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## Experiences of Female Adolescent on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children During Community Quarantine in Davao City, Philippines

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### Abstract

*The study sought to describe the experiences of female adolescents, ages 15 to 17 years old as victim-survivors of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) during community quarantine in Davao City. The study's design was descriptive- qualitative particularly phenomenological research. Using purposive sampling the team interviewed eleven female adolescents, three barangay officials for key informant interviews, and conducted a focus group discussion among the identified agencies with direct services for OSAEC. The study describes poverty as the major driving factor that leads female adolescents in Davao City to engage in OSAEC. This situation was further exacerbated when the COVID lockdown happened to result in the loss of jobs, limited mobility, and uncertainty. Consequently, the respondent's family had difficulty sustaining their daily needs, pushing victim-survivors to engage in OSAEC. Limited mobility, caused many respondents to shift to online platforms as substitutes for physical communication, further raising their vulnerability to online sex predators. Respondents were introduced to OSAEC through seemingly harmless online chat groups which eventually led to pimping and matching with potential perpetrators. The chat groups paved the way for new acquaintances with experience in online sexual transactions and pushed victim-survivors to the trade in hopes of gaining financial rewards. Sexual behavior online eventually leads to physical interaction with local perpetrators. The study further revealed that barangay officials have little knowledge and capability in handling OSAEC cases. OSAEC in its many forms continues to victimize children, more so when several factors create vulnerability in them such as naivety, peer pressure, distorted perspectives on filial obligations, minimal awareness, and proactive action from duty-bearers. As we strive to protect the youth from all forms of sexual abuse, there is a greater challenge in providing holistic, multi-disciplinary, and multi sectoral action among duty bearers to stop OSAEC further.*

**Keywords:** Female adolescents, Poverty, Online sexual abuse and exploitation, Community quarantine

### Introduction

It has long been established that abuse and exploitation of children have consequences may it be short-term, long-term, severe, or cumulative adverse effects. The consequence of sexual victimization negatively impacts the child's present and future, as well as the community or society. As such international bodies, government institutions, and countries have initiated programs and policies to safeguard children against all forms of abuse and exploitation. ASEAN member states have also committed support through, a declaration to protect children from all forms of online exploitation and abuse by prioritizing seven measures that represent the key elements which can help shape a safer digital world for children in the ASEAN region and beyond.

In a collective concern to promote the rights and welfare of children, the Philippines in 1990, approved the International Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) and adopted several laws about protecting and promoting Human Rights. However, despite a legal environment conducive to implementing public policies, Child Sexual abuse remains the most common issue handled by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), (UNICEF, 2020). The 2015 Child Protection Network Annual Report states that 87% of all cases of sexual violence are girls, 11.7% of which occurred in the family home. While victims of sexual exploitation for commercial purposes are predominantly 13 to 18-year-old girls, some of them were forced into prostitution from as young as ten years old. ("Child Sexual Abuse: Context in the Philippines").

Prior to the Digital era, child sexual abuse and exploitation were limited and specific. Today, technology has ushered a new form of sexual abuse and exploitation, that is, Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC). In a study by Burke et al. (2002) the increase in indecent images in the digital space is a growing concern since it warrants policing and legislation to ensure the protection of our children's rights. Child sexual abuse has become a threat as people misuse internet, in fact the study emphasizes the strong relationship between internet use and child pornography. Child protection advocates now contend with the online and offline sexual abuse. In this Digital era, sexual abuses and exploitation has become more organized, complex, prevalent, and clandestine, making it more challenging for the government and child protection advocates.

OSAEC involves the use of communication technology for sexual abuse and exploitation. The forms of sexual abuse and exploitation online are not limited to pornography or cybersex but also include live streaming, according to the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the Philippine Internet Crimes against Children Center (PICACC). OSAEC (Joleby et al., 2021) can vary from sexual conversations with children, viewing, downloading, and distributing child sexual abuse images, inviting children to perform sexual acts/assaults online, and webcam live or recorded videos. OSAEC usually happens with the use of webcams and communication software using chat rooms, email, and social networking sites. It involves cybercriminals who initiate communications of a sexual nature with children as victims and entice them to later engage in sexual behavior transmitted through the internet" (DSWD-UNFPA, 2021).

A negative blowback of surge of internet use is the rise of illicit trade of online sexual abuse images and videos. NCMEC reported that there are more than 16 million reports of online child sexual abuse materials. Of this number, more than 800,000 of the reports came from the Philippines (NCMEC, 2019). In 2022, statistical data from NCMEC showed that there is a steady increase with more than 32 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation online materials, showing a steady rise from 2019 to 2022, with 2021 as the highest jump from 21 million in 2020 to 29 million in 2021 (NCMEC, 2022). With the alarming increase happening during the pandemic, we can perhaps deduce it is attributed to a surge in online use during these years. The reported increase in OSAEC around the world by US NCMEC was during the lockdown (Ronda, R.A., 2022).

Though OSAEC is gaining an alarming magnitude, OSAEC is currently understudied (Wolak et al., 2018), and to some extent underestimated (Hamilton-Giachritsis et al., 2017). OSAEC is a hidden, complex, and practically borderless crime that many people are unaware of. According to the National Baseline Survey on Assault against Children (NBS-VAC, 2015), one in every two children is a victim of online violence, and girls are more vulnerable (UNICEF, 2021). OSAEC, in the Philippines, has emerged as the center of child sex abuse materials production worldwide, with 80% of Filipino children vulnerable to online sexual abuse, some facilitated even by their parents (UNICEF, 2016).

The negative impact of OSAEC has immeasurable adverse and long-term effects in terms of the physical, psychological, emotional, and well-being of children and adolescent females/girls (Hall et al., 2023). However, according to Merten (2020) effects like trauma may not be immediately noticed. In a study conducted by the DSWD and the Agency Council against Child Pornography and UNICEF-Philippines (July 2021), the first cybersex case in Davao involving minors was noted in the article of Velez, 2014, as cited in the study. The suspect was at first performing lascivious acts, then began to ask for children, and later it involved the client's two daughters and nieces. This study also cited Gabriela's argument that the inefficiency of the government's anti-poverty programs has led to an increase in child pornography syndicates, mostly involving European pedophiles in Mindanao (DavaoToday.com, 2016).

Before the lockdown, the Philippines had been known to have cases related to online sexual exploitation of children, with more than 2000 suspected victims of sexual online exploitation from 2014 to 2015. In 2016 UNICEF already called the Philippines the "global epicenter of live-stream sexual abuse trade," and many of the victims are children (UNICEF, 2020). In 2018 it was reported that the Philippines, through the Department of Justice Office of Cybercrime, received 579,006 cyber tips for

the online sharing, re-sharing, and selling of child sexual abuse images and videos. In 2019, 418,422 cyber tips were recorded (<https://www.saferkidsph.org/learn-about-osaec/>, nd).

When the lockdown was implemented, where cinemas, bars, restaurants, and concerts were closed, most people were compelled to engage online. This includes children and adolescent females/girls. Thus, incidents related to sexual abuse, like cybersex or pornography, escalated. Several articles or reports cited that sexual exploitation among children or adolescent females has become rampant in the Philippines (UNFPA, 2020).

Noteworthy to say that the pandemic put more Filipino children at risk of OSAEC. The US-Based NCMEC (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children) announced in April 2020 that from the start of the pandemic, the number of cases related to OSAEC has increased by 264% in the Philippines. Save the Children, (2020) It was noted that 40% of the facilitators were members of the victims' immediate families who had been involved in the online exploitation of children to help them cope-up with the debilitating economic impact of the pandemic. As a result, the Philippines has been identified as the "largest source of online child sexual abuse materials," with most youngsters coming from low-income families and going online unprotected or without guidance. Foreign online sexual predators have been targeting Filipinos, according to the survey, because the majority can understand and speak English (Mindanews, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic led the government to impose policies ordering community lockdowns, quarantines, stay-at-home policies, and online classes which has increased the risk of Filipino children being sexually exploited in cyberspace. Engagement in social networking and gaming sites has made it easier for online perpetrators to gain access, incite, and communicate with vulnerable children by sharing pornographic materials or asking for one. With the increased demand for pornography among children and adolescent girls during quarantine and the severe economic downturn hitting many families, reported cases of online sexual exploitation of Filipino children have ballooned (Payne, 2020). In 2020, there were an estimated 1.2 million cases of online sexual exploitation among children, as reported by CNN Philippines (CNN Philippines, 2020). Furthermore, according to advocates against OSAEC, the Philippines' online sexual abuse and exploitation cases continued to be very alarming. The Commission on Human Rights has stated that the pandemic in the Southeast Asian country encouraged a rise in online sexual exploitation of adolescent women and children (Save the Children, 2021).

The changes brought by the pandemic led to a significant impact on OSAEC occurrence and victimization. It was reported in a study by Gassó et al. in 2021, that from a psychological perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as an exceptional event that acted as a natural experiment as they influence change in the individuals' routinary activities, engagements initiatives, behavior of perpetrators, victims and even guardians in this particular time and space.

According to Talikala, Inc., a non-government organization based in Davao City that helps women who are forced to engage in the sex trade or as victims of human trafficking, with the shift in school setup from face-to-face to online classes, young girls from poor urban communities have become vulnerable to online sexual abuse and exploitation. Worse, the group discovered that a number of cases, the victims' family members are complicit in the online exploitation of minors to help the family cope with the crippling economic burden caused by the pandemic (Soco-Bantayan, J. M., 2021, October 20).

Despite initiatives from several non-government organizations working with children, such as Save the Children, Talikala, Inc, and government agencies like the DSWD, there is still a need to beef up the IEC campaign against OSAEC and to advocate for the passage of relevant policies to safeguard children and adolescents against all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation. We continue to wonder why despite the mentioned initiatives, problems related to cybercrime and violence against children continue to proliferate.

The study is anchored on the Ecological System Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, which holds that people encounter different environments that influence their behavior throughout their life. As the study sought to investigate the narratives of the experiences of victim-survivors of OSAEC, it also investigated the different Ecological Systems of Urie Bronfenbrenner, including personal, social, cultural, and economic factors. To give a better analysis on the person's environment, Bronfenbrenner divided it into five different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. The first level was the Microsystem which was the direct/ immediate environment of every female adolescent, like their family, friends, classmates, teachers, neighbors, and other people that have direct contact with the person included in the Microsystem. This system was one of the most important systems of all five, in a way that it can affect the adolescents' well-being instantly compared to the other remaining system. The role of this system was to nurture, guide, educate, and monitor children so they could have a good life and view of the world. When victim-survivors live in a system where OSAEC is condoned or tolerated or where knowledge of the OSAEC or its ill effects is absent,

the response and experiences of OSAEC victimization will be detrimental, this causes huge changes in their actions, behavior, and how they interact, also, this will influence whether their risks and vulnerabilities on OSAEC were increased or decreased.

The second level was the mezzo system. The structures of this layer impact the child's development by interacting with some structures in her microsystem (Berk, 2000). The mezzo system encompasses the interaction of the different microsystems in which victim-survivors find themselves. It was, in essence, a system of microsystems and as such, involved linkages between home and school, between peer group and family, and between family and community. Positive and negative relationships influenced the victim-survivor. The development of victim-survivors was affected by the different relationship interactions between their parents and teachers, health workers and service providers, policies, and the community, and lastly, the relationship they had with the church to which they belong.

Leah Bordlee (2020), wrote in a Borgen Project blog entitled "Child Poverty in the Philippines During COVID-19" states that COVID-19 had exacerbated cyber-trafficking, and "increasing risks of poverty" led to the growth of online exploitation of children. "This relationship suggests a strong link between poverty and exploitation." 80 percent of Filipino children were vulnerable to online sexual abuse, some of which are facilitated by their own parents. OSAEC has become for some, victim-survivors, a family's response to combating poverty (UNICEF, 2016). The parents who were supposed to guide and teach the children good actions became the perpetrators of why the children were victimized in OSAEC. Agonizingly, the children thought that sexual exploitation was good and would not harm them because they were led by their parents, but they were just used by them to earn money. Furthermore, unemployment due to COVID-19 is a precursor to *harsh parenting*. It places a *strain on family relationships*, and it may also increase the stress level among siblings or couples (Lawson, Piel, & Simon, 2020)

In the mezzo system, victim-survivors' experiences with the service providers affected their development. Positive experiences with the service providers who rescued the victims of OSAEC provided safe facilities, and prepared protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs for the victim-survivors will help them in healing and recovery. The exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model pertains to the linkages that may exist between two or more settings, one of which may not contain the developing children but affected them indirectly, nonetheless. This layer incorporates formal and informal structures in society, where it includes a much bigger social system that indirectly influences victim survivors' experiences of OSAEC. Guidelines pertaining to IATF COVID response, closure, and restrictions had compelled people to go online either for education, business, work, or recreation.

The pandemic pushed people to become reliant on the internet to learn, work, and relate to family and friends. While the fast-evolving digital world was extremely promising, it also opened new avenues for criminal activity and violence that endanger children's safety. The government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a shift in the environment from face-to-face interaction to virtual, thereby, also increasing risks and vulnerabilities to OSAEC. The fourth level, the Macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, was the largest and most distant collection of people and places to the children that still had significant influences on them. This ecological system was composed of the children's cultural patterns and values, specifically their dominant beliefs and ideas, as well as political and economic systems. The poverty situation of the victim-survivor pushed the parents or relatives to look for an economic remedy. Sadly, for some, the online platform became an avenue to sell, lure and victimize female adolescents to OSAEC. The Filipino value of respect for the elderly has been used as an excuse to manipulate children. The adult caregiver /parents used authority and power to influence young children to perform OSAEC.

The Philippines had been tagged as the global epicenter of sexual exploitation because Filipinos were good and can speak English. English language literacy, availability, and ease of access to technology, well-established financial transaction facilities, and the lack of perceived conflict between sexual exploitation and significant social norms were some of the sociocultural and economic factors contributing to the country's high concentration of OSAEC. Internet Technology literacy (Ali, S. & Paash, A.S, 2021) appertaining to ease of access and ease of use has been cited as a significant factor facilitating sexual abuse and exploitation against children. Passage of relevant laws specifically, Republic Act 10929 which allows access to free Wi-Fi in public places is seen by some key informants as posing further problems related to OSAEC. Unless some checks and balances were put in place, this will be used by perpetrators to commit OSAEC. On the other hand, Technology can be used as a medium for raising public awareness about OSAEC through the following: setting up hotline/helplines for reporting, filtering content delivered through the web, and semi-automated detection of content in materials shared online, and analysis of chat logs. These factors would have a positive impact on the

victims if they were managed and guided properly but instead, the use of technology had also made OSAEC more invisible, fast-tracked, and bigger in scope.

Lastly, was the chronosystem which consists of all the environmental changes that occur in a person's overall lifetime had a huge influence on their development? This includes major transitions in their life just like the pandemic. They experience a lot of things during community quarantine and the use of the different online platforms influences their actions, behaviors, and attitudes. This situation perpetuates the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. The advent of technology, the shift to online, lockdowns, physical restrictions, and job closures, these changes led to some changes in the children's social, cultural, worldview, personal and psychological aspects. In a way, it can be said that it raised children's risks and vulnerabilities to OSAEC.

The service providers, law enforcement agencies, communities, and barangay officials or leaders were also having challenges in adjusting to what they called the "new normal" and in combating OSAEC. Knowing that adolescent females/girls were more often present online during the pandemic has doubled the risks and vulnerabilities and called for more proactive and palliative responses from the duty bearers. (The Psychology Notes Headquarters, 2019). This necessitates the importance for further investigation on the experience of children victimized in OSAEC.

This study sought to determine the experiences of female adolescents aged 15 to 17 on online sexual abuse and exploitation during community quarantine in Davao City. This included the experiences of the adolescent females/girls in accessing services from the agencies where the adolescent females/girls are placed, like DSWD, the City Social Services and Development Office (CSSDO), and NGOs with related programs for OSAEC.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What were the experiences of the female adolescents on OSAEC during the community quarantine in Davao City?
2. What programs/services were made available to OSAEC victim-survivors?
3. What were the recommendations of the respondents to improve the programs and services provided to OSAEC victim-survivors?

## **Methodology**

This research study is descriptive utilizing a qualitative approach. The use of a qualitative approach is very important in understanding deeply the experiences and feelings of sexual abuse survivors. We need their "voices" to understand why Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) occurs, what its impact is, and how to prevent and treat it (Hidayati and Nugroho, 2022). Specifically, it utilizes the descriptive phenomenological method. The unit of analysis includes the following: eleven (11) OSAEC survivors, 15 to 17 years of age at the time of the interview and were residents of Davao City. For the key informant's interview, two (2) barangay officials who were actively involved in programs and services that curb OSAEC at the community level, and Social Workers, law enforcement agencies, or service providers directly involved in managing the victim-survivor case either in the rescue, rehabilitation, or reintegration program/services for the focused group discussion. The study utilized the purposive sampling in choosing the respondents. A triangulation of methods was employed for data gathering particularly, in-depth interviews, key informant interview and focus group discussion.

Prior to the conduct of the study, and given the sensitivity of the research topic, the study was subjected to an Ethical review and approval from the Ethics Committee of the University Research Council (URC) of the Ateneo de Davao University and the Department of Social Welfare and Development Reg. XI. The team underwent Training in Conducting Interviews with Victims and Survivors from the World Hope International. To address possible triggers of trauma that may occur from the respondents' recall of their experiences of online sexual abuse and exploitation during community quarantine, a standby in-house social worker was on board during the IDI. Since Davao City was still under enhanced community quarantine lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, health protocols were observed during the data-gathering phase.

The study utilized the thematic analysis approach by Colizzi with the following steps: familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering of themes, developing an exhaustive description, producing the fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the fundamental structure. The team coordinated with the centers/facilities and secured approval for data gathering. An informed consent was presented to the minor's caregiver/guardian/parent, while an assent form was provided to the respondents. Agreeing to undergo the IDI requires the respondents to affix their signatures to the consent and assent forms. This signifies that the respondent fully understood the purpose of the study and the importance of their participation. Since the respondents were minors, the researchers considered the presence of parents/caregivers/guardians in the entire process of the

IDI. The interviews were conducted in the center, with the assigned Social Worker staying with the respondents in cases where there is an absence of parent/caregiver/guardians.

## **Results and Discussion**

This part shows the narratives of female adolescents who are victim-survivors of online sexual abuse and exploitation. Note that the names used here are aliases and not the real names of respondents.

### **Experiences of the female adolescents on OSAEC during the community quarantine in Davao City**

The series of pandemic lockdowns (Gassó et al., 2021) significantly affected daily routine, and changed the communication landscape through how people socialize, express their feelings, romantic and sexual interactions. Social Distancing has led to a change in the way people behave in cyberspace which has increased sexual victimization cases. In Davao City, during community quarantine, the respondents have engaged online more than usual. The Internet became their only source of interaction through different social media sites. The internet also became their primary tool to learn as there was an academic shift from face-to-face to an online mode of learning. Because of the shift, more female adolescents exposed themselves to risk and vulnerabilities to being victimized by predators online. Furthermore, when young adolescents (Blancaflor et al., 2022) have limited to no knowledge about data privacy and data protection, this makes them more vulnerable and at risk to exploitation and abuse by online perpetrators.

#### **Alternative Source of Income**

Poverty is a reality in the Philippines, further exacerbated by the restrictive lockdown that led to the loss of jobs for some individuals and income for some families. It has been identified that poverty is the driving force for female adolescents to engage in OSAEC. The online interaction made them vulnerable to transactions through different social media platforms and gaming applications enticing them to earn money. The lure of financial compensation for seemingly harmless but with sexual overtones, and poverty increased the vulnerability of women exponentially. As they search to find means in alleviating hunger and find means to augment their needs, they become prey to those facilitators and buyers of OSAEC.

Respondents shared that among peers, this kind of online transaction from harmless conversations to sexual innuendos is proliferating, and if they can bring food to the table, most parents turn a blind eye to it. Just because those who engage in this online transaction can buy the latest fashion accessories and food, it has become a sort of a "fad" among their peers. Normalizing what they are doing because almost all young female adolescents in the community are allowed by their parents as the majority are earning and can help sustain the financial needs of their families. According to one of the respondents.

*"I met a guy in the chat room. Later, I called him Daddy. He sends me money from P1,200.00 to P2,500.00 monthly."- Chloe, 15 years old*

A stressful social environment raised the vulnerability of children to abuse and exploitation. Seeking financial means to augment the needs due to economic challenges during the lockdown has led young adolescents to look for financial means.

#### **Grooming Behavior Becomes a necessity for OSAEC**

Based on the narratives, most of the respondents were groomed by their gay friends. Before engaging online, they already know what to do and what possible things will happen. Unfortunately, such online activities are becoming popular among these female adolescents because they are now seeking approval from their parents to engage in them. According to Talikala, since these incidents are becoming a trend among female adolescents, it is now considered "online prostitution" among female adolescents who started during the pandemic.

Female adolescents casually introduce themselves to buyers online. Then as they get along, and become comfortable, it is when their buyers send them nude photos. They are also asked to do the same in exchange for financial rewards and other promises like going to other countries and scholarships.

*"Gi share gud niya iyang ari nya tagaan daw ko niya og kwarta ipakita lang daw nako akong boobs." He is an American. He let me see his penis. He said he will give me money If I let him see my boobs) -Ivy, 17 years old.*

Some facilitators did not have a hard time grooming the respondents to engage in this activity because the child victim-survivors initially wanted to join their peers in online sexual transactions due to naivety.

*“Di man gyud malikayan kay naa pud koy ubang friend na ga engage ana” (It cannot be avoided because some of my friends are into it) – Esther, 16, years old.*

### **Widening of online community**

As female adolescents engage online, they discover different sites or applications on the internet being introduced to them by their online acquaintances. Eventually, their social circle expanded, and the respondents learned to engage with more buyers. As their online community expanded, so did their vulnerability to OSAEC. Potential buyers introduced new websites, which they would have to transfer to lessen detection by law enforcers or online surveillance. Facebook has strict online community standards, censors pornographic materials, and even uses sexually charged language. Many of these respondents were asked to move to a different platform with fewer restrictions, and anonymity was promoted.

Engaging with buyers online resulted in a drastic change in the lifestyle of the victim-survivors of OSAEC. They were not used to this kind of setup as they were engaged more with people physically before the pandemic. However, the shift to online, where people are restricted from going out, affected their livelihood and made them vulnerable to abuse in this online setup.

For example, recent research suggests that online sexual victimization (OSV) rose to 10% during the 3-month period of lockdown alone. (Gassó et al., 2021) This can be attributed to lack of social contact and change in routine activities which more likely led to OSV occurring. This change in interaction landscape because of community lockdowns and quarantines led to financial limitations, loss of jobs, and inability to earn income because of the covid restriction. Risk-taking behavior was evident as respondents shared that they are more concerned with surviving and buying things they want and were deprived of, especially in terms of school requirements.

*“Makapalit ko sa kinahanglanon labi na sa skwelahan.” (I can buy the things I need in school). Chloe, 15 years old*

The theoretical framework on the ecological systems of Urie Bronfenbrenner, particularly under the microsystem, states that the direct interaction of the respondents includes their parents/family and peers. This system is responsible for guiding, monitoring, and educating female adolescents, especially on their online activities. This is supposed to be the ideal situation. Hence due to poverty and naivety, these female adolescents become vulnerable to being victimized by OSAEC. The family and parents are supposed to guide, nurture, and provide for the basic needs and fail to play their roles as parents. The microsystem is essential in shaping the values and beliefs of female adolescents. "The quality of the child's environment is essential in developing the cognitive aspect" (Hartin & Williams, 2022). Considering that friends and the online community have been where the interaction and communication of the respondents were directed towards, there are influences in their way of thinking, beliefs, values, and worldview. It became evident that the respondents thought that engaging in online sexual activities to earn income was a way of earning money, not knowing that it was already a form of sexual abuse. Sexual predators online exploited the vulnerable state of the respondents by promising income or financial rewards in exchange for lewd photos. Friends who groomed the respondents to this kind of trade were able to directly influence them into entering the online sexual trade by convincing them that it is the only kind of financial help accessible to them.

OSAEC is borderless, difficult to control, and increasingly transactional in terms of production, distribution, and engagement between perpetrators and young adolescents. Looking at OSAEC in a positive light as a widening of community, but on the other side of the spectrum, it also raises vulnerabilities to abuse and exploitation. Hearn in 2004 pushed for having a transnational perspective, first, we look at the nations or national boundaries, and second, we consider the trans (across) relations which understandably affects governance and state control becoming less powerful in cyberspace. Significantly, the second element 'trans' is understood as in a continuous movement where the hosting and posting of online pornographic materials may be located elsewhere, transferred to another audience, and the exchange between nation-state or transnational gender-sexual cultures further results in a sexual violation. Without the change in perspective, we might fail to recognize that sexual predators continue to exploit the cyberspace for their benefit.

### **Different rooms, different games**

There are various activities one can find online, from games, fashion, celebrity news, funny reels, and the like. Online platforms seem to address all forms of desires, curiosities, and the need for

connection. As the respondents engaged in online activities they are also introduced to different “rooms” which means different social media sites or gaming applications. Cybora, red room, role play, Roblox, and the inns are just a few of the platforms that the respondents were able to name. Given the options of cyber engagement by the respondents, these online activities extended to personal meetups. The same is also true for those children who were sexually abused online and offline in the study of Joleby in 2020. The study cited that the perpetrators were also able to exploit children online through sexual coercion, child pornography, sexual service, indecent sexual assault, and grooming. Unfortunately, in the study, respondents shared that despite the strict implementation of community quarantine, they were able to circumnavigate the protocols in place and meet their online contacts face-to-face. After meeting online, they exchanged Facebook accounts, then started chatting through the Messenger app. It is where they started as friends and then moved up to another level of engagement until negotiations to meet personally were agreed upon. Because of these online meetups, the young adolescents were enticed to perform sexual favors, participate in indecent videos/pictures, and sexually assaulted in exchange for monetary rewards. According to one of them, they are paid P2,500 for every sexual favor they give to their buyers during personal meetups.

While the respondents engaged online with their respective buyers who are foreigners or locals, they also experienced different types of exploitation and abuse. For instance, Cybora is a chat room where there are a set of menus to choose from. Menus may display women or girls with different colors and different body sizes. Each menu has corresponding prices; the base price is 50 tokens which is equivalent to two dollars (\$2.00). The more the buyers demand sexual activities online from the respondents, the bigger the money they can earn. One respondent claimed that she is earning one hundred thousand pesos (PhP 100,000.00) every two weeks. These sexual favors that are shown through real-time video feeds are the ff: simulating same sex, sex with the opposite gender, stripping, dancing in lewd clothing, defecating, having sex with a mentally challenged individual, basically, all the deviant sexual fantasies one could think of are found in the menus. A buyer will choose a menu, pay a corresponding token and the child victim will perform the request.

*“I joined Cybora, it is where I perform. When I joined, I did not expect that I would become popular. They like me. If the buyer especially likes the performance, they sometimes pay more tokens.”*  
-Nicole, 17 years old

Another room is Roblox. It is a game application that is seemingly harmless. But there are hidden rooms that can be found throughout the setting. Once the setting is clicked, the user may find options to click the chat room for those engaging in sexual abuse and exploitation among children. These are just one of the many examples of gaming applications or social media platforms that promote online abuse and exploitation among children. Social media and gaming applications are not merely for virtual engagements. Some narratives included that when they chat with buyers and find out that they are in the city, personal meetups follow. Hence it is also a venue where the buyers can meet the respondents personally even at the height of the pandemic despite the restrictions coming from the government.

### **Parents and Friends as Instigators of OSAEC**

The respondents shared that they needed to provide financial help to their parents or siblings out of filial piety. It is known that community quarantines or lockdowns exacerbated the poverty situation in the country, and because of this the respondents, unfortunately, engaged in sexual transactions for financial remuneration. Being young and naive, they are easily lured by friends to engage in activities considered OSAEC with the hope that they will earn money.

Most respondents initially kept their sexual activities a secret from their parents because they are afraid to be scolded. However, when they disclosed what they were doing, their parents encouraged them, and others told them to just take care. There is no adverse reaction from the parents. Their parents just remind them to ensure that they will not harm others or that they will not be harmed and are told to stop immediately once they feel there are negative effects on their bodies.

*“...dako naman gud akong nahatag sa ilaha bantog nagduda na sila didtoa nag open forum mi...Tanan sila ma’am, Papa, lolo og lola wala silay mabuhat. Ana sila okay ra sa amoa basta wala ka nangawat, wala kay gihadol ana pud. Kasabot pud sila sa akua Ma’am ba na gibuhat nako to tanan para sa ilaha” (I gave them a big amount of money, there they started to doubt. All of them cannot do anything. They said for as long as I did not steal and did not harm anyone. They understand me, I did all for them) -Nicole, 17 years old.*

Since the respondents are minors, the parents claim the money from the remittance centers. This tells us that the parents know about their children's transactions and are even aware of the money being sent in exchange for sexual favors. Moreover, we also have respondents whose parents are the ones who push their daughters to engage in online sexual activities in the hope of sustaining the family's economic needs. The same findings are supported by NCMEC in 2013 where data showed that 18% of online child sexual abuse materials were produced by parent/guardian, 25% were made by neighbor or friend while 18% was through online enticement.

While respondents were pushed by their parents to become victims, some victims were neglected by their parents and went into the trade to survive alone. The respondent said she engaged in online sexual activities because her parents were separated, and her father physically abused her. She left her home and lived with relatives. Thereby, she needs to earn so she will not become financially dependent on her relatives. Her relatives were also struggling financially, and it did not sit well with her to also become baggage to her relatives.

While parents allowed the respondents because of the income they are earning, friends who are facilitators of OSAEC are grooming or influencing these female adolescents on how to perform better to earn more. According to most of the respondents, their gay friends are the ones who introduced them to OSAEC. They compare their friend's improving economic condition to the potential child victim to lure them. Seeing the changes in the economic situation of those who have already engaged in online sexual transactions, the respondents are convinced to engage in this type of activity. Parents and other family members assure them that this will not harm them because it happens online and there is no physical contact. Little did their parents know that some of their children were meeting their buyers personally for the local buyers.

Parents as instigators of OSAEC is also one reason why many of the *barangays* (referring to smallest administrative division in the Philippines and is the native Filipino term for a village, district or ward) officials in the community deny the existence of OSAEC. Either they have children, or it is their neighbor's children who are in this situation. Hence, resulting in minimal reporting of cases in the barangay. This becomes a challenge for those government agencies or non-government agencies to effectively respond to this issue in their respective barangays or communities. Conversely, if parents or other family members are implicated, it creates a difficult situation for the government to address since children may not be able to bear seeing their loved ones incarcerated.

### **Stages of emotions experienced by the victim-survivors of OSAEC**

The respondents in the study undergo stages of emotions. At first, when they were introduced to this kind of activity, most of them said they feared meeting the buyer for the first time. There is fear of the unknown because they are uncertain of what will happen and what will be asked of them.

Based on the narratives, they have different responses on what their feelings are when it comes to engaging with their buyers. The respondents said they feel happy and excited about engaging with their buyers because they can buy what they need daily with their money. Even if there is a nagging feeling of uncertainty, this is overpowered by the desire to be financially compensated.

*"Lipay kayo ko ato te kay makakwarta ko tagaan pud ko og kwarta ato..malipay ko kay mapalit ko sa kinahanglanon labi na sa skwelahan.." (I was so happy because I earned money and bought the things I need in school) -Chloe, 15 years old.*

*"Excited! Na excite ko ma'am..of course naa pud siya positive na impact sakoa ma'am kay tungod napalit nako ang gusto nako na paliton." (I was excited! of course there is a positive impact for me. I can buy what I want) -Nicole, 17 years.*

While most of the respondents are happy with their initial engagement with their buyers, they are slowly confronted with dilemmas because their online activities are unknown to their parents. Some of the respondents are forced to disclose because as minors they are not allowed to transact with the money remittance centers. This caused them to reveal their activities online. Consequently, when parents become aware of their daughters' actions, they may exhibit both common and varying responses. Some may simply inform them that their behavior is harmless and acceptable, allowing them to continue with it. Some parents will only remind their daughters to take care. But no one among them discourages their daughters and takes action to prevent their daughters from further engaging in such activity.

Respondents stated that the feeling of happiness and excitement shifts to fear and unwelcoming as time passes. As the sexual favors escalate and their boundaries and limitations are tested, they are fearful that as higher amounts of money are involved, greater, risky, unwelcoming sexual favors are

expected from them. Since foreigners can afford greater money, they might also demand more deviant sexual favors/behaviors. For local buyers, the respondents experienced having been asked to take off their clothes and then being watched online while taking a bath. The respondents are afraid that it will come to the point that they will not be able to decline the requests because of the money involved and the fear of losing control over their bodies.

*"I'm scared that they will just come here, I'm scared that I cannot do anything because they send me money)-Chloe, 15 years old.*

As the respondents further engage, they earn more and become happy and excited to share their income with their parents. Respondents feel fulfilled because they can contribute financially and help with the expenses in their homes. But, as the demand increases, they feel stressed and anxious because they are uncertain about what the buyers will ask. Meanwhile, the longer they engage in this type of activity, they become apathetic to the discrimination and stigma. The uncertainties, fears, and feedback from others who think less of them are overshadowed by the money they earn. They said they don't care what other people say about them. What is important is they have food on the table. A child who is a victim of sexual abuse may exhibit ambivalent feelings about her experience, they may feel excited yet have unpleasant sensations, and may be fun but uncomfortable (Joleby et al, 2021). In this study, children felt disgusted yet happy because they can bring food to the table, anxious and apathetic, stressed and fulfilled. These myriads of emotions coming from the respondents show that as victims, counseling/therapeutic services should focus on arriving at resolutions of these conflicting emotions, specifically when it appears that they are desensitized to the negative emotions due to the feeling of fulfillment through their ability to "bring food to the table" is overwhelming.

The respondents revealed that they were afraid and uneasy regarding the situation. The initial feeling was fear because they had no choice but to get into the activity for economic reasons. After the sexual interaction online, the respondents feel "dirty", even if this was just online, the sexual behavior/activities the respondents did still cause them to feel uneasy about their bodies. There is an unwanted sexual activity in which certain boundaries and limitations were broken, leading to them feeling dirty about what transpired. When respondents recall the abusive act, such feelings and emotions may develop because of shame and humiliation. (Scott, 2022). Hence, it may be noted that traces of trauma may not appear immediately; it may take weeks or years. Some continue to be online even if it constitutes a serious crime, Merten (2020)

*"I feel dirty and scared. It is not good because I'm still young to engage in this type of work. I did this out of poverty" -Esther, 16 years old.*

This data is supported in the study on online child sexual abuse where children often developed distressing feelings from the sexual act which can be characterized as feelings of anxiety and disgust (Joleby et al, 2021) In the ecological systems theory, the microsystem plays a crucial role in honing and shaping children's attitudes and behaviors. Poverty contributes to what they have become. To change this situation, at least one of the systems where the child lives must help these female adolescents. In this case, the mezzo system is important to intervene to help the female adolescents as victim-survivors of OSAEC. According to Evans, "the microsystem is where the individual's microsystem does not function but is interconnected and can influence the microsystem" (Evans, 2020).

### **Victims becoming groomers**

The worst effect of OSAEC is the cycle of violence because once these victims have been in the sex trade for quite some time, eventually, they become pimps/facilitators/headhunters. These victims have come to recruit other female adolescents in their communities or people they meet online to be involved. Like what happened to Nicole, since she wants to maintain her earnings, she also pimps other young female adolescents. Sadly, it has come to a point where Nicole has begun grooming young females for OSAEC. She joins the beauty pageant to meet other female adolescents and transwomen.

She befriends them and introduces them to chatting online, enticing them on how to earn more just like her. Her friends affirmed her being a facilitator during our interview. It was observed that continued contact with the perpetrator who is the source of financial support distorted the value placed on self-worth, the adolescents felt better as a result of the financial support that they receive amidst the negative effect of OSAEC to their well-being. On the other hand, those who are already engaged in such activity are also asked by their buyers if they could refer to other female adolescents. According to Talikala, there are cases where the whole female adolescents in a family, whether it is their siblings or cousins, are also engaging in this sexually abusive and exploitative activities online. Some incidences

of sexual grooming dynamics, procedures, and stages include adults befriending and exploiting youngsters through the Internet. (Craven et al., 2006; Kloess, Beech, & Harkins, 2014).

### **Programs/services to OSAEC victim-survivors**

The government, non-government organizations, and other agencies, namely Talikala, DSWD, and Tambayan Center for Children's Rights, are at the frontlines in combating OSAEC cases. These organizations used *child's rights framework and multi-level framework* in creating immediate and long-term interventions that benefit the victim-survivors of OSAEC. Tambayan Center for Children's Rights and Talikala Inc are NGOs that provide direct services to victims-survivors of OSAEC. A wide array of *holistic programs and services* are also available to rescue/refer victims-survivors. They provide educational assistance, food assistance, psychosocial therapy, and dramatic arts therapy, physical development, to name a few. Their presence in their communities provides immediate access to services for the victim-survivors of OSAEC.

Tambayan uses a strategy called "hangout." This quickly befriends and earns the children's trust by hanging out in the communities. This is where they learn and identify who are those female adolescents who are at risk and those who are engaging in sexual and abusive relationships online.

Talikala Inc, on the other hand, works with people's organizations. They regularly visit their partner communities. This is also where they identify those female adolescents who are identified to be victim-survivors of OSAEC. They have direct work with clients, use casework and group work methods and provide services to the victim-survivors of OSAEC.

As NGOs, they also have their limitations in terms of resources. Whenever needed programs/services are not provided in their agency, they refer the victim-survivors of OSAEC to the Department of Social Welfare and Development XI (DSWD-XI) through the Interagency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT). Since both NGOs are members of the IACAT, there is a strong collaborative partnership. It must be noted that during the pandemic, DSWD-XI had limited services on OSAEC because the Center where the victim-survivors of OSAEC may stay for immediate help was turned into a facility for COVID patients.

### **Multi-level programs and services**

According to the respondents, NGOs' programs and services are *sufficient* because they have *multi-level programs* and services from immediate to long-term assistance, including psychosocial therapy, to heal the self-worth and self-determination of the respondents. Respondents expressed that the programs and services were helpful. In addition, with the help they receive, they can go back to school through educational assistance or scholarships. NGOs providing educational scholarships were significantly empowering clients and lessening their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. Literature on using formal education as a strategy to prevent sexual abuse to teach skills in children support that it proactively ensures children's personal safety against sexual exploitation and abuse. Banking on formal education to empower children and teach self-efficacy encourages uniformity in prevention skills (Fakunle, S.O. & Opadere. A.A., 2023).

Food assistance during the community quarantine was also another program cited as most helpful in the young adolescent's integrative healing.

*"Katung pandemic gipadal-an mi og 1k pero dapat makita sa picture ang mga grocery kanang bugas. Picturan namo tung napalit tapos tapos ipasa sa Tambayan. (During the pandemic they sent us one thousand pesos for food expenses. We took a picture of what we bought then sent it to Tambayan)" – Johanna, 17 years old.*

One respondent also shared that she learned self-defense from Talikala Inc. She joined the Taekwondo class sponsored by the said NGO. She also said that they have been able to attend camps with fellow children that allow them to be oriented on children's rights and the risks and vulnerabilities of children to all forms of abuse. The Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking gave them an allowance for their daily needs and school supplies.

*"Niya first ano nako diri kay tong nag taekwondo me, mao to nag sugod-sugod na dayon ang mga activity. Tong IACAT na gihatagan mig allowance. 300 taga bulan. (It was my first day here, we had Taekwondo. The IACAT provided us with P300.00 as monthly allowance)." -Ivy, 17 years old*

Provision of programs and services to victim-survivors is done through a multidisciplinary approach. Programs include rehabilitation and healing from the trauma of OSAEC. One of the respondents claimed that she was grateful for the organization that helped her not just financially but psychologically as well. She was able to enhance her different skills, including behavioral skills and through the training workshops conducted by the organization. More importantly, is learning how to protect themselves from getting victimized by perpetrators or becoming possible victims of OSAEC.

*“They helped us a lot financially and mentally. We learned a lot from our lessons about good manners, good behavior, and other skills. They also conducted workshops which I joined before.”- Nicole, 17 years old.*

Talikala also conducts sessions with parents and their children in the barangay or their respective communities. This activity helps settle disputes between children and their parents and heal their relationships. This reflects the Ecological Systems Theory that emphasized that when a microsystem is dysfunctional, the mezzo system, through the government or private organization's intervention, may help solve certain issues or problems related to OSAEC (Evans, 2020). This is where the role of the local government unit through the barangay, the government agencies, and the non-government agencies intervenes.

### **NGO partnerships with Barangays are important**

Ideally, the barangay is the closest unit of society responsible for helping the victim-survivors. The barangay must install mechanisms to respond to cases where victim-survivors are reported immediately. It has a structure such as the Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC) responsible for ensuring that the concerns of children are taken care of. The barangays are supposedly the ideal alternative source of support in cases where parents and relatives cannot perform their responsibilities over the female adolescents because they become an accomplice in instigating sexual abuse and exploitation. The barangay plays a critical role in the reintegration phase of the victim-survivors of OSAEC.

Capacitating and enabling the barangay officials, especially those handling OSAEC cases is considered a challenge. Barangay officials who are considered as focal persons for children and women's concerns on gender-based violence (GBV) handle all forms of GBV cases. Aside from case overload that focal persons face, continued learning development on OSAEC is also demanded. Yet, there are focal persons who are not well versed on what constitutes OSAEC, handling, reporting, and community reintegration of victim-survivors. This can be attributed to the constant changes in people and structure in the community due to the election, which possibly affect the management of cases of OSAEC. Hence there is a problem in terms of sustainability of the programs and services.

Previous research (Martin, J., 2014) showed challenges in working with child victims where officials handling OSAEC cases may have differences in the appraisal and evaluation on what constitutes images of child sexual abuse, and may have varying levels of understanding in looking at the effect of the abuse to children and degrees of seriousness of images (undressed, scantily dressed, alone, with others, sexual posture or not) may be sexual, or pornographic for some, yet some officials may exhibit poor judgment on the sexualized image, where images can vary based on the officials' assignment of the term “sexualized image”.

There are also cases where the barangay is compromised because the barangay officials in charge of OSAEC are identified with parents whose children were engaged in OSAEC. There are instances where the barangay officials were also instigators of OSAEC. The DSWD-XI representative realized the importance of strengthening the coordination between and among its members, including their coordination with the barangays in Davao City.

### **Guided by-laws on the protection of children against all forms of abuse**

The laws on OSAEC mandate that government agencies respond to cases of abuse and exploitation of children. Hence, the involvement of the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD) of the Philippine National Police. However, according to the WCPD, their involvement is limited because they focus more on preventive measures. They are expected to know the people in the communities and their persons of interest. As police officers, they are more concerned about providing penalties to those who committed the crime.

The government also mandates DSWD-XI to provide programs and services to the victim-survivors of OSAEC. DSWD has facilities for responding to OSAEC cases. However, during the pandemic, their facility was turned into a facility for those affected by COVID-19. One of the agency's tasks is strengthening the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking of Persons. IACAT is the coordinating body not only for trafficked persons but also for those victim-survivors of OSAEC. Talikala Inc and the Tambayan Center for Children's Rights are members of IACAT. Since the government also has its limitations in providing services for the OSAEC cases, NGOs fill in the gaps to help the victims-survivors of OSAEC.

Generally, government and private institutions play a critical role in supporting victims-survivors of OSAEC. Each has its contribution, from curbing the incidences of OSAEC down to providing services for intervention to rehabilitation and reintegration of the victims-survivors back into their communities or their respective families. The respondents clearly stated how the NGOs could help and support them. In the absence of such services from these institutions, there is no way that these female adolescents will be helped, including their parents, as they believe what they are doing is right and harmless.

According to the Theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner, there are multiple aspects of the child's development. It needs to consider the individual's development, in this case, the female adolescents. Under the mezzo system, education or other agencies may have a good relationship with parents, be it an NGO or government agency. This may have a direct positive influence on the female adolescents or the parents. (Evans 2020). On the other hand, the laws and policies are crucial in supporting and protecting female adolescents from becoming victimized because they are vulnerable.

### **Recommendations from the Respondents to improve the programs and services provided to OSAEC victims-survivors.**

The NGOs recommend that *awareness-raising in the communities* be conducted to enhance knowledge of the barangay officials and parents, especially on the possible effects of abuse and exploitation among female adolescents. The *multi-level approach* in addressing issues and concerns of victims-survivors of OSAEC must be emphasized to have a holistic response ensuring that support is both proactive and sustainable.

The importance of *multidisciplinary approach* is also essential in handling the victim-survivors to ensure a holistic approach in providing support for the victim-survivors of OSAEC. For example, NGOs like Talikala have limited programs and services including resources in helping the victim-survivors of OSAEC. There is a need for Talikala to establish linkages and network with other agencies. Talikala supports livelihood projects for the family of the victim-survivors to sustain their basic needs with the hope to prevent the female adolescent from engaging online. On the other hand, if a legal action or psychological support is deemed necessary, Talikala can also tap other agencies or individuals for referrals. However, during the FGD, Talikala shared the advantages of being a member of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking because they have a referral pathway in helping the victim-survivors of OSAEC. This also includes capacity building for those NGOs working with children as victim-survivors of OSAEC. In this case, there is a need to *mainstream the issues* related to OSAEC into the different curriculums, from basic education to the Higher education level. So, students or learners in different disciplines are prepared in assisting victim-survivors and in reporting of OSAEC cases.

The *participation of the different barangays* in curbing OSAEC is critical since the barangay serves as an alternative home for the victim-survivors of OSAEC. They are the ones closest to the families of the victim-survivors. Hence, they need to install mechanisms to ensure the safety of the victims-survivors as well as those at risk. It must be remembered that OSAEC is hidden and usually occurs at home. The barangay will serve as a watchdog to prevent OSAEC from happening.

*Close monitoring of internet utilization and literacy.* The respondents of this study wish that the government would come up with a mechanism to protect them as female adolescents from the perpetrators, including the facilitators of OSAEC. One suggestion from them is to have a law that bans them from accessing sites that promote OSAEC so these perpetrators will no longer harm them or further victimize other female adolescents. Respondents wanted those female adolescents or children to be secured from the perpetrators of OSAEC. Respondents also saw the need for small group discussion/processing activities like what they did in Talikala. Through this, children will also be aware of other children's experiences regarding OSAEC.

*"I want this resolved. I want them to no longer victimize other young females. It all happened on the internet. I want the Americans to be banned so they can no longer connect to the Philippines."- Esther, 16 years old.*

A promising line of research indicates that internet use is not associated with online sexual victimization (OSV). This accordingly is attributed to the fact that people can utilize internet/cyberspace in a healthier, safer, and responsible way because of technological literacy and awareness of existing laws governing internet use. (Gassó et al., 2021)

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

OSAEC, in its many forms, continues to victimize children due to the following: naivety, peer pressure, distorted perspective on filial piety, minimal awareness, and minimal action from duty-bearers. The result and findings already stated the possibility of normalizing the engagement of young children online in sexual abuse and exploitation. Seemingly, it is now acceptable because of the approval of most of the parents in the communities. Consequently, it becomes an alternative income for the family. Female adolescents do not only earn from trading themselves into abusive and exploitative relationships with buyers, either foreign or local, but some of them also engage in facilitating OSAEC.

As mentioned in the discussion, OSAEC victim-survivors developed apathetic behaviors based on the respondent's claim of the "*I do not care*" attitude for as long as they have money and may create distorted values. The respondents shared that they are encouraged by their parents because the online sex trade will not physically harm them. Furthermore, the stigma attached resulted in stress and anxiety among female adolescents.

Programs and Services for OSAEC victims' survivors are seen as multidisciplinary, holistic, and multi-level. Different agencies provide various programs and services for the victims' prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The relationship between the key players: NGOs, GA, and the Barangay is a crucial factor in ensuring that collaborative and cooperative efforts are in place to combat OSAEC. However, curbing or ending OSAEC is a challenge because this implies that effort must also focus on the international arena knowing that OSAEC is a global phenomenon.

On the other hand, IACAT put efforts together with other agencies to combat OSAEC through coordinated activities, programs, and services being implemented to respond to the issues and concerns related to OSAEC. Combatting OSAEC requires concerted effort. Hence, there is a need to strengthen and improve the mechanisms from the Barangay level to the Government Welfare Agencies in handling OSAEC.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the findings and implications of the study, the following suggestions are put forward:

1. It must be noted that OSAEC is hidden, and most of the incidents occurred at home. Ironically, the home is supposed to be a haven for female adolescents, whether in the presence or the absence of the pandemic. Therefore, IEC to combat OSAEC should start in the home. There is a need to promote awareness among families so they can safeguard themselves from being victimized. Awareness should also be the role of schools as part of their empowering initiatives.
2. With the increasing incidents of OSAEC despite the effort from the government and NGOs, there is a risk that the country will eventually be a haven of sexual predators. It calls for more proactive measures in detecting, surveillance, and monitoring online transactions that are sexual. Online access does not discriminate, especially when minors already know how to set the settings or pretend to be adults. This widens their website access making it more difficult for the government to track sexual predators online. Some websites appear as games, but online sexual transactions are happening through their chat rooms or message functions. There is a greater challenge for the Philippine National Police Anti-Cybercrime Group (PNP-ACG) unit to improve its initiatives to curb OSAEC in keeping with its mission to monitor operations and activities in the pursuit of keeping a safe and secure cyberspace.
3. Rationalizing that OSAEC is a victimless crime, desensitizing the risks and vulnerabilities of children, and downplaying the effects of OSAEC on its victims make this phenomenon more challenging to stop. Thus, changes in perspectives will influence the norms that OSAEC is unacceptable as an alternative income among female adolescents. If this scenario persists, the possibility of normalizing OSAEC is not far behind.
4. With the passing of Republic Act 11930, also known as the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC Law), which took effect last July 30, 2022. Many are hopeful that this will begin a safer online environment for children of any gender. Hence, it must be noted that the passage of the law does not guarantee that such abusive and exploitative online activities will end, but we hope this will become a deterrent factor. There is a need for the

government to realize its critical role to go beyond the implementation of the laws and become proactive in its implementation.

5. There is a need to improve the programs and services of the government agencies as well as to implement more awareness raising and other information dissemination efforts from the communities to different institutions like the school, the social media in promoting information about the possible effects of OSAEC not only among children or the female adolescents but also the families as they are becoming the instigators of such crime. This is where information dissemination or awareness-raising becomes essential in addressing issues and problems related to OSAEC.
6. Given the extent of this problem, there is a need for a multi-level approach to addressing the issues related to OSAEC. It must include the family and the different *institutions of the government and NGOs, as well as the Barangays*. Hence, the importance of a multi-level approach in combating OSAEC. The *community* also plays a significant role. It is the closest to the child's or the female adolescent's environment. The communities must install mechanisms that will help address the problems of OSAEC, specifically in curbing incidences of OSAEC.
7. The validation reveals that officials in the barangays, especially those who chair the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), do not have enough skills and knowledge to handle cases of OSAEC. The fast turnover of officials after elections, wherein trained personnel are often replaced, makes it challenging to capacitate key personnel on anti-OSAEC initiatives. Hence, anti-OSAEC programs and services are not sustained. Many of the Barangays deny the occurrence of OSAEC in their communities since some perpetrators are close contacts. Some narratives point to parents pushing their children to engage in this online sexual activity.
8. The school is the second home for the children, and teachers are considered second parents. Since the target of OSAEC is children, the *Department of Education (DepEd)* is recommended to include it in its curriculum or create IEC campaigns to prevent the cases of OSAEC from proliferating. Furthermore, the training of its teachers to be vigilant and look for red flags, and warning signs whenever they encounter cases like OSAEC or any form of abuse among the students. The basic education unit needs to mainstream issues related to OSAEC so that children are also aware of it and can better safeguard themselves. It is important to start the discussion of OSAEC in the homes, schools, and the community, especially on the possible effects of engaging in abusive and exploitative relationships.
9. The multidisciplinary approach will be better appreciated if OSAEC-related issues and concerns are mainstreamed through different professional courses so that everyone is aware and can contribute to curbing OSAEC. Mainstreaming of OSAEC can start in the primary, secondary, and even tertiary levels. We must be aggressive in our IEC campaigns to ensure that our vulnerable sectors are protected.
10. Appreciation of research data, recognition of narratives from victim-survivors, and consistent assessment and evaluation of current programs and services for the victims will ensure a holistic, more informed program and services that respond to the needs of rehabilitation and healing for the victims. For the policymakers to craft sound Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) that shall cover all the mandated functions and duties of all duty bearers to synchronize all actions to curb OSAEC.
11. Psychosocial interventions for OSAEC victims-survivors are also crucial and must be given importance to healing them from the possibility of trauma, stigma, and fear. The victim-survivors need psychological support to cope and heal from their experiences, especially in overcoming fears and the need to realize their self-worth. *The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)* continues with its multidisciplinary, multi-level, and holistic case management and further develop/enhance its existing programs and services for women adolescents using the child rights framework. For NGOs working for abused children, to augment government initiatives towards prevention, healing, and reintegration of victims to their families considering the psychosocial adverse effects experienced by the victim-survivor. Overall, we should promote programs and services that allow victims to become functional and have a peaceful journey.

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Ad majorem dei gloriam!

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