

New research reveals how digital platforms are being weaponised to abuse and exploit women in Kenya

NAIROBI, KENYA, November 11, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Across Kenya, online sexual exploitation and abuse (OSEA) is escalating rapidly, with predators exploiting digital technologies to recruit, groom, abuse, and traumatise women and girls. Two new reports uncover how the digital realm is being weaponised to perpetrate harm online and offline through technology-facilitated sex trafficking, online sexual coercion and extortion, and image-based sexual abuse, including deepfakes and non-consensual sharing of intimate images.



Photo credit: Equality Now

[Experiencing Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Kenya](#): Survivor Narratives and Legal Responses documents the experiences of twenty survivors, revealing the devastating personal toll and systemic barriers to justice and support.

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The abuse may begin on a screen, but the impact is deeply personal and lasting. Our systems must respond holistically and ensure that survivors are not retraumatised when seeking justice or support.”

Catherine Wanjohi, Executive Director, Life Bloom Services

Commissioned by Equality Now and produced in partnership with KICTANet, with survivor testimonies gathered by HAART Kenya, Life Bloom Services International, and Trace Kenya, the report reveals OSEA's personal, legal, and social dimensions. It highlights the continuum of sexual exploitation across digital and physical spaces and recommends actionable, survivor-centred legal and policy reforms.

An accompanying policy brief by Equality Now, Not Just Online: Addressing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Across

Digital and Physical Realities, examines how online and offline sexual exploitation and abuse intersect and reinforce each other. Drawing on evidence from legal and advocacy work in Kenya with survivors, civil society, justice sector actors, and the media, the brief identifies critical gaps in laws, policies, and institutional responses that leave survivors without adequate protection or legal redress. Recommendations outline ways to strengthen prevention, protection, and accountability across physical and digital spaces.

Technology weaponised to lure and abuse women and girls

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, dating sites, encrypted messaging services, and mobile money applications like M-Pesa are increasingly used to lure women and girls into harmful situations. The lack of binding obligations on tech companies to monitor and report harmful content compounds the problem, with social media platforms failing to adequately enforce their OSEA policies.

Perpetrators can connect with, manipulate, blackmail, harass, and shame victims with unprecedented reach, speed, and anonymity, often operating with impunity inside and beyond Kenya's borders. Survivors are subjected to a range of violations, including being coerced into creating sexual content, blackmailed with intimate images, livestreamed during abuse, and trafficked.

Financial vulnerabilities put women at increased risk

Eighteen of the twenty documented survivor stories demonstrate how predators frequently offer money and false promises of well-paid employment. Over half the survivors were targeted through work, with four recruited for jobs abroad and subjected to sexual violence once overseas.

One survivor recounted responding to an advertisement about a job in Malaysia through a Kenyan broker who communicated via WhatsApp. On arrival, she was raped by her supervisor, who told her that having sex with him was the only way he'd arrange her work visa.

She explained, "He then linked me through WhatsApp to a man he said would give me a job. This man took me to a hotel and forced me to have oral sex with him. The agent threatened to kill me if I ever uttered a word about the sexual abuse.

"I only reported when I returned to Kenya at the Department for Criminal Investigations headquarters. I was asked for proof of the rape or if I could provide DNA evidence, which I did not have."

OSEA survivors face difficulties reporting and pursuing cases

Victim-blaming and fear of retaliation remain widespread, discouraging reporting to authorities.

Survivors commonly face family or community pressure to withdraw complaints and reconcile informally with perpetrators. Those who report incidents often encounter dismissive law enforcement officials and weak enforcement of laws. Fragmented institutional responses hinder the progression of cases, with survivors bounced between police, hospitals, and courts without coordinated support.

Ivy* was in school when she began chatting to a man on Facebook. He gained her trust by sending her money for school fees and food, but when they eventually met face-to-face, he drugged and raped her with another man.

She recounts, “They held me down, and despite my screaming and pleading, they continued. It wasn’t just the physical pain; I was terrified, humiliated, and completely powerless.

“After everything, I went to the police, hoping for justice, but they told me I had to pay KSh 8,000 (USD \$62) if I wanted them to track down the two men. I’d already lost so much that day, and now it felt like I was being punished again. The system that was supposed to help me felt like another betrayal.”

Perpetrators exploit encryption and other digital tools to hide identities and evidence, while survivors are mainly unaware of how to preserve digital proof. Judicial and law enforcement systems lack resources, technical capacity, and expertise to collect, preserve, and analyse digital evidence, with some police, prosecutors, and judges needing training on handling OSEA cases and providing trauma-informed support.

Kenya’s adversarial court system risks re-traumatising survivors through aggressive questioning, forcing them to face their abusers, and compelling them to recount their experiences repeatedly, with evidentiary procedure prioritised over survivor wellbeing.

Prosecutors represent the State, not survivors, leaving many without personal legal guidance. Survivors report feeling invisible, disempowered, and disengaged from legal proceedings. Compensation to victims is recognised in law, but is rarely included in prosecutors’ pleadings, and therefore seldom granted.

Corruption also deepens mistrust in Kenya’s justice process, with survivors seeing investigations compromised by perpetrators using bribery and social connections to evade punishment.

Many cases collapse or are withdrawn. Free legal aid is essential as survivors with access to legal assistance are more likely to report crimes, persist through court processes, and secure favourable outcomes.

Kenya’s legal system is ill-equipped to address OSEA

Kenya has taken progressive steps to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse across physical and

digital spaces through various laws and policies, including the Sexual Offences Act (2006), Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act (2010), the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act (2018) read together with the recently enacted Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes (Amendment) Act (2024). The country has also ratified international and regional instruments, including the Maputo Protocol and Palermo Protocol, which oblige states to protect women and girls from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

However, Kenya's legal system remains rooted in outdated definitions of abuse, often treating online and offline harms as separate, and enforcement remains weak and fragmented. National laws haven't kept pace with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and algorithmic targeting, nor do they adequately recognise or define key online harms, including livestreamed sexual abuse and image-based sexual exploitation.

Reforming Kenya's OSEA laws

Comprehensive legal reform is still urgently needed to strengthen and harmonise Kenya's laws, improve digital forensic capacity, and ensure survivor-centred justice. Current reviews of the Sexual Offences Act and the Counter-Trafficking in Persons Act offer crucial opportunities.

Experts are calling on Kenya to adopt trauma-informed, gender-responsive approaches and to strengthen coordination across justice, health, and psychosocial systems. There is a need for better collaboration among stakeholders, increased institutional capacity to prevent and respond to abuse, and stronger accountability mechanisms, supported by adequate resources. Sustained prevention and awareness efforts are also essential to challenge harmful social norms and build a culture of zero tolerance for sexual exploitation and abuse.

To improve regional cybersecurity and data protection consistency, Kenya should ratify the [Malabo Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection](#). While concerns over weak implementation and limited human rights safeguards are valid, the Convention provides essential tools for digital evidence-sharing, corporate accountability, and cross-border justice.

Regional cooperation is vital. Kenya can drive a rights-based, survivor-centred approach to online safety and cross-border cooperation across Africa by leading the shaping and advancement of more robust regional frameworks.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

* Ivy's name has been changed to protect her identity.

**Comment on the Computer Misuse and Cybercrime (Amendment) Act, 2024

On 15 October 2025, Kenya enacted the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes (Amendment) Act, 2024. It amends the 2018 Act, supplementing the original law with additional provisions, reflecting increasing awareness of digital threats and changes in online activities.

Some provisions have been added that could protect against online sexual exploitation and abuse. One positive development is that Section 30 on phishing now includes 'calling' as a technique to gain unauthorised access or trick users into revealing personal data.

Section 36A empowers the National Computer and Cybercrimes Coordination Committee (NC4) to act against platforms hosting CSAM, terrorism, extremism, and cultic content. Section 27 on Cyber Harassment adds conduct "likely to cause [a person] to commit suicide." However, enforcement must protect other human rights, such as freedom of expression, and prioritise survivors' voices and rights. Platform accountability should not result in overreach or arbitrary censorship.

About: Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet) is a multi-stakeholder think-tank focused on ICT policy and regulation in Kenya. It serves as a catalyst for reform in the ICT sector, guiding its work through policy advocacy, stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and research. KICTANet aims to promote an open, accessible, and rights-based ICT environment in Kenya.

Available for media comments: Cherie Oyier, Women Digital Rights Program Lead

"OSEA is not just a tech issue. It is a justice issue. As tech evolves, so must our systems to respond swiftly, protect victims, and ensure accountability for harm done in digital spaces."

About: Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming 133 discriminatory laws globally, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities, and nations, both now and for generations to come.

Working with partners at national, regional, and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political, and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping, and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all.

Available for media comments: Amanda Manyame, Digital Rights Advisor, Equality Now

"Enforcement must protect human rights, define online sexual abuse and exploitation (OSEA) in law, and avoid overreliance on motive, which risks letting abusers escape accountability, hinders reporting, and undermines justice to survivors. Kenya has the tools, institutional frameworks, and the expertise in civil society to lead a truly modern, rights-based response to sexual exploitation. But reform must be bold, survivor-centred, and rooted in the realities of today's

digital world.”

About: Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART) Kenya, HAART is a Kenyan non-governmental organisation based in Nairobi that is entirely devoted to eradicating human trafficking. While HAART’s core focus is on prevention, protection of victims, policy cooperation, and prosecution, the scope of its partnerships and impact areas cuts across grassroots communities, civil society organisations, national state actors, and the global community. Since its inception in 2010, HAART has organised training at the grassroots levels for more than 100,000 people and assisted over 1,300 victims of trafficking.

Available for media comments: Dr. Radoslaw Malinowski, CEO of HAART Kenya

“The abuse doesn’t stop when the screen goes dark. Online and offline sexual exploitation are part of the same problem. When the law fails to recognise that, it fails survivors.”

About: Life Bloom Services International is a women-led non-profit organisation founded in September 2004. The organisation works with vulnerable women and children survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. It supports women and children living with disability in Nakuru and Narok Counties in Kenya to regain choice and control over their lives, health, and livelihoods in order for them to pursue a safe, prosperous, and healthy life of their choosing.

Available for media comments: Catherine Wanjohi, Executive Director, Life Bloom Services

"The abuse may begin on a screen, but the impact is deeply personal and lasting. Our systems must respond holistically and ensure that survivors are not retraumatised when seeking justice or support."

About: Trace Kenya is a Counter Trafficking in Persons Public Benefit Organisation (PBO) based in Coastal and Northern Kenya. It was founded in 2006 to help rescue, rehabilitate, and reintegrate women, youth, and children who were victims of human trafficking. Trace Kenya works with referral partners on issues of counter-human trafficking.

For media comments: Macmillan Ochieng, Programs Coordinator, Trace Kenya

"Digital technologies are expanding the reach of traffickers. Stronger legal protections and coordinated support systems are essential to help survivors rebuild and seek justice."

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