Factors Affecting the Prevalence of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children in Camarines Sur, Bicol Region, Philippines

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Abstract
The culture within the family and community generally affects people's attitudes and acceptance towards using available technology. Alternately, technology can also influence the culture and social behaviors of people. This study aimed to discuss the family and community factors and their unintentional contribution to the prevalence of Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) and explore the community's perspectives of OSAEC. Utilizing a qualitative approach, it employed focus group discussions and interviews to obtain relevant data and insights from the participants. Based on thematic analysis, family factors include (1) unsupervised access to the internet and gadgets, (2) children disregarding their parents' reminders on gadget usage, and (3) parents' lack of knowledge on the use of phones and the internet. In terms of community factors, (1) poor socioeconomic conditions, (2) limited community initiatives to capacitate parents on online media risks and OSAEC, and (3) limited knowledge of emerging child protection issues may have contributed to OSAEC cases. Furthermore, the study found that community members view OSAEC as a cybercrime involving showing and sending obscene pictures, texts, or videos without physical contact. Given the findings, establishing appropriate mechanisms for responsible online use and online behavior is vital to ensure proactiveness in protecting children against abuse and exploitation at family and community levels.

Introduction

The kind of culture existing in a community and within a family generally affects the attitude and acceptance of people toward technology usage. Conversely, available technology can also change the culture of those who utilize it. It is critical to note that the advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and its progress over the last decades have significantly altered how humans interact. ICT has changed many aspects of human life by providing new forms of communication and socialization that fundamentally transformed our world (Zhao, 2006). The number of people using the internet can prove the extent and effect of the world's current connection. As of January 2021, there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide, or 59.5% of the global population. Of this, 92.6%, or 4.32 billion, are accessing the internet via mobile devices (Johnson, 2021).

In the Philippines, the Internet became widely available in 1994. It has become the most popular ICT tool, wherein more than half of the population, or approximately 79.7 million people, are Internet users (Statista Research Department [Statista], 2021). It helps boost the economy because of online merchandise, which makes marketing services and products like travel booking, food deliveries, and online media more accessible and convenient. From 67.74% of internet users in 2017, the projected percentage of internet users in the Philippines by 2026 will be at least 91.57% (Statista, 2021). The Internet is designed to facilitate communication across borders and easily access different services and networks (Aritao & Pangilinan, 2018).

While there are benefits and positive impacts, the digital advancement can also pose new risks, vulnerabilities, and dangers to people, especially to children's safety, development, and well-being. For instance, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2015) highlighted that children could easily interact with strangers and exchange large data files while parental supervision and monitoring were restricted. Children are at risk as they often do not fully understand the threats of using technologies. In addition, since accessibility to online resources and the internet has been rapidly increasing, studies have shown the danger for online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2020). Hence, the rise of the internet and its related technologies had paved the way for perpetrators to commit crimes, such as human trafficking and sexual abuse and exploitation through online production, with greater anonymity. These crimes target vulnerable victims, particularly children, to satisfy an increasing demand for exploitative products worldwide (Aritao & Pangilinan, 2018). The UNODC (2015) revealed that ICT-facilitated child abuse and exploitation includes child pornography, commercial sexual exploitation of children or trafficking, cyber-enticement, solicitation and online grooming, cyberbullying, cyber-harassment and cyber-stalking, and exposure to harmful content. All these activities fall and can be counted as part of the Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Children (OSAEC).

Furthermore, UNICEF Philippines (2020) identified that tech-based and tech-enabled child pornography and cybercrime were technology modalities that have facilitated OSAEC in the country. It is further articulated by the International Justice Mission (IJM, 2020) that child sex offenders from around the world sought traffickers online in countries like the Philippines, paying them to live stream the sexual abuse and exploitation of specific children in certain ways and in real time. In IJM's casework experience from 2011 to 2020, demand-side offenders used known internet platforms with live video and chat functions to send graphic and specific abuse instructions. This sexual abuse was live-streamed for the offender's sexual consumption on a "pay-per-view" basis and documented in photos and videos.

Recognizing OSAEC's risks and dangers, international bodies and even national governments have implemented laws and instruments to protect children. Existing international laws serve as instruments to protect children against abuse and exploitation, namely: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Consequently, with the global rise in the cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation, further instrumentalities were developed through international conventions such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, entered into force by the General Assembly on January 18, 2002, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a Communications Procedure, among others (Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights [OHCRH], 2002).

In the Philippines, several laws protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, including Anti-Pornography Act, Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act, Cybercrime Prevention Act, and the Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act (Tarroja et al., 2020; Divina Law, n.d.). However, despite these laws, incidents of Filipino minors being sexually abused and exploited online continue to rise, and so an urgency to pass more measures that would fortify the state's

power to pursue and punish perpetrators. Hence, the passage of Republic Act No. 11930, or the Anti-Online Sexual or Exploitation of Children and Anti-Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation Materials Act.

However, while there are policies, global law enforcement data revealed that the Philippines is the largest known source of OSEC cases and the third largest source of "online enticement" in the Asia-Pacific Region (IJM et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the problem of OSAEC cannot be attributed alone to the widespread availability of internet access. Poverty, a good grasp of the English language, the "easy money" perception of webcam sex, and a cultural norm of "family first" that promotes choosing the needs of the family over the child's welfare were among the identified causes or drivers of OSAEC in the Philippines (Hernandez et al., 2018; Ramiro et al., 2019). These drivers imply that OSAEC runs deeper than initially thought and are part of behaviors and practices observed within a family and their community.

It is worth noting that the study of Shafe and Hutchinson (2014) inferred that cultural norms affect disclosure and reporting and are variously influenced by religion and global cultural trends. Reporting practices are influenced by sensitivity, fear, taboo, attitude, acceptable practices, prejudice, community passivity, legal system inadequacies and weaknesses, and general attitudes toward sexual offenses against children. While the study covered various countries, it nevertheless pointed out that a pattern of concealment is observed in the Philippines. There are some people in the community who tend to tolerate these online practices and were least likely to report incidences of OSAEC to authorities (Ramiro et al., 2019).

Moreover, young people perceive online sexual activities as "normal" although "disgusting" but not harmful because of anonymity and not having actual physical contact (Ramiro et al., 2019). In addition, only a small portion of children who use the internet experience harm. Therefore, an important challenge one needs to explore in this area is how harm from online child sexual abuse and exploitation is defined, measured, compared, and understood by people with a high risk of being victimized (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2015).

The examined collection of the literature suggests that there were factors influencing the prevalence of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children cases. However, limited studies have explored how these factors may have unintentionally facilitated the toleration of the prevalence of OSAEC in the Bicol Region. As of 2021, the Department of Social Welfare and Development - Field Office 5 (DSWD – FO 5) recorded 23 cases, encompassing online sexual exploitation, violation of anti-voyeurism, and sex extortion. Of the seven provinces, cases were reported from three provinces, namely, Camarines Sur (21), Catanduanes (1), and Albay (1). In terms of sex, 10 were male, and 13 were female. Based on the initial consultation meeting the researchers had with the OSAEC Focal Person of the DSWD – FO 5, she emphasized that the current cases in the region were due to the lack of awareness of the victims and their families on OSAEC and the risks that it poses.

Therefore, this study explored critical insights to understand better the prevalence of OSAEC cases related to family and community practices and perspectives in the region. Specifically, it aimed to describe the family and community factors that can contribute to the prevalence of OSAEC cases and determine the community's perspectives on OSAEC. Knowing the different factors can significantly serve as a basis for strengthening and enhancing existing interventions and mechanisms to prevent, respond to, and address the impact of online sexual abuse and exploitation among children.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore and generate insights into the family and community factors that may have contributed to the prevalence of OSAEC cases in the Bicol Region. As articulated by Hidayati et al. (2022) the use of qualitative approach is essential in understanding individuals' experiences and feelings. Through this, it allowed the researchers flexibility to process and analyze the participants' insights and ideas to meet the objectives. The study sites were the top barangays with reported OSAEC cases in the Province of Camarines Sur, which were determined using the available data from the DSWD – FO 5. More so, the researchers opted to intentionally not indicate the name of the study sites to protect the people in the community and in observance of the research ethics on confidentiality and anonymity.

A total of 25 community leaders from the targeted sites participated in the study. They were selected purposefully using these criteria: (1) an elected official/member of the Barangay Council; (2) an official of an organization in their community duly recognized by the Barangay Council; (3) is 18 years old and above; and (4) willing to participate in the study. Moreover, the social workers in the Local Social Welfare and Development Offices (LSWDOs) handling OSAEC cases were also invited to participate in the study as key informants.

The identified participants were given an orientation about the study. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and mainly involved sharing their insights on the different aspects of their

family and community life that might have influenced the prevalence of OSAEC. In addition, they were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any point during the data collection and that they could opt not to answer questions should they wish to do so. Considering that the study's findings might be publicly disseminated through research publications and conferences, the researchers also secured the explicit consent of the study participants for the findings to be published. Participants who expressed willingness to participate and consent to publish were requested to sign a voluntary consent form signifying that their participation in the study was of their own free will and volition. Hidayati et al. (2022) emphasized that these steps are vital ethical considerations in research involving sexual abuse survivors. Though this study did not directly involve the OSAEC survivors, still, it adhered to appropriate ethical considerations for its research conduct.

Furthermore, the study employed Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews to gather the relevant data from the community members and key informants. A researcher-made FGD and interview guides were prepared. The instrument contained open-ended questions allowing the participants to express their insights about the research topic freely. The researchers also provided follow-up and clarificatory questions. The instrument was subjected to critiquing, comments, and inputs from subject matter experts and panel members to ensure that the needed data for the study were generated appropriately.

After gathering the needed data, the researchers encoded and transcribed the participants' responses. The study employed thematic analysis to determine the emerging patterns. The data were categorized into key themes and topics, which then answered the study's objectives. In addition, a meeting with the participants was conducted to verify, confirm, and clarify the study's findings as a form of data validation. Furthermore, member checking was employed to evaluate the truthfulness of the themes developed based on the participants' insights and responses.

Results

This section presents the key themes related to the family and community factors influencing the prevalence of OSAEC cases and the community's perspectives on OSAEC.

Family Factors Affecting the Prevalence of OSAEC Cases

The findings revealed significant themes related to factors contributing to the likelihood of OSAEC derived from family conditions and practices. These include (1) unsupervised access to the internet and gadgets, (2) children disregarding parents' reminders on the use of gadgets, and (3) parents' lack of knowledge on the use of phones and the internet.

Theme 1: Unsupervised access to the Internet and gadgets

The theme relates to using unsupervised technology, allowing children to freely use technology and explore the internet with limited guidance. Notably, the early exposure of children to gadgets was common among the participants' responses. Although they still observed children and youth playing together in their barangay, the majority were engaged in social media, computer games, and other technology-based activities. A participant shared,

> *One of my observations is the exposure of children to gadgets. There were instances wherein a two-year-old baby was already exposed to mobile phones. Using mobile phone is one reason children could not do a particular [household] task you asked them to do. There are times when some parents do not limit their children's mobile usage. Being too lenient with children can also be alarming because there are instances when we are unaware of what they do.*

The participants articulated that some parents did not limit their children's use of mobile phones, hence being unable to monitor the internet apps and sites visited by their children. Also, parents were busy in the house, so they failed to monitor their children's use of gadgets. As stated,

> *Sometimes, they accidentally search for prohibited sites, like porn, and rated SPG [strong parental guidance] videos. At an early age, they already know it. Every now and then, with just one click, you can view different information. Phones have benefits, especially during emergencies. However, mobile phones also have a negative impact, like visiting harmful sites.*

Because of the unsupervised use of phones, some children could check pornographic sites and other sites detrimental to their well-being. Furthermore, they mentioned that before, parents attempted to continue the practice of eating and praying together. However, children are currently busy using their phones and gadgets, even during mealtime. In addition, using phones resulted in them sleeping late at night.

> *In my experience, some children sleep late at night because of using mobile phone. Hence, during morning, when you wake them up, they will be upset, and sometimes when you try to wake them up repeatedly, they still do not get up. There are also times that before I go to sleep, I can still hear my children using their cellphone and then when I remind them to put it down, they will ignore me and sometimes leave and go to our neighbor.*

Another participant shared,

> *I do not have children, but I have two cousins. Sometimes, when I noticed them still awake late at night, I would ask them why they were still awake. They would respond that they were studying, but the truth was, they were using their cellphones.*

Theme 2: Children disregarding their parents' reminders on the use of gadgets

Some participants expressed that children fight and talk back when their parents tend to reprimand or remind them of something. They observed that some children no longer listen and were sometimes disrespectful to adults. The participants perceived that such behavior might be influenced by the videos or posts their children watch and see on various social media sites. As expressed,

> *Before, some parents would discipline their children by hitting them. At present, if you hit your children, they will fight back. That is why there is already a new way to discipline children, which is through verbal communication. You talk to them to remind or reprimand them of their misbehaviors. However, some children talk back disrespectfully to their parents.*

> *Children were already scared when their mothers stared at them during our time. But now, they are not afraid anymore nor even listen to you because they are now focused on their cellphone. They will not respond immediately when you ask them to do something. That is how children behave nowadays.*

In this case, the participants shared that when children talked back to their parents, some parents would ignore or leave the children as they were without processing the situation. They thought that verbal discipline was ineffective. On the other hand, some participants still perceived other children as obedient. However, the parents also recognized that the environment strongly influences them. Specifically, they mentioned the use of gadgets.

> *I still observe children nowadays as obedient. Sometimes, when you tell them something, they still follow. However, they become addicted to gadgets. If you request them to do something, they act as if they hear nothing. The mother is the one doing the chores.*

> *They are too focused on gadgets. Some, in watching tv.*

It is significant to note that some of them emphasized that it is imperative to teach children proper conduct because if the parents do not guide them, children may manifest misbehavior, leading to more severe consequences.

> *In my family or for me, we need to teach children the proper conduct because if the parents do not guide their children in the right way, they will also not behave properly. Therefore, it depends on the parents on how they will teach their children how to respect and be courteous to others.*

Theme 3: Parents' lack of knowledge on the use of phones and the internet

The theme pertains to the need for more knowledge among parents on the use of gadgets and the various apps and sites on the internet. The parents needed to be made aware of what their children do online, particularly the sites they visit. As discussed by some participants,

> *I see children watching and visiting TikTok, Facebook, sometimes Mobile Legends, and YouTube, but I do not know what is there.*

The participants recognized that using cell phones has been helpful to their children, like doing research activities related to their school activities, among others. Nevertheless, they too mentioned the need to control its use, like setting schedules for cellphone use and not allowing their children to bring their gadgets to school on weekends. The children in the community can access the internet through mobile data and a "*piso*" net (coin-operated WIFI vending machine). However, since children have access to gadgets and the internet at an early age, they can also learn to navigate the world wide web, wherein, if left unsupervised, it may jeopardize their safety and security online. The participants emphasized that children could view vast information, including positive and harmful materials, with just one click.

Community Factors Affecting the Prevalence of OSAEC Cases

The community factors that may have contributed to the prevalence of OSAEC in the study sites include (1) poor socioeconomic conditions, (2) limited functionality of community mechanisms and structures to protect and uphold children's rights, and (3) limited knowledge of child's rights.

Theme 1: Poor socioeconomic conditions

One major factor attributed by the participants to the occurrence of OSAEC cases was the prevailing poor socioeconomic conditions in the communities. Considering the study sites' geographical location, it was noted that the primary livelihood of many community members was connected to fishing, crab farming, and agriculture-related activities, among others. The participants noted a decreasing trend in fish catch and crab production. Similarly, those engaged in agriculture shared that the high materials costs and the low farm gate prices of agricultural produce translate to inadequate income to cover their family's needs. As expressed,

> *We can see some neighbors working hard and are determined to provide for their families. However, some are suffering from extreme poverty.*
>
> *I have observed that some families are not in a good state because of the parents themselves. They are not acting as a good example for their children. Sometimes, it is the children who exhibit care toward their parents. One main reason that they give why they are like that is poverty. They even cannot provide the food they need. They cannot send their children to school. Thus, the family ends up in a sorry state.*

Further aggravating the problem was the observation that some community members from low-income families were engaged in vices such as gambling and drinking alcoholic drinks. As shared,

> *The problem I can see with my neighbors is too much alcohol drinking. It is a problem since they already lack the money to suffice their daily needs, yet they still drink alcohol. Instead of using the money for their family's needs, they use it for gambling. Then, when they go home, they end up fighting with their spouse.*
>
> *One observation I see with the men in our community, especially in business, is that they are okay with it. However, whenever they have a limited budget, they tend to utilize their remaining money for vices such as alcohol and drugs. Thus, they end up neglecting to provide for their family.*

The poor socioeconomic conditions affecting many of the community's residents seem to be one of the underlying motivations leading to the prevalence of OSAEC cases. As one participant remarked when asked regarding the possible reason why there are families who engage in OSAEC, "*Based on my observation, money can easily be earned."*

Theme 2: Limited community initiatives to capacitate parents on online media risks and OSAEC

The participants expressed that caring for the child still falls under the parents. It serves as the main task and duty of the parents, caregivers, or guardians to ensure that the children under their care are safe and free from any form of abuse or violence. They were also aware that laws are being implemented to ensure that the welfare of the children will be protected and always upheld. Several participants shared that they were aware that children must not be subjected to corporal or physical punishments as it is a form of physical abuse. Unfortunately, it was noted that the functionality of mechanisms and structures meant to protect and uphold children's rights at the level of the community was limited, implying that community initiatives to capacitate parents on online media risks and OSAEC were unimplemented. When asked if there is a Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), the Punong Barangay shared,

> *We have a VAWC officer, but it is different from BCPC. The BCPC is there for the protection of children. In many instances, when there are complaints related to abuse and maltreatment of children, they reach out, and we try to help them as much as possible.*

In addition, aside from the referral of possible cases of child abuse and maltreatment, the Barangay Council and the BCPC were noted not to have other activities implemented to help uphold the rights of the children in the study sites. Instead, there seems to be a reliance on external community partners such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office, and other partner institutions in conducting child rights advocacy and child abuse prevention activities. Accordingly, the study sites did not have existing local ordinances to protect children in their communities except a curfew ordinance identifying the specific time when children were not allowed to roam alone.

Theme 3: Limited knowledge of emerging issues related to child protection

Another factor revealed was the limited knowledge of child's rights and emerging issues related to child protection. It is important to note that the study participants have existing knowledge about child rights. For instance, a participant shared,

> Based on what [I know], every child, once they are born, must be provided with nationalism and a name. However, many children in our barangay have yet to be registered [in the Local Civil Registrar]. Second, they should be provided with housing or shelter, food, and other needs. Even access to education, regardless of one's economic status, must be provided to the children.

Unfortunately, the study participants seemed to have a limited grasp of the comprehensive rights of the child, oversimplifying the child's protective rights as not being subjected to physical abuse as a form of disciplining. In addition, there seemed to be a community consensus that the law against child abuse (specifically on the prohibition of physical punishment as a form of disciplining) has led to the different set of values that the community observes among its children. As shared,

> When the law banning child abuse was enacted, children became more abusive toward their parents.

Lastly, while some study participants were aware of the child's fundamental rights, they shared that some community members need to do more to ensure that these rights are being provided and enjoyed starting with their children. As to the knowledge and awareness of the participants concerning the emerging issues related to child protection, such as OSAEC, participants remarked that they already have an idea, but it needs to be improved.

Community's Perspectives on OSAEC

The following themes pertain to the perspectives of the study participants regarding OSAEC. The emerging themes include (1) as a form of cybercrime and (2) involves showing and sending obscene pictures, texts, or videos but includes no physical contact.

Theme 1: OSAEC as a form of cybercrime

When asked what OSAEC is, the participants defined it as a cybercrime. According to them, individuals who are victims of OSAEC may experience trauma and will usually be turned over to a center or the Department of Social Welfare and Development. The victim-survivors are helped to address their situation. Moreover, the participants perceived those children who were victims of the act to be pitiful. On the other hand, they agreed that perpetrators should be punished. They also articulated that the community should monitor and assist the family.

Furthermore, the participants believe that one reason people engage in online sexual abuse is that they can make or earn easy money from doing it. Moreover, they shared that OSAEC may happen due to a lack of knowledge and extreme poverty.

Theme 2: OSAEC involves showing and sending obscene pictures, texts, or videos but includes no physical contact

For the key informants, online sexual abuse and exploitation of children encompass displaying pictures, text messages, or indecent or obscene videos. However, these are purely done online or in a virtual mode. It does not involve engaging in physical contact. Others perceive OSAEC as becoming a trend that leads to the loss of decency of people.

They also believe that as long as the perpetrators are not caught, they will continue doing such activities because it is a source of income, especially since people do it because of poverty. Moreover, it has helped them improve their houses, transforming the *bahay-kubo* (nipa hut) into concrete houses.

To combat OSAEC, the key informants believe there is a need to restore some families' traditions, such as sharing meals and having open communication. They added that families should not wait for barangay officials to conduct family-related activities. Instead, they could plan for these themselves. Setting rules like no use of cell phones after 7 p.m. could also help combat OSAEC.

As for their community leaders, they see the need to implement child protection-related laws, organize family days for the barangay aside from those conducted in the schools, and strengthen sports programs. They also wish to implement the policy on sim card registration as it could help in curtailing OSAEC incidents. Another is for the barangay leaders to pass inclusive ordinances. Videos about OSAEC may also be produced for advocacy purposes.

Discussion

Family Factors Affecting the Prevalence of OSAEC Cases

Technology can empower children of every age by providing tools to learn, express their creativity, and stay connected with others. Although technology has brought about significant societal advancements, it has also introduced new dangers and crimes that prey on vulnerable children. As a

result, people are exposed not just to unquestionable benefits but also to numerous hazards linked with technology use (Blynzyuk, 2020).

A central theme of the findings was children's unsupervised access to the internet and gadgets. While digital solutions can help us limit our device usage, the most excellent way to teach children the essential skill of disconnecting is to practice and demonstrate mindful use of technology, including the parents whom children look up to as their models themselves. The usage of screen devices has become widespread in today's parenting. As observed, parents at home, especially mothers preoccupied with domestic work, usually allow their children to use gadgets to pacify behavior or, more so, let them be on their own to proceed with their work. In short, gadgets have now become the new babysitters. Taylor (2013) mentioned that "half of the parents in the United States have used a gadget to "babysit" or occupy their little ones, so they did not have to." It is especially true for families with no house helper and with large family members. It can also be noticed that parents utilize a smartphone, tablet, or handheld game console to keep their children busy during travel.

Moreover, it is significant to note that children's excessive internet use, particularly the sites, and apps being accessed, poses negative consequences for parents and their children. The findings reflect that some children tend to disregard their parents' reminders on the use of gadgets. In this sense, parents may dismiss the harm that excessive use of technology creates, when they allow their children to continue exploring the internet with limited supervision. This complacency in parenting then creates an unsupervised consumption of media which becomes an avenue for unregulated access to various sites with intense and provocative content not advisable for children. For instance, Dela Rosa et al. (2023) found out that as female teenagers interact online, they can learn about new websites or applications recommended by their online friends, which eventually led for them to meet potential customers. Their susceptibility to OSAEC increased as their online community grew. Cornish (2014) argued that media associated with dangerous online information and content involving sex, violence, and cruelty create negative emotions in children. Hence, unregulated and unsupervised use of technology among these children posed a lot of negative implications, such as irregular sleeping.

Meanwhile, Ali et al. (2020) posited a different vantage point by suggesting that lack of parental control translates to the parent's inability to monitor and control the sites their children access. In addition, uncontrolled internet access might lead to difficulty identifying and verbalizing feelings and emotion regulation (Karaer & Akdemir, 2019). This suggests that with inadequate regulation and unsupervised use of technology, children would be at risk of OSAEC as the negative implications of excessive internet use affect their well-being and behavior. Therefore, possible alternatives to excessive smartphone use and strategies should be realized to strengthen children's self-regulation concerning smartphone use benefit the children and their parents (Park & Park, 2021).

Furthermore, another family factor that may influence the existence of OSAEC is the parents' lack of knowledge in using phones and exploring the internet. With limited knowledge, parents cannot monitor their children's online activities and guide them on their inappropriate and appropriate use. Such lack of knowledge may be due to the fast-paced technological evolution, wherein some individuals fail to learn and cope immediately. As the world becomes more digitalized, parents must simultaneously manage their relationship with mobile devices and the internet while supervising their children's exposure to and interaction with technology (Auxier et al., 2020). A collection of the literature revealed that parenting has become more complex due to technology; specifically, the parents did not know how to handle it and had difficulty keeping up with it. In addition, many survey participants expressed that technology has led children to have no patience, feel instant gratification, become addicted and unhealthy, and were noted to have declined in social skills (Pew Research Center, 2020; Hill, 2017).

Despite the challenges parents experience, it is essential to note that they play a massive role in safeguarding their children against online risks and dangers (Lenhart et al., 2011). However, the findings revealed that some parents were unaware of the internet sites visited by their children, which is detrimental to the child's internet safety. They see their children check Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, but they have limited knowledge of their content. When parents lack knowledge, they cannot answer their children's questions and give guidance regarding media sites. For instance, Dela Rosa et al. (2023) pointed out that when parents learn of their daughters' involvement in OSAEC, they may merely tell them that their actions are harmless and that they should be careful, but did not directly discourage them from engaging. Furthermore, the parents cannot explain the appropriate and inappropriate online practices and behaviors to their children since they still need to learn the nature of the internet. The study participants recognized that children could view vast information, including positive and negative sources and materials, with just one click.

The study's findings imply the need for parents to become literate in using mobile devices and exploring the internet to guide and monitor their children's technology engagement. One way the parents can do to gain awareness is to connect and interact with their children, allowing their children

to tell them what they do on the internet. The parents, being the primary environment for socialization, are influential in developing children's intellectual and social skills. In addition, parents educated about technology can teach children what is safe and unsafe online, preventing them from being victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Community Factors Affecting the Prevalence of OSAEC Cases

The findings pointed out one striking similarity between the sites explored by the researchers – both communities have prevailing poor socioeconomic conditions. With most of the community members considering agriculture-related work (largely farming and fishing) as the primary source of their livelihood, they are likely experiencing poverty. In the Philippines, the agriculture sector has recorded the highest poverty rate among all the basic sectors since 2006, with approximately 2.4 million Filipino farmers and agricultural workers living below the poverty line (Enano et al., 2022). More so, the findings reflect the existence of gambling, drinking alcoholic drinks, and alleged drug use in their communities. These activities and poor economic conditions lead to a higher risk of child abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse and exploitation (US CDC, 2022; Mustaine et al., 2014; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017).

In relation to the poor socioeconomic conditions, the recognition that economic benefits could be reaped by engaging in online sexual activities was present in both study sites. Generally, participants view OSAEC as one of the ways where one can get out of poverty due to its perceived economic benefits (Ramiro et al., 2019). This is consistent with the findings of Dela Rosa et al. (2023) stating that poverty has made female teenagers vulnerable to engage in OSAEC, where they received financial compensation to meet their daily needs. In this study, the participants were also quick to share their observation that families with members who were found to have engaged in OSAEC could have better financial resources. Accounts of families able to afford things beyond their basic needs were observed. These include, but were not limited to, house improvement, purchase of a new vehicle, and purchase of the latest gadgets, to name a few. While it is unfortunate, the reality of participants' view of OSAEC to escape poverty can be considered an acknowledgment that purely relying on their current economic and livelihood opportunities was insufficient to improve their socioeconomic situation.

In addition, the findings revealed that the community representatives were aware of the issue of OSAEC in their locality, expressing that they have the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC) composed of Barangay Officials, School Principal, and Pastoral Council representatives who were responsive and active in handling cases of violence against women and children. Although these organizations exist, they still expressed that their knowledge of handling cases of abuse and maltreatment of children was limited. This was one of the reasons they still relied on external community partners such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development Office and other partner institutions in conducting child rights advocacy and prevention activities. The initiatives came mainly from fulfilling mandated activities by the national government. The community lacked unique initiatives to monitor cases of OSAEC.

Consequently, another prevailing factor for the continuing incidence of OSAEC was the limited knowledge of emerging issues related to child protection. While the barangay officials were aware of OSAEC cases, which mostly involved adults, the community was not fully aware of the effect this would have on their children since the practice continued with involvement in recent years of children. According to the barangay officials, those involved only see the lucrative side of engaging in these transactions, particularly in alleviating them from poverty, where they enjoy life by buying things that suffice their family's needs, constructing bigger and stronger houses, without considering the effect it will have on their children. Moreover, the community people still believe that because there was no physical contact, it would not have any effect on their children.

When asked if activities are conducted at the barangay level where community members were made aware of OSAEC and its effect on children, the participants said several seminars were also given to some officials. However, not all members involved in child protection are allowed to attend, and some barangay officials were not trained to handle cases at their level. In addition, there were no available information and education materials on OSAEC that could build community awareness on emerging issues related to child protection. One of the reasons for this is the limited budget of the barangay to finance projects and programs to increase the community's awareness of child sexual abuse and exploitation-related issues or even to divert the attention of children and adults away from activities that makes the children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

This is related to the findings of Roche and Flynn (2021), stating that "child protection actors in the community are constrained by limited government capacity and community reach." While this could be true in the case of Study Site 1, which is a 4th class municipality, Study Site 2, on the other hand, is a 1st class municipality that can very well afford to invest in projects and programs as well as activities that would contribute to the awareness of the community on child protection related issues. The

Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016 noted that most LGUs at the time the Plan was developed still lacked the ability or the will to raise adequate revenues, leaving them over-dependent upon national government revenue. Many local governments have failed to manage their financial resources effectively and sustainably. Where there has been significant decentralization of functions, not all LGUs have increased their capacity sufficiently to enable them to prioritize, plan, budget, and implement programs effectively. Lack of training and experience amongst local officials has also resulted in poor delivery of programs. The Philippine Development Plan of 2017-2022 notes that many of these challenges remain, including an over-reliance on national revenue, including weak delivery of services (Hamilton et al., 2018). This is also related to what the participants are saying: the limited budget at the barangay level prevents them from initiating projects, programs, and activities that would contribute to the knowledge-building of the community regarding the protection of children. In other words, they are also dependent on the revenue cascaded to them by the municipal government.

In addition, there were poor mechanisms for child protection at the barangay level to ensure that issues related to child protection, such as OSAEC, were given action, both in the context of prevention and restorative intervention. Supposedly the BCPC should oversee planning and implementing activities on child protection (R.A. 7610), which would include building community awareness and broadening knowledge and understanding of the community on child protection-related issues, which are paramount to preventing its occurrences. Aside from the curfew imposed on children and youths, the lack of ordinances at the barangay level may also be a manifestation of the poor functionality of the BCPC. It is noteworthy that multi-level programs and services, partnerships of local communities with government and non-governments, and enforcement of child protection policies are vital to respond to and prevent OSAEC (Dela Rosa et al., 2023).

One of the essential things the community can do is to capacitate the parents in determining online abuses in their own homes. Training the parents in the detection of probable online abuses should be given. The children should also be made aware of the effects of OSAEC by engaging in other activities to divert their attention from online activities. The barangay council should be more vigilant and find ways to divert the attention of the youth from online fiasco by introducing more recreational, cultural, and developmental activities. It is important to note that such materials can readily be accessed online, especially from the websites and resource pages of the different organizations whose focus includes child protection. Awareness of where to call/report OSAEC cases can also be explored from the existing agencies in the locality, both at municipal and provincial levels.

Community's Perspective on OSAEC

For the participants, OSAEC is a cybercrime where obscene pictures, texts, or videos are shown online. This means they view OSAEC as a criminal activity committed virtually, using technology. For them, it did not involve any physical contact, as the abuse happens online. Therefore, OSAEC may indeed be categorized as cybercrime. Cybercrime, or computer crime, is using a computer to further illegal transactions such as trafficking, child pornography, committing fraud, violating privacy and intellectual property, or stealing identities (IPLeaders, 2021). According to an article by Malig (2022), the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 defines cybercrime as using an electronic medium, such as a computer, to conduct online communication and transactions that victimize vulnerable children.

The findings show that the participants have a rudimentary grasp of OSAEC. If the definition of OSAEC based on Republic Act No. 11930 will be the basis, OSAEC entails more than showing obscene pictures, texts, or videos online. The law states that OSAEC involves using ICT to abuse or exploit children sexually. This definition includes situations in which offline child abuse and exploitation are paired with an online component. Additionally, but not exclusively, this can involve the creation, distribution, and possession of child sexual abuse and exploitation materials (CSAEM), the online grooming of children for sex, the sexual extortion of children, the sharing of image-based sexual abuse, the commercial sexual exploitation of children, the exploitation of children through online prostitution, and the live-streaming of sexual abuse, with or without the victim's consent (R.A. 11930) In addition, the study by the UNODC (2015) revealed that the ICT-facilitated child abuse and exploitation includes child pornography; commercial sexual exploitation of children or trafficking; cyber-enticement, solicitation, and online grooming; cyberbullying, cyber-harassment, and cyber-stalking; and exposure to harmful content.

Meanwhile, the IJM (2020) defined OSEC (or OSAEC) as the online production, publication, and visual depictions (e.g., photos, videos, streaming) of the sexual abuse and exploitation of a minor for a third party who is not in the physical presence of the victim, in exchange for compensation. Furthermore, the 2016 Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse defines online child sexual abuse in two ways: "sexual abuse of children that is facilitated by ICTs (online-facilitated child sexual abuse)" and "sexual abuse of children that are committed elsewhere

and then repeated by sharing it online through, for instance, images and videos (Australian Center to Counter Child Exploitation, n.d.). These descriptions of OSAEC show that the research participants' understanding of OSAEC is still limited, thereby indicating that there could be a need for further educating the community about OSAEC.

Nevertheless, the study's findings affirm the results of World Vision's research in May 2021, which found the use of technology as one of the most common themes that emerged in their respondents' descriptions of OSEC. The technology captures the use of the internet, social media (particularly Facebook), and digital cameras to record and publicize the sexual acts performed by children or to chat with the offender. The results imply that fighting OSAEC would mean addressing the factors that cause OSAEC. While efforts should be made to stop the facilitators of OSAEC, the government and its partners can continue implementing programs and providing services to alleviate poverty since this is one of the main reasons behind OSAEC. Along with this would be the education and advocacy campaigns so that the community will be informed about OSAEC – concepts, causes, forms, effects, and roles of stakeholders to combat it.

Consequently, part of the participants' perspectives concerning OSAEC was about what can be done to fight OSAEC. Their ideas can be divided into two categories: (1) family responsibilities; and (2) community leaders' roles.

The participants believe families, especially parents, are essential in curtailing OSAEC incidences. They could initiate activities that would restore traditions observed in the past, such as sharing meals where each family member may openly communicate about their experiences and concerns. This could lessen the time spent surfing the internet, and the parents may have time to monitor their children's activities through their conversations. They likewise emphasized the importance of setting rules, particularly in the hours children spend using their gadgets and browsing cyberspace. As mentioned in the previous findings on factors that may contribute to OSAEC prevalence, there were times when the parents could not anymore monitor their children when they were online, especially at night when they were already sleeping or taking some rest after work. Thus, setting time limits on the use of the net could be one way to lessen the chances of children being exploited or abused online.

As for the role of community leaders, the main theme was implementing the existing laws that protect children, which may be supplemented by organizing activities that families may participate in and producing IEC/advocacy materials. In the view of the participants, the community leaders are not just policymakers but implementers. Since the leaders usually serve as administrators and legislators in the barangay, the people expect them to oversee the implementation of the laws, including those that would protect the children. Moreover, part of their task as barangay officials are planning and organizing activities that would focus on developing the well-being of their constituents. This would include educating the people about OSAEC. Hence, the production of IEC/advocacy materials would be helpful. These materials may be distributed to the families to create awareness and serve as a guide on what to do about OSAEC cases.

Conclusion

The study found key thematic family and community factors that might have contributed to the prevalence of OSAEC in Camarines Sur. In terms of family factors, the likelihood of OSAEC cases might have been influenced by the family characteristics, more specifically, related to parents' technology literacy and awareness and children's rule compliance. Furthermore, given the inadequate regulation and unsupervised use of technology, the need to create parental controls over the children's use of apps and sites is emphasized due to some negative implications. Furthermore, creating parental control over the children's access to these apps and sites is necessary for their well-being and to prevent OSAEC. Moreover, this implies that family members must implement and observe appropriate mechanisms regarding responsible online behavior and media use. Additionally, poverty and the absence of significant capacity-building and awareness-raising initiatives in the barangay were community factors that might have led to OSAEC cases. It signifies that community leaders can design policies and interventions to ensure online safety and protection and strengthen the proactiveness of their members in dealing with potential OSAEC cases.

Suggestions

In line with the study's findings and conclusions, the researchers propose the following suggestions:

Community Leaders / Barangay Council - may undertake community initiatives to strengthen the knowledge and skills of key community leaders, officials, and parents on child protection and OSAEC. Activities aimed at strengthening the local council for the protection of children and carrying out information and education campaigns on OSAEC-related laws can also be implemented. In addition,

barangay officials and leaders can partner with government and non-government organizations to conduct advocacy campaigns related to OSAEC. Barangay ordinances can also be enacted to help strengthen child protection policies in their communities.

Local Government Units / Local Social Welfare and Development Offices - may take the lead in capacitating the barangay officials and community leaders as front liners in the fight against child exploitation and abuse. The Local Social Welfare and Development Offices can also conduct awareness campaigns on emerging child protection issues and concerns. Local social workers can also facilitate the establishment of linkages between the community and government and non-government organizations.

Local Policy Makers - may consider enacting local ordinances that can supplement existing national statutes aimed at producing interventions that can prevent and respond to local cases of abuse and exploitation.

Social Work Schools - may provide extension activities to help in the capacity-building of the concerned communities; Partnership with stakeholders/different organizations/sectors to implement anti-OSAEC initiatives can also be explored.

Future Researchers - to undertake future research that can further provide empirical evidence related to the effects of OSAEC in families and communities.

Authors Brief Bio

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Angelo C. Uclaray, is a social worker and a faculty member of the Social Work Department, Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Previously, he served as a project staff in the DSWD-funded research project on KALAHI CIDSS- National Community Driven Development Program (KC-NCDDP), particularly on identifying the factors affecting timely completion of the sub-projects in Bicol and the factors influencing the community volunteers to seek elective position in the local government. Among his research interests include social work education, field instruction, mental health, and social work experiences in various fields or settings. His recent publications include, (author) "Stress and Wellbeing of Social Work Students in Field Instruction" published in the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, (co-author) "Social Workers' Roles, Challenges, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Albay, Bicol" published in the *Philippine Journal of Social Development*, and (co-author) "Social Work Students' Challenges in Flexible Learning and Implications for Social Work Education: A Study in Bicol, Philippines" published in the *ASEAN Social Work Journal*.

Russ Daniel O. Baldoza, earned his bachelor's degree in Social Work at Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy in April 2013 and passed the Social Work Licensure Examination

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Joselynn M. Niñofranco, is an Associate Professor at Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy with background designations as National Service Training Coordinator, Social Work Department Chairperson, Associate Dean, and College Gender and Development Coordinator. Aside from her membership with the National Association for Social Work Education, Inc. and the Philippine Association of Social Workers, Inc., she is also an alumni of the Group Study Exchange Program (2009-UK) of the Rotary International Foundation and is currently the Board of Trustees Corporate Secretary of Simon of Cyrene Community Rehabilitation and Development Foundation, Inc. and Advisory Council member of the 502nd Maneuver Company Regional Mobile Force Battalion of the Philippine National Police Region 5. She earned her Master of Science in Social Work degree at the Universidad de Santa Isabel, Naga City in 2011 where her master's thesis was on the Job-Oriented Interpersonal Communication Skills of Social Work Practitioners in the Province of Albay. Her recent involvement in research was as a Study Leader on a Tracer Study of AB Philosophy, AB Sociology and BS Social Work 2015 to 2017 graduates on the Extent of Contribution of their respective enrolled curriculum to the development of their competencies.

Cherry M. Dycoco, an Associate Professor of Social Work Department at Bicol University College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. She is both a Registered Social Worker (RSW) and a Professional Teacher. She earned her Master of Science in Social Work in 2000 at Universidad de Sta. Isabel, Naga City. She had been the Social Worker in charge of all court related cases – children, women and youth while handling other administrative functions and designation at MSWDO Daraga from 1997 to 2010. The following are the unpublished researches of Prof. Dycoco: Graduate Thesis – "Social Services Programs for Guest Relation Officers in Daraga, Albay: Implication to the rehabilitation of women in especially difficult circumstances" (2000), "Glossary of Terms for Abused Children" (2001), Child Sexual Abuse Awareness Program, (2013). Gender Aggregated Intervention Program for Imprisoned Men, Women, Lesbians and Gays (2016). Expanded Students Grant-in-Aid Program for Poverty Alleviation (2017). LGUs Readiness to Institutionalize CDD: An Assessment (2019). Currently, she is an active member of the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education, National Association of Social Workers, Inc. and Philippine Association of Social Workers Incorporated – Albay Chapter.

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