in the consumption of CSAM, but a growth in more extreme and more violent materials involving younger children<sup>2</sup>.

As demand for the material grows and technology advances, the CSAM itself becomes ever more ephemeral. Images and video are electronic and no longer physical, and even these are giving way to live streaming<sup>3</sup>. With virtual reality in close proximity, worries about harm caused by and to avatars looms on the horizon. Abuse in virtual environments not only generates very real trauma on victims, but the damage may even be augmented. The intensity of virtual environments, along with the anonymity that can generate more extreme behaviors, more harmful events can take place<sup>4</sup>.

Predator networking makes these crimes more complex because it normalizes and praises interest in CSAM and greatly increases the perpetrators ability to avoid prosecution. Behavioral tips and technological knowhow are rapidly shared. The information exchanged on these platforms regards how to disseminate material without leaving a trace and how to commit the abuse with less possibilities of prosecution. One such strategy is the introduction of elements that will cause confusion in the victim and will serve to make the child's testimony less credible<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>In 2022 NCMC alone reported over 32 million CSAM alerts in the open web alone. (NCMC, 2023). This number is considered to represent only 20% of the actual consumption of CSAM which mostly circulates in the dark web. (Insoll, Ovaska & Vaaren-Valkonen. 2021).

<sup>2</sup>24% of perpetrators who participated in an anonymous study (8,484 responses) viewed violent or sadistic material involving children between the ages of 0 – 3 years of age. (Ibid, 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Since 2016, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has reported sexual exploitation of children transmitted through live streaming in real time. (OHCHR 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Studies find the effects of violence in V.R. to produce the same physical and psychological affectation as abuse offline. (Porta, C. M., Frerich, et al. 2024).

<sup>5</sup>During 2022, the Mexican NGO "ODI" interviewed high level official within the Federal Attorney Generals Office who had documented specific exchange of tips to avoid prosecution among perpetrators. (Mimeo. Oficina de Defensoría de los Derechos de la Infancia, 2022).

Cases documented in Mexico, for example, contain striking patterns in the testimonies of very young children (aged 3 to 5). Recurrent descriptions of paper or dirty paper being used for penetration are noted. This very unusual action has been documented in cases of possible live streaming in different states. Also registered in these cases are affirmations by the children that would make their narrative implausible, such as mentioning that their parents were present during the abuse. In one case a four year old stated that her parents were present, generating confusion and disbelief in the authorities who took her initial testimony. Only after she was allowed to narrate freely (without interruption) in adequate conditions, did she provide further details. The perpetrator had told her that her parents were present, but that they had been made invisible. The reappearance of these unlikely or unusual details may be due to tip sharing on part of aggressors<sup>6</sup>.

## **Trends in international efforts to combat online child sexual exploitation**

In this evolving criminal context, international efforts to combat OSEC have mainly concentrated in 2 areas. Important resources and actions are centered around technology and issues such as encryption, hash detection, online safety and reporting. These efforts are and will be a constant game of catch up as technology continues to develop. However, regardless of this challenge, they are indispensable. Safeguarding, detection and takedown must be a constant in combating OSEC.

Other, less successful efforts are centered around victim identification and protection. One obstacle in going from the material - to the victim, is that the CSAM itself is becoming more difficult to detect and preserve. The strategy faces the challenge of having less material to use as a starting point from which to trace and reach victims.

Another and more significant problem is that even when the victim is identified, their protection and any criminal prosecution often depends on local authorities. International detection eventually results in notification of police within the victim's jurisdiction.

<sup>6</sup>ODI, 2021.

However, there is a correlation between the places where the CSAM is produced and countries that face serious institutional challenges. Often both, increased exploitation of children and institutional weakness, are due to similar social, political and economic conditions. As is the case in Mexico, local authorities have serious deficiencies in criminal investigation, particularly regarding complex crimes<sup>7</sup>. Often, the result is that despite specialized and costly efforts on part of international agents, the victims remain unprotected and the cases are not prosecuted.

In Mexico, significant institutional problems limit the capacity of local officials to use international alerts to detect, protect and prosecute domestic cases. Although the issues presented here refer to Mexico, it is not hard to imagine that very similar issues are widespread along the Global South. In Mexico some of the problems with international alerts are:

- Investigative and prosecutorial institutions are fragmented. Those who receive the alert are not the same individuals or departments who investigate the case. The alert is handed over, but the course it should follow once in national hands is unclear. The practical reality is that alerts are stored as statistical data. Each alert does not turn into an open investigation, even when elements of victim identification are provided.
- Although law obliges authorities to act ex officio regarding crimes against children, the practical reality falls short. With police institutions overwhelmed, understaffed and no procedural supervision in this regard, a case without active victim participation is left in a drawer. This means that even if the police who receive notice of the alert, pass it on to an investigator, the case will almost surely be ignored.
- Even if a case is actively taken on, prosecutors have limited capacity in case building. If the case requires international collaboration these limitations are doubled. Requesting evidence from foreign governments or international offices is extremely rare and most often flawed. Upon receiving off shore evidence, local officials are challenged as to how to use this evidence in accordance to national formalities. Many such cases are registered by foreign offices such as Homeland Security Investigations. Through their missions in Mexico, they often attempt to assist specific cases. Much to their dismay, most of the evidence shared with Mexican authorities is rejected for formal reasons. Even images obtained from NCMC or other similar sources, are deemed as useless given that “domestic like” chain of evidence cannot be applied.

<sup>7</sup>Impunity in Mexico is almost at 100%. Striking data indicates that only 3.7% of criminal investigations arrive at any conclusion (México Evalúa, 2023).

It is understandable that international efforts should stop at notification. Dealing with local jurisdictions is an incredibly complex matter. Involvement in specific cases or opining on matters of domestic justice, are politically sensitive issues. However, these limitations cannot be ignored. The ineffectiveness of victim protection and prosecution through international notification not only leaves known victims unprotected, but renders significant efforts poured into the “OSEC material - to victim” strategy useless.

Interesting lessons can be learned from the experience in the Philippines. Well documented cases show how international notification can result in the rescue of victims and successful criminal prosecution. The main factor in these cases is the local presence of the non-governmental organization: International Justice Mission. Their presence acts as a bridge. They effectively litigate a case and, with understanding of local law, assure it's follow-through<sup>8</sup>.

Jurisdictional boundaries that limit specialized and effective criminal investigation in the victim's country of origin must and can be addressed. The international nature of the crime, can open gateways for closer collaboration and victim participation in criminal investigations taking place within the perpetrators jurisdiction.

<sup>8</sup>I.J.M. has long worked with local law enforcement within countries of origin of victims of OSEC. (I.J.M. 2023).

## **Victims of OSEC are consistently ignored by local authorities**

In the context of the fast changing crimes of OSEC, one factor will always remain the same. Be it to produce images, streaming or in virtual settings, the child or adolescent will live a traumatic experience<sup>9</sup>. The one constant indicator that a crime has been committed is the victim's experience. As technology evolves, the one consistent way to detect a crime of this nature will be through the child's testimony. It is thus notable that children's voices are not at the forefront of the efforts to detect and combat OSEC. Growing attention is paid to the voices of survivors. However, this is not where the disconnect lies. The problem is the lack of attention paid to the victims voices by the very authorities that could give them immediate protection.

This is an extremely important and tragic matter. On a daily basis international efforts are poured into the detection of materials and through them exploited children; meanwhile local authorities are in contact with victims of OSEC but fail to identify them as such. Due to inadequate methods to obtain child testimonies and incredulity regarding crimes of OSEC, children's narratives are dismissed. In the best case scenarios, their narratives are interpreted as indicative of child sexual abuse. All evidence of exploitation and the production of materials is ignored.

### **Inadequate child testimony**

Children narrate in a subjective and concrete manner. They will generally focus on what they felt directly, in their body and their emotions. Strong indicators of OSEC such as the presence of cameras during abuse may simply not be relevant to a young child. Unless adequate conditions are guaranteed for testimony, this information may be omitted.

<sup>9</sup>Rigotti and Malgieri, 2023

<sup>10</sup>SEE "THE CHILD TESTIMONY". [https://dispensariodi.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The\\_Child\\_Testimony.pdf](https://dispensariodi.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The_Child_Testimony.pdf)



Child testimonies require specialized methodologies. Due to the cognitive structures that determine a child's and adolescent's language, traditional interrogation based methods all but destroy their testimony. Each question posed to a child or adolescent affects their narrative. Unlike adults who can maintain intentional focus on what they want to convey, a child narrative will digress where the questions lead<sup>10</sup>. It is important to note that this digression is not to say the child will be influenced and describe falsehoods. Rather it means the child will omit narrating other things lived and attend only the questions posed by the adult. Free and spontaneous narrative is indispensable for a child to testify.

Naturally a child's and adolescent's narrative will be disorganized. Structuring one's own narrative so to better be understood by others, implies complex though processes that are yet unavailable to children and adolescents. This fact places a burden on the adult authority who must make informed efforts to understand the child.

When children narrate complex experiences the characteristics of the child testimony are ever more relevant. Children narrating events of abuse with the purpose of producing CSAM may refer elements of fantasy, disguises, multiple adults and unusual types of violence. This generates an even more confusing testimony. In addition, if perpetrator promoted tactics to cause greater confusion are used, it is extremely difficult that adequate testimony will be obtained without adequate child-centered methods.

Given the lack of specialized methods and the use of interrogation based approaches, authorities tend to focus questions around what they understand and expect: most likely sexual abuse. The lack of adequate methods for the child testimony, effectively hides crimes of OSEC and treats them as cases of sexual abuse.

## **General disbelief in children's narratives**

Often crimes of this nature generate disbelief. It is natural to feel fear and repulsion when confronted with the existence of these extreme forms of violence against children. This natural rejection and unwillingness to confront such brutality generates confusion. The existence of these crimes

<sup>10</sup>QAnon refers to a disreputed conspiracy theory that alleges the involvement of high profile individuals in crimes of sexual exploitation of children, among other extreme behaviors. <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/08/21/espanol/qanon-que-es.html>

is discredited when mixed together with QAnon<sup>11</sup> type confabulations or cases of extortion against visible individuals. The confusion presents an opportunity for social relief: it is easier to believe these crimes do not exist. The confusion does not go unnoticed by the perpetrators who use the disbelief to escape prosecution. The introduction of bizarre elements into the abuse may serve this purpose.

The problem is that crimes of OSEC cannot be combated if they are ignored or believed inexistent. International efforts must use carefully vetted information to generate greater awareness of the existence of these crimes. The information must then be disseminated in consideration of the natural social reaction to be expected. Knowledgeable communication campaigns are needed to generate awareness on these issues.


One of the most pernicious effects of this social reaction, is that often authorities disbelieve and disregard children's narratives. In several cases documented<sup>12</sup>, specialized police simply disregarded references made by children about being abused in the presence of others or of being taken to safe houses used for the production of OSEC. Together with inadequate methods to produce children's testimony, social disbelief of these severe crimes, leaves children unprotected and unheard.

<sup>12</sup>ODI, 2023.

## **Case in point: Growing evidence of crimes of OSEC in public and private schools in Mexico**

A growing number of troubling cases have been documented in Mexico during the past 3 years. These cases are apparently unrelated but they present consistent coincidences in the types of violence described by the children. In all cases, children between 3 and 5 years of age describe serious and unusual sexual assaults that take place in public and private preschools. They report that the sexual assault is committed, conjunctly by several adults. Often the children report being attacked in groups, many being forced to hurt each other. In many cases, the boys and girls report the presence of cameras and the use of costumes. Some describe ingesting something that makes them sleepy or the presence of other sleeping companions. To date, 27 cases have been documented in 12 states of the Mexican Republic. (see [https://dispensariodi.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Report\\_IT%C2%B4S-A-SECRET\\_2024.pdf](https://dispensariodi.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Report_IT%C2%B4S-A-SECRET_2024.pdf))

Documentation is based on court files, recommendations of human rights commissions and media coverage. In some cases, criminal responsibility has been established against individual aggressors. In one school higher courts have confirmed guilty rulings against 10 individuals in one school (teachers, maintenance staff and the principle). Other rulings have upheld staunch sentences of up to 180 years against individual school staff for abusing multiple children.



In these cases, the children have been ignored as possible victims of OSEC. In all cases the authorities treated them as individual instances of sexual abuse. Even in the massive cases where over 30 child victims attained criminal sentencing against multiple adults, the crimes punished were of multiple individual cases of sexual abuse. In none of the cases have electronic devices, in the schools or belonging to the accused, been properly seized and analyzed. References to unusual events, uncommon in cases of individual sexual abuse have simply been ignored as fantasy or childish incongruences.

The cases documented, leave more questions than answers. How are multiple aggressor's hired at one same public school? If these hirings are coincidental, how do these individuals organize in order to act together? If the hirings are not coincidental, how has the school system been hijacked in order to insert criminals within schools? All of these questions require profound and specialized investigation. The demand on part of numerous members of civil society who document these cases is that a serious investigation take place.

However, these cases have generated little social traction. When first published, more than 50 media outlets covered the news; 3 international newspapers wrote about these cases and the president of the republic himself was publicly questioned on the subject on 2 occasions<sup>13</sup>.

Months later it was announced that a judge had condemned the Mexican State as jointly liable for reparations. The sentence was harsh: A teacher was sentenced to 494 years in prison; the Mexican Public School System had to incorporate into its curricula education on sexual violence within the classroom; all schools in Mexico City had to guarantee transparent infrastructure and safe spaces; and the Attorney General's Office was ordered to expand its criminal investigation.

<sup>13</sup>Idem

### **Yet, 3 years later:**

- The number of cases documented has risen from 18 cases in 7 states, to 27 cases in 12 states.
- Not a single school policy has been changed. There is no greater transparency in schools and no progress on investigating possible connections between cases.
- No investigation has taken place on how criminals infiltrate schools acting as teachers, school directors or cleaning staff.
- After an initial outrage, and with no disclaimer of any sort on part of the State, society prefers to look elsewhere.

## **Mexican State as jointly liable for reparations. The sentence How can something like this happen in a public school?**

It would seem impossible, and yet the conditions of the Mexican school make the educational establishment vulnerable to crime. This criminal phenomenon can only be understood by considering how public schools operate in Mexico.

The lack of regulation and transparency has created a context that makes the public education system vulnerable to recruitment by criminal groups. In a context of systematic and widespread irregularity, the co-optation of posts for the commission of crimes is made possible.

### **Some areas of particular concern are:**

- There is no clear and transparent procedure for the recruitment of teachers. In the cases that have been litigated, it has proved impossible to determine how, when, under what standards and by whose authorization the accused teachers were hired. The labor records are uneven, incomplete and fragmented. There is no clear regulation as to how school staff are recruited. The allocation of places within schools is a black box. The opacity and discretion of the designation of jobs makes it a possible currency. In many cases, the designations are made for economic, political or personal interests. But the context of corruption in the recruitment of teachers and administrators leaves the school vulnerable to infiltration by criminals who use their position for committing crimes.

- There are no independent channels for complaints. When students or parents wish to report abuse within the school, they should do so to their own school or SEP. Worse, the SEP states in its protocols that any complaint of sexual abuse by a school official will be investigated by the SEP itself. Although every public officer is obliged to report to the prosecution any possible crime committed against a boy or girl SEP does not. It is illegal to establish that the institution itself will investigate if there is a crime, and then decide whether to give notice to the person who should investigate if there is a crime. According to official figures, only 52% of the complaints of sexual violence received by SEP are known to the prosecution<sup>14</sup>.
- There is no transparency in school spaces. Several of the schools where cases of possible organized violence were reported had either classrooms or the whole school covered with black cloth or cardboard. Within a large number of public schools there are private houses where the quartermaster lives. Many of the allegations describe the assault taking place within private homes accessed from within the school campus.
- There is no independent or transparent oversight. School supervision, as well as recruitment of staff, is a black box. There are no approved monitoring registers or independent mechanisms for reporting on performance within a school.
- There is a context in which sexual violence within the school and impunity of cases prevail. According to data reported by SEP itself, at least one sexual abuse within a school is reported daily<sup>15</sup>. The authorities themselves consider that there is an underreporting of complaints. The Mexican school is a context in which reports of sexual abuse against students are common and therefore organized violence is more easily unnoticed. In fact, all documented cases where criminal investigations exist are treated as sexual abuse. No investigation is carried out into the recruitment of pedophiles within the school.

<sup>14</sup>Crail, A and Guazo, 2023

<sup>15</sup>Idem.

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