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Published online: 23 Sep 2022.

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Analysis of the constructions of children and the internet in Kenya and Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Kenya and Ghana as case studies to analyse the construction of children, information and communication technologies (ICT) and the internet in Africa. The article discusses the interaction of girl-child protection and media risk discourses and the implication for children, girls, and women in Africa. It highlights the positioning of children in relation to ICT and the internet in terms of gender, age, class, and other demographic factors. It further examines whether, how and which children are constructed as agents or victims, and the ways in which their agency/victimhood is discussed. The article finds dominant child protection and media risk discourses focusing on the risk posed by the internet for children, particularly girls, as the main drivers of the representation of the problem. It also offers a critique of the solutions proposed to addressing the problems presented by the internet for children for taking a homogenising as well as a legalistic and regulatory approach. The article concludes by problematizing these problem representations and solutions, as well as the silences and the ways in which the in problems can be approached differently.

Introduction

In March 2019, Terre des Hommes (TDH) Netherlands office in Kenya launched a report that aimed to provide evidence on the severity of online commercial sexual exploitation of children (OCSE) in Kenya. The 2018 published report aimed to demonstrate how OCSE is fuelled by lack of a clear regulatory framework to govern the operation of cybercafés[1] in Kenya.

In the same year, in July, the Government of Ghana through the Department of Children, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection together with UNICEF Ghana, published a position paper on children's online safety concerns in Ghana. Similar to the TDH report, the concerns stem from inadequate regulatory framework to protect children from the risks that arise from increased online exposure.

In this paper, I conduct a discourse analysis of the two reports with an aim to understand the construction of children, particularly in relation to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet. The paper further aims to understand whether and how dominant constructions of childhood are perpetuated or challenged

in framing children's engagement with ICTs and the internet. This includes examining the representation of the problem and the positioning of children in relation to the problem in terms of gender, age, class, and other demographic factors. In addition, I examine the ways in which children's agency and victimhood are constructed and discussed. This analysis stems from a recognition of the importance of the internet for children, but also an understanding that related discourses and framings could influence children's access and use of the internet.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws on socio-constructionist and post-structuralist theories, which argue that socio-cultural norms, attitudes, and perspectives that construct children as innocent, vulnerable, and asexual, and in need of protection and control, often drive dominant childhood discourses (Allen, 2007; Bhana, 2016; Zhao, 2011). Childhood is homogenised and homogenous solutions are provided to address the issues that children face through preventive and regulatory measures aimed at protecting children from sexual harm (Bhana, 2016; Jones, 2011; Lesko, 1996; Zhao, 2011). However, the perspective of children and methodologically rigorous evidence are often lacking in these views and solutions.

While protection is a right stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), child protection discourses employ protection to override other rights including the rights to participation and information. Even though the right to participation and information extends to matters relating to children's sexuality, taking into consideration their evolving capacities and in recognition of their agency, protective discourses tend to dominate (Bulger, Burton, O'Neill, & Staksrud, 2017; Lansdown, 2005). Moreover, while the UNCRC's recent adoption of General Comment 25 (2021) recognises the digital rights of children and provides guidelines for the promotion and protection of children's rights in a digital age, it is important to reflect more critically how dominant narratives surrounding children and the internet can influence the realisation of children's digital rights. Given the role of digital engagement in the realisation of children's rights, the legal and policy environments that frame digital access and participation for children require closer examination from a rights-based perspective (Bulger et al., 2017).

In line with this, this article examines the interaction of child protection discourses with media risk discourses to portray children's increased access to ICTs and the internet as risky and dangerous by exposing them to pornography, sexual predation, and violence (Coffey, Budgeon, & Helen, 2016; Naezer & Ringrose, 2018). Child protection and media risk discourses often strip children off their agency by viewing them as passive victims of online risk, with little understanding of how they navigate the experiences, risks, and challenges that children face online (Naezer, 2017). While the internet could indeed pose threats to young people, a strong focus on the risks and threats could limit the opportunities that the internet presents to children and hinder more nuanced approaches to understanding young people's engagement with ICTs and the internet.

Livingstone (2011, 2013) argues that while the internet inarguably presents both opportunities and risks for children, societal views of children and their interactions on the internet have played a key role in influencing debates and policy agenda on regulation of the internet to reduce the risks and harm posed to children. However, in many cases, the debates on regulation are informed by internet moral panics, rather than

nuanced, contextualised views, based on methodologically robust evidence of how the internet shapes or is shaped by the lives of children (Livingstone, 2011, 2013). Anxieties resulting in moral panics about young people's lives online yield to "attempts by adult society to intensify surveillance, censorship, and control over online platforms" (Walsh, 2020, p. 844). Although moral panics operate under the guise of protecting girls and young women from potential harm, they can be more harmful by denying them agency to access and benefit from technological changes, which could potentially disempower them technologically (Cassell & Cramer, 2008).

This paper builds on these debates to analyse the construction of children and the internet in Kenya and Ghana as presented in two reports and provides a critical discussion of the practical and theoretical implications.

Methods and data analysis

The two reports were analysed using discourse analysis, which is an interpretive research method that involves critical engagement with language, stated and unstated meanings, reasoning patterns and constructed social relations (Gasper, 2017). It includes an examination of interrelated elements such as the use of concepts, narratives and stories, stylistic devices such as metaphors, as well as the framing of problems to be addressed, and what and whom are included or excluded (Gasper & Apthorpe, 1996).

The researcher (author of the paper) first read the entire content of both reports to establish their origin/authorship, intended audience, key message(s) and approach. The researcher then conducted analysis using different discourse analysis methods to interrogate the content. "What is the Problem Represented to be" (WPR) was the main discourse analysis method, using Bacchi's approach. Bacchi's approach uses the following six questions to interrogate and analyse the theoretical premise of policies and practice (Bacchi, 2009, 2012):

(1) What is the problem represented to be?
(2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?
(3) How has the representation of the problem come about?
(4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be thought about differently?
(5) What effects are produced by the representation of the problem?
(6) How/where is this representation of the problem produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disputed, disrupted?

To answer these questions, the WPR method was complemented by analysis of selected texts including definitions to understand the problem and the construction of children, particularly in relation to ICT and internet access as well as the underlying presuppositions and assumptions. The researcher also conducted a visual discourse analysis, which involves critical engagement with visuals to identify discourses and beliefs surrounding power relations by examining what or who is included or excluded in visuals, structuring of objects in visuals, and the social meanings attributed to subjects and objects in visuals (Albers, 2014). The researcher analysed all the visuals in the reports to examine the

representation of children, by interrogating which children are under discussion in relation to gender, age, and other demographic factors.

The researcher also conducted a content analysis of words frequently used in the report to describe the problem and to propose solutions. This included a quantitative frequency count to demonstrate the influence of the child protection discourse. Metaphor analysis, which involved identification and analysis of all metaphors, that is, indirect descriptions in the report, was used to highlight the influence of media risk discourses in the reports. Metaphor analysis seeks to uncover underlying meanings in indirect terms used to describe an experience or situation, some of which may be subconsciously used (Zhen & Song, 2010).

Overview of the reports

The TDH report is titled, "The Dark Side of the Internet for Children: Online Child Sexual Exploitation in Kenya – A Rapid Assessment Report." The title of the report is similar to a report published by ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking), titled "The dark side of Cancun: child sexual exploitation," which also discusses OCSE. The report also cites the work of ECPAT International, a global network of organisations working to end OCSE. These interconnections may be indicative of the global perspective to the issue.

The indicated author of the TDH report is Terre des Hommes and does not mention the individuals involved in writing the report. However, the researcher accessed the PowerPoint presentation given during the launch of the report, which bears the logos of Childline Kenya, the African Institute for Children Studies, and TDH, indicating that the study was conducted collaboratively by the three organisations. The three organisations are child focused, specifically working on child protection.

The Government of Ghana report is titled "Children's online safety concerns in Ghana: A position paper on legislative and policy gaps." The report is a collaborative position paper by the Department of Children, Ministry of Gender Children and Social Protection and UNICEF Ghana. The acknowledgements section of the report indicates that the report was developed by the Law and Development Associates (LADA) Group, as part of a contract between LADA, UNICEF, and Government of Ghana. Given that the authors of the report are lawyers, it may explain the legal approach to the report.

Both reports are short, with the Government of Ghana one containing 25 pages and the TDH one is 36 pages long. The two reports are written in English and each contains seven chapters as outlined in Table 1.

The seven chapters are preceded by a brief executive summary and information about TDH Netherlands, while the government of Ghana provides a short rationale for the report. The reports use clear and easy to understand language, without much jargon and with reader friendly fonts.

The TDH report is characterised by a lot repetition for emphasis. Its content is fairly basic with more than half of the first chapter focusing on elaborating on the terminologies and definitions surrounding OCSE, drivers of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and OCSE in Kenya, and the consequences of CSEC and OCSE for children. The report also has large bolded captioned texts inside it, which have been picked out from the rest of the text and highlighted. The extra emphasis on these texts demonstrate the issues that are considered important to pay more attention to.

Table 1. Chapter titles in the TDH and Government of Ghana Reports.

TDH report	Government of Ghana report
Introduction	Rationale
About the study	Problem Statement
Context analysis: The internet and children in Kenya	Situational analysis of child online violence in Ghana
National legal and policy frameworks and institutions	Legal and policy framework
Findings on occurrence of online child sexual exploitation in Kenya	National initiatives, implementation and effectiveness
Availability and capacity of service providers to support victims of OCSE	Conclusion
Conclusions and recommendations	Recommendations

The basic approach and language of the report seems to indicate that the report is targeting an audience that is not aware or well versed with the phenomena of OCSE. The basic approach could be explained by the findings of the report which indicate that the issue of OCSE is not understood by stakeholders, including those in child protection (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 7). Although it is not explicitly stated, the purpose of the report thus seems to be to create awareness on OCSE, a phenomenon that the author consider poorly understood, despite its severity, and as such, calls for urgent action as discussed in later sections.

While the Government of Ghana report also uses fairly simple and easy to understand language, it contains less repetition and emphasis compared to the TDH report. Similar to the TDH report, the Government of Ghana report aims to provide some basic understanding of the situation, which is demonstrated by the provision of basic definitions such as the definitions of a child, and of child online abuse. The report also provides a very brief and simplified situational analysis of child online violence in Ghana. However, the approach is less basic compared to the TDH report. For example, the fourth chapter discusses the policy and legal environment in Ghana in relation to child online protection (COP) at length. This section is the longest in the report, covering eight pages, which is about 30% of the entire report.

This combination of basic definitions, simplified situational analysis and a lengthy and elaborate discussion on the policy environment suggests that the report is targeted to a policy-making audience that may not be well versed with the issue at hand. This is demonstrated in the rationale, which seeks to provide stakeholders with a broad understanding of the emerging challenges, particularly the risks and vulnerabilities that the internet poses to children and provide recommendations to combat the abuse of children online (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 7).

In the following sections of this paper, the WPR method is used to analyse selected texts to interrogate the problem. In the TDH report, highlighted texts provide a clear picture of the problem. Given that the Government of Ghana report does not use this approach, the researcher used the entire text to understand the problem.

Discussion

What is the problem represented to be?

An analysis of selected texts in the two reports reflects two major problems. The first problem is the heightened vulnerability to online abuse, harm and OCSE posed by

increased access to the internet for children. The second problem is inadequate legal framework and capacity of state and non-state actors to deal with the problem.

Problem 1: Increased accessibility to the internet is increasing children's vulnerability to OCSE/ exposure to pornographic content, sexual images and harmful content.

Statements in both reports demonstrate how increased access to the internet is heightening children's vulnerability to OCSE and to harmful online content, particularly pornographic content. In the TDH report, these statements that describe the internet and ICTs as creating new forms and new locations for CSEC are highlighted and bolded (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 7, p. 8). Similarly, the Ghana report indicates that children reported exposure to online pornographic content and experiencing damaging affects as a result (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 5).

Unlike the TDH report, the government of Ghana report seems to focus on abuse and harm more broadly than sexual abuse. It outlines "cyberbullying, grooming, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and emotional abuse" as well as online fraud and falling victim to online scamming as some of the online forms of abuse that children experience (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 5, p. 8).

Some of the claims connecting increased access to the internet for children to OCSE, abuse and harm are however unsubstantiated and are generalised based on the statements of a few respondents or from media articles. The TDH report for instance uses the statements of two respondents to conclude that cybercafés are largely responsible for OCSE. In a statement in the report, a respondent states that "[y]ou don't have to walk on the beach to get a mzungu (white foreigner) anymore, just go to a cybercafé and get one, and afterwards you can continue on your smartphone and even get paid to show [your] nude body and videos". "Male survey respondent from the coastal area of Mtwapa" (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 28). In another statement, an interviewed cybercafé attendant in Nairobi states that, his customers are allowed to access all sites without any form of restriction (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 28). Such claims could have been strengthened by more robust research methods that allow for generalisation rather than using the statements of a few respondents to make such generalisations. While it may be beyond the scope of the report to provide strong evidence to support these claims, the authors could have suggested further research to examine the role of cybercafés in OCSE.

The Government of Ghana report on the other hand indicates that media reports have led to the conclusion that children's access to the internet is increasing their vulnerability to predation, sexual abuse and exploitation (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 9). The report however does not clarify the nature and frequency of such reports in the media, or provide examples of these media reports, which could have strengthened such claims.

Problematizing children's access to the internet based on inadequately substantiated statements as demonstrated above in the two reports begins to paint a picture of the problematic ways that dominant narratives can drive policy and programs.

Problem 2: There is a lack of capacity/mechanisms to regulate and deal with the challenges presented by children's access to the internet

To demonstrate the lack of understanding and capacity to tackle the challenges, OCSE is not only presented as new issue in the TDH report, but also as a new issue to relevant actors, including stakeholders in child protection, NGO workers, and government authorities, particularly those dealing with crime. The report discusses how these stakeholders lack understanding of the issue due to their limited knowledge of the occurrence and impact of OCSE in Kenya, as well as lack of experience and structures to handle OCSE, including mechanisms to investigate OCSE or to regulate cybercafés (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 24, p. 29, p. 30).

Similarly, the Government of Ghana demonstrates the lack of capacity and mechanisms to deal with the problem, with specific focus on the legal and policy environment. The report contains several statements that demonstrate Ghana's inadequate policy environment, specifically lack of clearly defined legislation, policy statements, guidelines, and institutional frameworks for COP as a major problem (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 5, p. 14). Based on which, regulation combined with awareness and sanctions to ensure compliance are proposed as solutions (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 24).

It is important to note how children are missing from the discussion surrounding the cause of the problem and the solutions, discussed further in this article.

Examining the representation of children

Having described the primary problem as the vulnerability of children to OCSE and online harm and abuse, due to increased access to the internet, the researcher sought to understand how children are represented in the reports. This stems from an understanding in critical childhood studies that views childhood not as homogeneous category, but as a "gendered," "raced," "classed," and enthnicised category (Alanen, 2016, p. 159). Childhood is therefore socially constructed and influenced by social, economic, political, and cultural factors. The definitions provided in the two reports are used for this analysis.

Analysis of definitions

In defining a child, the Government of Ghana report provides a legal definition, based on age, as provided by CRC and the Constitution of Ghana (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018). While this is already an indication of a homogenising approach based on age, the report claims to provide a situational analysis based on a report that used a child rights framework, which acknowledges differences in children's contexts. The report also indicates the need for policy interventions to pay attention to differences in access, skills, risks, and opportunities when discussing children's well-being in the digital age. Despite this acknowledgement, there is no attempt in the report to discuss the contextual vulnerabilities faced by children in relation to the internet. Instead, children are portrayed as a homogeneous category that faces the same vulnerabilities with regard to accessing the internet.

Moreover, the report further states the need to pay special attention to children who may be more vulnerable, such as indigenous or ethnic minority children, children in poor or rural settings or those who have some form of disability. This statement considers children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and children with disabilities to be automatically vulnerable or at risk in every aspect of life. Yet in the case of the internet, such children are more likely to be disadvantaged from accessing the internet

than from the risks associated with the internet due to infrastructural and socio-economic challenges (WRPAPC, 2012).

The Government of Ghana report further defines child online abuse as any action that affects children negatively because of using technology, specifically the internet through social networking sites, gaming platforms, and mobile phones (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 8). This is not only a narrow definition of child abuse, but it portrays children as highly vulnerable and without agency to make sense of the content that they interact with online. Conceptualisation of young people's online engagement as risky and heightening their vulnerability stems from a moralising, pathologizing, and policing approach (Livingstone, 2013; Naezer, 2017). Naezer (2017) employs a more nuanced approach that shifts from viewing young people as passive victims of online risks to considering their online sexual experiences as adventures, and young people as active agents in navigating the experiences and challenges presented by online spaces. As such, young people's online interactions bear uncertain outcomes that may be positive or negative. An adventure approach therefore moves from simplistic conclusions about young people's online experiences to understand the nuances and complexities involved (Naezer, 2017).

Similar to the Government of Ghana report, the TDH report provides a definition of a child sexual abuse that includes an implicit definition of a child based on age stipulated in legal provisions. The report further defines CSEC as "involving a transaction in cash or in kind to the child or a third person" and "consists of criminal practices that demean, degrade and threaten the physical and psychosocial development, wellbeing and dignity of children" (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 8). The TDH report indicates that poverty and economic inequalities, contextual factors such as dysfunctional families, and cultural norms and traditional gender norms as factors that intersect with technological advancements to increase children's vulnerability to OCSE.

This however seems to be a poor attempt at intersectionality, as these intersecting factors are not discussed in the findings and the only factor gender is the only highlighted factor as demonstrated in this statement.

> It is commonly believed that girls are more at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation than boys but this does not mean that boys do not become victims of CSEC. For a number of reasons including lack of comprehensive research and programming provided for boys, low disclosure rates, social and cultural beliefs that deny and or hide the reality of the problem, assumptions related to masculinity and the subsequent shame due to the stigma attached, sexual exploitation of boys is less understood and acknowledged, more hidden, socially invisible and therefore likely to be underestimated. (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 12)

While the report attempts to make OCSE as a problem experienced by all children, by indicating that both boys and girls are affected, the findings do not reveal this. Instead, the only finding that discusses the occurrence of OCSE among boys is based on the perspective of a child protection volunteer, who indicates that boys are increasingly getting involved in OCSE.

What are the underlying presuppositions/assumptions?

Representing increased internet access as dangerous for children stems from an underlying discourse of victimhood, based on the assumption of children's ignorance and

vulnerability. Such representation further assumes that children lack agency to compre-hend and respond accordingly to issues surrounding them in their context and are therefore in need of protection (Bhana, 2016).

The discourse of victimhood pays most attention to those who are deemed most vulnerable, and in the case of children, this is often girls, and more so in terms of sexuality as they are considered to be vulnerable to male sexual violence (Khau, 2012). This is more strongly portrayed in the TDH report. Even though the author(s) of the TDH report attempt to portray OCSE as a problem experienced by both boys and girls, they are in actual sense focusing on girls, as demonstrated by the images and examples used in the report, which are all of girls.

The Government of Ghana report does not include visuals, other than in the cover page, which has a picture of adolescents that look like 16–18 year olds, with the picture sharpened to focus on the girl and with blurred focus on the boys. Figure 1 provides the cover page image of the Government of Ghana report.

Since the Government of Ghana report does not contain any other pictures, the analysis of visuals focused on those contained in the TDH report as detailed in the next section.

Analysis of visuals in the TDH Report

The TDH report uses pictures at the beginning of each section and on the cover page. All the pictures are of girls. The cover picture provided is a blurred image of a girl/young woman who may be in her late teens or early adulthood, using a computer in a cybercafé, and on her screen is a Facebook picture of a young man. Figure 2 provides the cover page image of the TDH report.

The picture on the executive summary only shows the hands of a girl (the bracelets indicate that it is a girl) typing on a keyboard. The next picture is one of seven school girls in a queue, with the one at the front of the line holding a placard writing rights in Kiswahili (Haki). The third picture is of two school girls, using a smartphone. One girl is holding the phone as the other one operates the apps. Chapter two begins with a picture taken from behind of two school girls walking together holding shoulders. Chapter four has an image of an older adolescent girl/young adult woman operating a laptop in a public space that could also be a cybercafé. The image at the beginning of chapter five is of two school girls looking at the screen of a smart phone held in a manner that seems to indicate that they are watching a video. The image on the sixth chapter is of a girl, wearing a hijab that partly covers her head and she seems distressed from the way she is holding her head. In chapter seven a school girl is pointing to a poster that has a number of words written on it. The girl is pointing to the top word on the poster, which is security. The last image is below the final message of the report and it is of another girl in a hijab, and she is holding her face in a position that suggests distress.

Considering that all the pictures are of girls, this indicates that even though the report attempts to discuss the issue of OCSE as affecting all children, in reality, it is discussing girls.

The report further lays emphasis on girls in school as most of the pictures are of school-going girls. Some of the pictures are of slum settings, which may indicate that the girls in discussion are from low-income settings. Given that the report casts the spotlight on cybercafés as sites for OCSE, it is interesting that the images used to depict girls in

Figure 1. Cover page image of the Government of Ghana report.

cybercafés are of older girls who seem like young adults, and those that portray school girls are using personal handsets or not using an ICT device. In all the pictures, they have attempted to hide the identity of the girls and young women, by blurring the images or by taking the picture from the back or of one part of the body (hands, head). The blurring and de-identifying of pictures even though these girls are not at risk, may be informed by the protection discourse that views the visibility of children as a threat to their protection. It further demonstrates how the child protection discourse has informed the production of this report.

In addition to the visuals, several statements in the report demonstrate various ways that girls are constructed as ignorant and lacking agency. For example, "Unaware of their rights, children in general and girls in particular, are less likely to recognise abuse or exploitation and thus unable to develop strategies to protect themselves" (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 12). The next section delves deeper to understand claims and representations of children, and more so of girls and how they have come to be.
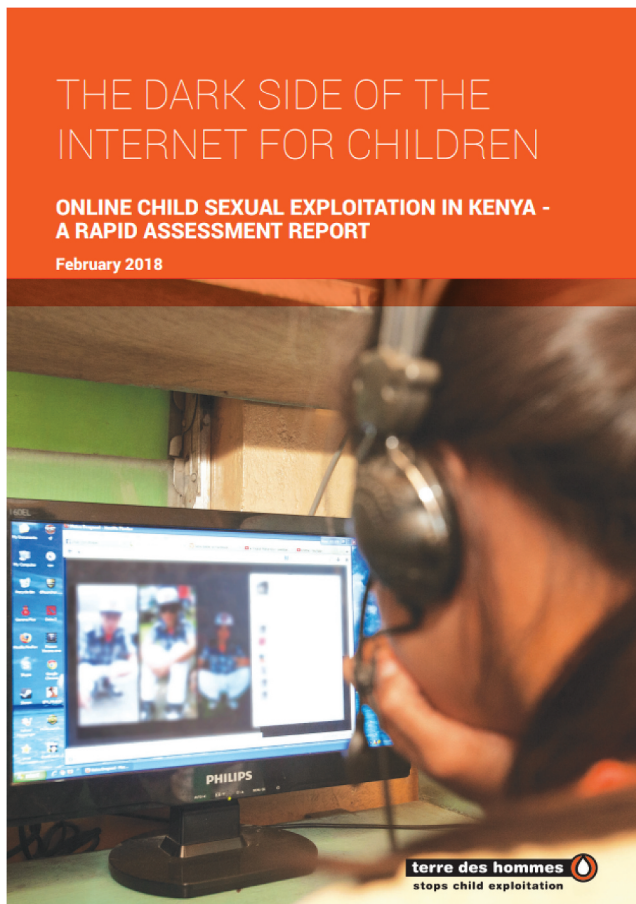
Figure 2. Cover page image of the TDH report.

How has the representation of the problem come about?

The discussion in both reports stems from a strong child protection focus in development work, which draws on dominant discourses of children as innocent and vulnerable, more so, in discussions surrounding children's sexuality (see Bhana, 2016; Zhao, 2011).

Ideas of childhood innocence, asexuality and vulnerability particularly for girls, provide basis for legal measures to protect passive female sexuality from active male sexuality (Kangaude, 2017). In most cases, sexual activity before the age of consent, which is often legal adult age, is categorised as violence or statutory rape, and often applies to girls (Amnesty International, 2018; Pitre & Lingam, 2021). Many former colonies maintain colonial age of consent laws due to assumptions that they are in the best interests of children, particularly girls, and intended for their protection from harmful sexual activity (Kangaude & Skelton, 2018). Colonial laws however did not intend to promote and protect the rights of individuals, but to advance imperialist and patriarchal agendas that were beneficial to capitalist economies (Kangaude, 2017; Kangaude & Skelton, 2018; Pitre & Lingam, 2021). Many African societies have maintained colonial era laws that deny and even criminalise young people's sexuality as they align with some patriarchal,

heterosexist, and gender-stereotypical norms and ideals (Kangaude, 2017). Despite evidence of sexual activity among young people, beliefs surrounding their innocence, asexuality, and naivety about sex and the need of adult control and protection from sexual harm using different mechanisms including the law, persist (Bhana, 2016; Nomdo, 2014).

The child protection discourse combines with religious conservative ideology and patriarchal norms to reinforce dominant discourses surrounding children and children's sexuality and to restrict access for women and girls to information technologies (Bhatia, Arora, & Pathak-Shelat, 2021). Evidence of religious influence is demonstrated by the fact that the TDH report was launched by the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB), Dr. Ezekiel Mutua, who is a conservative Christian who used his position to regulate media content to control against immoral content to protect children (Uzalendo News, 2021).

Child protection discourse: content analysis

A content analysis of the reports confirms the influence of child protection discourse. For example, the words protect, victim, and risk are common terms in the child protection discourse, and they are used extensively in both reports. In providing solutions to the problem, the words regulate/regulation and awareness occur frequently. Regulation and awareness are common approaches in the online risk management discourse and often go hand in hand (Livingstone, 2011).

Moreover, while the word access is used 30 times in the TDH report and 24 times in the Government of Ghana report, this is discussed in negative light, as exposing children to online as abuse and content. While ICTs can be accessed for leisure, play and learning, these are barely used and the focus is mainly on online harm and abuse, and the need to protect children.

Tables 2 and 3 provide the frequency of some of the common words used in the child protection discourse, as contained in the reports.

Media risk discourse: metaphor analysis

Both reports also draw on media risk discourses, which view ICTs and the internet as risky and dangerous for children. Most media risk discourses focus on the role of ICTs and the internet in exposing children pornography and sexually explicit content and other harms including sexting (Coffey et al., 2016; Gabriel, 2014; Naezer & Ringrose, 2018).

In the TDH report, the use of the metaphor dark to describe the internet further demonstrates the media risk approach. In addition, the report uses metaphors derived from militant language to not only describe the internet, but also how to deal with the effects it has on children. Such metaphors include words that describe the digital world as a double-edged sword that needs proactive solutions to combat, fight and tackle OCSE, webcam sex, child exploitation (Terre des Hommes, 2018a).

The Government of Ghana also uses metaphors that demonstrate the risk posed by the internet for children. It states that Ghana is in grave danger of losing of her future generation to the predatory and hidden evils of the online world. Moreover, the description of the internet as an imaginary world that requires critical responsibility from stakeholders for children to survive in it portrays it as addictive, dangerous, and difficult to control. Stakeholders are further urged to be part of the internet governance process to

Table 2. Frequency of selected words in the TDH report.

Words describing the problem and its magnitude	Frequency in the report
Protect	42
Abuse	46
Victim	31
Risk	28
Spread	10
Threat	8
Vulnerable	6
Words providing solutions to the problem	
Regulate/Regulation	25
Awareness	21

Table 3. Frequency of selected words in the Government of Ghana report.

Words describing the problem and its magnitude	Frequency in the report
Protect	68
Pornography	48
Abuse	48
Risk	19
Victim	5
Threat	2
Vulnerable	2
Words providing solutions to the problem	
Policy	41
Law/legal	38
Regulate/Regulation	9
Awareness	9

redesign the internet of the future with children's rights at the heart of it all. The use of extreme metaphors is a common approach in policy debates for regulation of the internet. Livingstone (2011) describes how policy debates on regulation of the internet for children are often dominated by extreme metaphors to demonstrate the risk and harm presented to children and the urgent need for regulation.

What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be thought about differently?

Even though ICTs and the internet present several benefits, media risk discourses often overlook the benefits of ICTs, the internet, and social media, and further fail to discuss what children use ICTs and the internet for other than exposing them to online harm. It is important to be critical of media risk discourses to ensure that the public's fear of the internet does not restrict children's opportunities and life chances in the long term (Bulger et al., 2017; Livingstone, 2013).

While ICTs and the internet are considered to have numerous benefits for adults, and pathways to economic, social, political, and cultural development, the same does not apply to children. Instead, the discussion on children, ICTs and the internet mostly focusses on the dangers. This is reflected in the two reports several times, for example in the use of the phrase "imaginary world" when discussing children's access and use of the internet. Such approaches others children as inherently different from adults and perpetuates the idea of children as lacking capacity to respond appropriately to risk. In the

reports for example, there is no discussion on how children and girls respond to the risks presented by online spaces. This is consistent with the risk management approach which disregards the varied ways that children respond to the risks that they may encounter online (Livingstone, 2013).

Such representations of children, particularly girls, may result in top-down solutions that often exclude them from participating in charting the agenda on issues regarding their lives.

What effects are produced by the representation of the problem?

The portrayal of the internet as dangerous makes a strong case for protection and control of children. In addition, the portrayal of children and girls as ignorant and vulnerable means that their agency is not recognised and they are not considered actors or active participants in addressing the issues surrounding children and the internet.

As such, the solutions provided to the problem of online abuse, harm, and OCSE are top-down. It is important to note that words like involve and engage, which may signify collaborative approaches are only used to discuss the magnitude of the problem. For example, even though the word involve has been used 25 times in the TDH report, it is often used in combination with involved in OCSE, involved in sexting, or to discuss the actors, that is, the perpetrators and victims in OCSE. Similarly, the word engage, even though it has been used 18 times in the Government of Ghana report, it is mostly used in combination with words that demonstrate the risks for example, in sexually explicit conduct and hardly to involve children. The same applies to the word collaboration, which is used three times in both reports, and only once is it used to demonstrate collaboration as a solution. In other instances, it is used to demonstrate collaboration between perpetrators as demonstrated in this statement, "The Internet can facilitate criminal collaboration and communication online" (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 8).

Another indication that the solutions are top-down, is the fact that children are not involved as part of the solution. In the TDH report, the solutions seem to lie with adults, particularly the law enforcement agents, as demonstrated in the five recommendations provided in the report. The recommendations propose legislative and regulatory measures, as well as strengthening the capacity of stakeholders such as government authorities and CSOs to prevent and respond to OCSE (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 32). Other recommendations include strengthening institutional mechanisms to monitor and respond to OCSE, partnership with private sector to enhance their commitment to addressing OCSE, in addition to training and awareness on digital safety for children, young people, parents, teachers, and the general public (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 33).

Similarly, half of the 18 recommendations provided in the Government of Ghana report discuss legal and policy interventions and regulation. The other half recommend establishment of COP systems and mainstreaming COP into programmes, empowering children and users, awareness and prevention, capacity building, partnership between government and private sector and parents dialogue.

In projects that take a top-down approach, the participation of children tends to be tokenistic. In the case of the TDH report, tokenistic participation is evident as seen in the picture of the girls handing the report to the CEO of the KFCB, while in the report the

voices of the children are not only missing, but solutions involving girls as agents are equally missing (see Terre des Hommes, 2018b).

Moreover, discourses that portray girls' access to the internet as a problem contribute to limiting access to the internet for girls. For example, a study conducted by Pfeiffer, Kleeb, Mbelwa, and Ahorlu (2014) in urban Tanzania found that 15–19 year adolescents had high access to the internet, even in low-income settings. However, access was lower for female adolescents compared to male adolescents, as girls were often discouraged from using the internet to protect them from risks associated with accessing the internet for girls. Such prohibitions result in gender inequality in access to information, ICT skills, and limits their access to the public, since online platforms give access to the public to those that would otherwise not have access through mainstream platforms (WRPAPC, 2012). Such inequalities have implications for the participation of women and girls in the political, economic, and social sphere.

The next section demonstrates how moral panics are used to produce, disseminate, and defend representations of children's access based on dominant discourses rather than evidence.

How/where is this representation of the problem produced, disseminated and defended?

The emphasis on children's exposure to online harm and abuse is represented in both reports as an emerging issue that needs urgent attention. While the reports attempt to provide evidence to demonstrate the issue, they are instead characterised by selective broad alarmist statements. For example, the TDH report attempts to demonstrate the likelihood of OCSE by indicating that the FBI estimates that there are 750,000 online predators seeking to connect with children across the globe (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 3). OCSE is further presented a phenomena with dire consequences by stating that, "the damage to the victim's wellbeing is likely to persist into adulthood and remain with them for life" (Terre des Hommes, 2018a, p. 15).

The same alarmist tone is evident in the Government of Ghana report by demonstrating the uncontrollable nature of online abuse permeating even the most private spaces anytime while their images and videos can be stored and shared with other people, a situation that can make children feel helpless (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 8).

Additionally, lack of understanding, capacity, and frameworks are presented as barriers to addressing the issue effectively. In the TDH report, the focus on cybercafés provides an actor that can be easily targeted through government regulation or cracking down on cybercafés, as opposed to regulating the use of personal handsets. The evidence provided, however, does not prove the pervasiveness of cybercafés in perpetuating such crimes. Similarly, the Government of Ghana makes generalisations about children's vulnerability to predation and exploitation, which compounded with their lack of online safety skills expose them to a variety of illegal and inappropriate activities. Interestingly, these conclusions are based on media reports, as stated in the report (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 8).

While the reports repeatedly indicate that there is strong evidence to demonstrate the occurrence of online harm, abuse, and OCSE in Ghana and Kenya, this is not evident in the

findings. Moreover, the methods are quite problematic, and do not substantiate the claims made on the severity and magnitude of online harm, abuse, and OCSE in both countries. For instance, in the TDH report, only eight children were sampled as respondents in the four counties involved in the study. It is important to note that Kenya has 47 counties that are highly diverse, with 44 ethnic communities, and different socio-economic characteristics. Therefore, even though the study is qualitative, a sample of eight children cannot be used to draw the kind of generalisations contained in the report, without highlighting this as a limitation to the study. The report does not employ the rigour that is required to understand the issue, but instead operates on preconceived notions of children access to ICTs and the internet.

This preconceived agenda based on dominant discourses is evident in the failure of the Government of Ghana's report to interrogate low access to the internet for children and digital inequalities, but focus mostly on online abuse and harm. While the report presents online harm and abuse as pervasive and a dominant feature of children's lives, a closer examination of the figures presented in the situational analysis demonstrates that internet access is low, with a range of 56% to 84% of children in the 10 Ghanaian regions unable to access the internet on a regular basis. In addition, four out of the 10 regions have less than 30% of children accessing the internet regularly. Despite the evidence of low access in most regions and digital inequalities in accessing the internet among the 10 regions, there is no interrogation of the low access in some regions and the inequalities between regions. This approach ends up restricting the internet for children, in a context where access is already low, and exacerbating exclusion and marginalisation further.

Moreover, due to the homogenising approach to childhood taken by the report, there is no interrogation of the geographic, gender, and age divide. The situational analysis presents online harm and abuse as experienced most by urban, male, and older adolescents (15–17 years). These figures are presented without seeking to understand whether the issue is prevalent among these groups because they have higher access compared to their rural, female, and younger counterparts. In addition to ignoring/failing to critically interrogate the geographic, age, and gender divide, the report quotes a previous study that indicates that gender differences in internet are not significant in four countries where the study was taken. This seems flawed as there is plenty of evidence demonstrating gender difference in internet access and use, with girls and women being more disadvantaged (see Banaji, Livingstone, Nandi, & Stoilova, 2018; Kleine, Hollow, & Poveda, 2014; Pfeiffer et al., 2014; WRPAPC, 2012)

In addition to advocacy for increased regulation to protect children and girls, child protection programmes may use awareness initiatives to disseminate discourses about the heightened vulnerability of children because of the internet. Religious and conservative groups and individuals further defend these discourses, disseminated through moral panics by moral entrepreneurs who include the media and public and religious figures and activists who promote, shape and influence societal core values (Bhatia et al., 2021; Howarth, 2013; Walsh, 2020). For example, in his statement to the media after officiating the launch of the report, Dr. Mutua describes children as valuable and precious and argues for their protection from aggressive marketing practices seeking to sell adult products like condoms, alcohol, and encourage gambling (Mediamax Network Limited, 2018). Similar sentiments demonstrating the value ascribed to children are expressed in the Government of Ghana report. The report

describes how the internet can erode such value, hence the need for urgent measures for their protection (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2018, p. 6). The idea of children as valuable emanates from beliefs about children and childhood, which adults are able to impose due to the power dynamics existing between them and children.

How could this representation be questioned, disputed, disrupted?

Analysis of the two reports point to a narrow focus based on a preconceived ideas and goals, rather than a serious effort to understand children's lives online and advance their well-being in the digital era. Such an approach is likely to lead to the development of laws, policies and programmes that advocate for online regulation, regulation of cybercafés and to create awareness on online abuse, harm, and OCSE. These agendas are based on adult perceptions of the problem influenced by dominant perceptions of childhood, ICTs, and the internet.

Such approaches could be disrupted by developing research agenda that is not centred on a pre-determined agenda. This could be achieved through the use child-centred approaches that centre on the perspectives and experiences of children, rather than preconceived ideas. Rather than viewing children and girls as vulnerable victims, the reports could have taken an approach that views them as social actors that continuously make sense of their surroundings. This should be followed by efforts to generate more nuanced understandings of children's experiences of the internet in their diverse contextual settings, and more so for girls.

Conclusion

This article presents Kenya and Ghana as case studies to demonstrate the interplay of child protection and media risk discourses in policy and practice, their practical implications. These discourses portray children, particularly girls, as innocent and vulnerable to OCSE and online predation and often drive policy agenda discussions on children and the internet, often calling for urgent regulation of the internet. Such discussions are however not driven by robust methodological research, but are instead driven by public fear and internet moral panic. This has potential to adversely affect children's access to the internet and consequently the opportunities that the internet presents for them. Moreover, by casting the spotlight for internet risk and harm strongly on girls, it widens the digital divide between women and men, and girls and boys, thereby derailing efforts towards gender equality. This call for the need for nuanced, contextualized, interventions based on methodologically robust evidence on children and the internet, particularly on the African continent where internet access is still low in many areas, particularly for girls and women and for poor and marginalized communities.

Note

1. Cybercafé are small commercial outlets that provide internet access at a fee (usually 50 cents or 1 Kenya Shilling per minute). Although this is expensive, it becomes an affordable way of offering the internet by allowing people to access the internet for short periods.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Joan Njagi is a PhD candidate at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam. Her PhD research examines the role of digital technologies in navigating the socio-cultural tensions that surround sexual and reproductive health and rights for 10-17-year-old adolescent girls in poor urban areas in Kenya. She is the Project Manager of the Girls Agency Lab (GAL) at AMPLIFY Girls.

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Prior state of knowledge

A lot of research documents the realisation of children's rights provided by the UN Convention on the rights of the Child. However, there is a dearth of research on the digital rights of children particularly in Africa.

Novel contributions

Through analysis of policy and institutional perspectives relating to children, ICTs, and the internet in Kenya and Ghana, this article offers a critical approach to the construction of children and ICTs in policy and practice.

Practical implications

The article counters dominant narratives that may affect children's ability to access and benefit from the internet. It advocates for policies and programs that seek to understand children's online experiences and support children to engage constructively with the internet.

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