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Episode title: International action is needed to stop online sexual exploitation and abuse of women & girls

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Gina Jurva: Thank you for joining us for our Thomson Reuters Market Insights Podcast. My name is Gina Jurva, Attorney and Manager of Market Insights and Thought Leadership for our corporate and government business. Today we will be discussing a new report published by Equality Now, an international human rights organization that focuses on using the law to protect and promote the rights of all women and girls around the world and the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the corporate foundation arm of Thomson Reuters. The report is titled “Ending online sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls: A call for international standards”, and it explores the ever-increasing problem of online sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls, which, according to the report, is growing at an alarming pace globally. The report discusses how technological advancements in the internet have made it much easier to locate, groom and sexually exploit women and girls with a level of impunity that is shocking, yet the full scope of the problem is largely unknown, chiefly because so many cases go underreported. Joining me today are two distinguished guests, Tsitsi Matekaire, Global Lead for End of Sexual Exploitation at Equality Now and one of the authors of the report and Heather Fischer, Senior Advisor for Human Rights Crimes for Thomson Reuters Special Services. Tsitsi, thank you so much for joining me today.

Tsitsi Matekaire: Thank you, Gina. It's a pleasure to be on the show.

Gina Jurva: Well, thank you. Well, as the author of the report, you know, I really would like to begin with you. And then we'll go to Heather, but let's start with just a simple - if you can't define a definition of online sexual exploitation and abuse, or OSEA as the acronym to level set for our audience, what are we talking about here?

Tsitsi Matekaire: So, I'll start off by just giving a broad definition of sexual exploitation and abuse. So, this is when someone abuses their position of power, or a position of trust and they take advantage of someone vulnerability for sexual gratification and also for profit. And so, when we're talking about online sexual exploitation and abuse, this refers to situations where this is happening on the internet, or it's been through the facilitation of digital technology. And online sexual exploitation and abuse includes many forms of cohesive and predatory actions, such as online grooming or live streaming or sexual abuse. It could be child sexual abuse material or online sexual cohesion and extortion. It also involves online sex trafficking. And image-based abuse. And so, we really took a very broad view of the of the problem. And we know we don't see this list as exhaustive. We know that digital technologies and the online space are ever evolving, so new forms of exploitation and abuse are also emerging. And sexual predators and opportunists are taking advantage of the borderless nature of the Internet and are able to commit these crimes from anywhere in the world.

Gina Jurva: Tell me more about the impetus for the report that you and your team published. Why publish it and why now?

Tsitsi Matekaire: And so, Equality Now we are an international human rights organization. And we've been working for over 28 years to end violence and discrimination against women and girls in the areas of sexual violence, sexual exploitation, harmful practices and discrimination in the law. And throughout all of these years, we have continually adapted our work to cater for the changing context. So, over the last few years, we've just seen how online sexual harms against women and girls are really growing on the Internet, and it's become apparent to us that we needed to contribute to efforts to end online sexual exploitation and abuse in its many forms. Particularly lending our gendered legal expertise and advocacy skills to bring about solutions. So, as an organization that uses the law as a tool to bring about change for women and girls, we wanted to really generate some evidence that would enable us to engage with other civil society organizations with governments, technology companies and the public on what needs to be done to address the problem from a gendered perspective. So, this is where the idea for the report and the partnership with trust law and the Thomson Reuters Foundation came about and we wanted to really hone in on a number of areas where we wanted to have better understanding of what the law is or how it looks like and so we looked at the law relating to online sexual exploitation and the international and regional levels wanting to really understand the gaps, challenges and solutions for addressing the problem. We wanted as well to understand the relationship between aspects of digital rights. And here we are talking in particular the right to privacy and freedom of expression online and how this interacts with issues of protection and safety of online users. And we also wanted to understand the challenges of bringing perpetrators to our to account, knowing that the problem that we are dealing with is multi-jurisdictional in nature and in the sense that these crimes are usually not confined to a single country or jurisdiction, and we also wanted to understand the frameworks that that exist for regulating the Internet and digital service providers and platforms on which this exploitation is taking place.

Gina Jurva: It's such a comprehensive report I definitely encourage everyone listening to download the report, to take a look at it. And I think what you said a moment ago is one of the biggest challenges I've seen, right? Is that these are borderless crimes, they're not just taking place in one place or another. I mean, so it's, you're going across jurisdictions and I'm excited to talk to you a little about that in a moment. One question I have for you, and it's something that I think comes up quite often, and maybe there's no easy answer. But why are women and girls particularly vulnerable to online sexual predators?

Tsitsi Matekaire: So, Equality Now and I'm going to draw some of our experiences from working on women's rights and particularly working on violence against women and girls. And I think what we have understood by talking to local organizations that work with women survivors and to survivors themselves is that violence against women and girls doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's really because of the inequality, sex and gender-based discrimination that women and girls face generally in our society, and this inequality and discrimination is intersecting with other forms of inequality arising from things like poverty. Or what race you are, your class, your ethnicity, your migration status. So, if you take all of these things across all our societies, you know, wherever you are in the world these factors impact more on women and girls and this makes them particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, sexual exploitation and other abuse. So, we have to look at sexual exploitation and abuse online as a form of gender-based violence and attitudes or caring as part of the continuum of gender-based violence that we see flourishing in our societies in the physical space and so this form of abuse is now being played out on the digital space. And sexual predators are using the Internet as the new frontier, if you will, to perpetrate and perpetuate violence against women and girls, and also the lack of adequate laws to deal with online

sexual exploitation and abuse. They are more limited than perpetrators enjoy online, so they are taking advantage of all of that, and are able to abuse and exploit with little fear of detection, or waste and what we see as well is that within groups of women and girls, adolescents are particularly vulnerable. They are preyed upon because of their emerging sexuality and unfortunately, they become very desirable to sexual predators. They are also quite difficult to identify as victims because of their age and their active sharing of images or material that they are generating themselves. So, we see them falling through the gaps in terms of legal protection and not being quite covered, even or protected by laws that are designed to protect children and so in that transition between childhood and adolescence and adulthood, we see that adolescent girls fall through the cracks in terms of legal protection, and this is something that that was quite clearly brought out in the survivor stories that we included in the report.

Gina Jurva: When we talk about international standards the report suggests, emphasizes, the need for those international standards for this uniform legal framework. Why is that challenging?

Tsitsi Matekaire: We are starting from the understanding, and this is what also came out in the report, that online crimes are multi-jurisdictional in nature. They are really confined to one country or territory, over which a single legal system is applied. And in some of the more complex cases you find that there may be multiple offenders, multiple victims, and the violence and abuse or carrying across multiple platforms. And all of these people and actors may be based in different countries. And so, you have to be looking at the problem is global in nature and by being global in multi-jurisdictional means we have to think of a global response than just siloed national responses. An international cooperation also becomes very critical when you are dealing with online crimes in terms of how they are investigated and how you bring perpetrators to account and so on. So, that becomes a very critical part of addressing the problem, and so what we are seeing is that actually what you need is a global response and international standards would support countries to work better together to understand the nature of the crimes better and for law enforcement to cooperate better across countries.

Gina Jurva: Yeah, and just as you're speaking, I'm thinking about, you know, how the, let's say it is an online image, sexual abuse image, that someone is receiving. So that person receiving it that's actually actively out there trying to purchase it or view it could be in the United States where I am, but the action of taking the photo or taking the video could have happened in a completely different country, and even the sexual predator who victimizes the young woman or girl in this in this scenario could be in a different country completely, so you could have three countries. You could have multiple countries and I can see why that could be challenging and why an international standard seems to be a way to go. And I have one final question before I get to Heather. What are some key recommendations that you found based on the research you've done for governments globally? Like what could they look to do to help alleviate some of the problem here?

Tsitsi Matekaire: Yes, our overall recommendation is really a call for governments and the international community to look at adopting these binding and international frameworks and standards, as well as updating existing ones. So, we are saying, you know it's not a situation where there is no law at all. There are quite a number of laws in place, but some of them may need updating, perhaps through general comments or general recommendations so that they are able to apply effectively to the digital space in terms of addressing sexual violence and exploitation against women and girls. We would also want to see at the international level clear standards that clarify their own responsibility and accountability of digital service providers that also clarify the interaction between protection and safety

on one hand and the rights to freedom of expression and privacy on the other. How do these rights interact and work together, and how are women and girls able to enjoy the freedom from discrimination and abuse? As well as their freedom of expression and privacy online. And we also want to see the international community being very clear in terms of protections to vulnerable people and ultimately by having international standards, we see them as a guide for national governments. So, national governments can then draw on from these international standards, their national laws and policies.

Gina Jurva: Well, Tsitsi, thank you so much. It has been a sincere pleasure to have you on here to share your experience with me, with our audience, and I applaud the work you're doing and thank you so much, we will continue to follow Equality Now's work in this space, and I appreciate your time. Thank you again.

Tsitsi Matekaire: Thank you.

Gina Jurva: And now I'd like to turn to Heather Fischer. I'd like to draw upon some of your experience in this area. You've dedicated your life to fighting human rights crimes, including as a special adviser to the White House, and before that at the McCain Institute for International Leadership. First, I'd like to thank you very much for being on the podcast.

Heather Fischer: Thanks so much for having me, Gina, and it was wonderful to hear from Tsitsi as well.

Gina Jurva: Yeah, she was fantastic. I'd like to start with just, in your opinion, in all of the work you've done why does this online sexual abuse of women and girls sexual exploitation, why is it happening? Why does it flourish?

Heather Fischer: Yeah, well, first of all, thank you, Gina. I have been working this issue for a number of years now and it's been a huge privilege honestly, to dedicate my career to preventing and combating crimes of exploitation, including online sexual exploitation and use the question that you pose is a great question and I'm glad we're getting to the heart of the issue. In my experience, OSEA flourishes because of the sheer volume of content and the offenders who propagate it far exceed our investment in preventing and countering abuse safeguarding women and girls from online exploitation is, I would say perhaps more important now than ever before, and those of us who've committed our vocation to human rights work know that the current risks for online sexual exploitation are just stunning. And in the United States over the past 15 years, reports of child sexual abuse material to the National Center for Missing Exploited Children have skyrocketed by 15,000%. So, here at Thomson Reuters Special Services, we're currently doing our part and thinking about what our tools and capabilities are to work, hand in hand with law enforcement on cases to combat the online exploitation abuse.

Gina Jurva: Tell me a little bit more about how the COVID-19 pandemic and it's ongoing, right? We're still we're still in a global pandemic. How has it exacerbated the situation? As more people turn to being online and we're all in front of our computers on a regular basis now, how has it changed the situation?

Heather Fischer: Well, unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic really has exasperated the situation greatly. Because the pandemic children are now digital learning and have access, more access to devices than ever before really putting them at increased risk to be lowered and grim by predators online and also children are viewing graphic, sexual content at younger and younger ages. When I was in office we thought about this deal quite a bit because we knew that we needed children to be digitally learning, and yet at the same token they were having more screen time than ever before. And one thing that we

have learned from the National Center for Missing Spoiled Children is that last year over 17 million reports to their cyber tip line included nearly 70 million child abuse material files.

Gina Jurva: That's huge. I mean, it's just I'm trying to even like wrap my mind around quantifying that number. And that's just reported. I mean, I think I as I said before. It's like we don't know, we don't fully know the magnitude of the problem because so much goes on unreported, right? So, how- so there's numerous laws that address the various facets of this problem, but there appears to be a gap in enforcement, right? I mean, the laws are different I think I was, you know, we were just talking about that a moment ago. There should be a call for international and international standard, but the actual law enforcement on the ground, so to speak, how do we train law enforcement in a different way to recognize the problem, to see what's happening? Like, do you have any suggestions on that?

Heather Fischer: Yeah, I do. I mean, I think it takes a whole society approach to tackle a whole society issue. Like online sexual exploitation abuse. So, the way I think about this, to counter perpetrators we really do need cross border collaboration with law enforcement, prosecutors, government, non-government organizations, our international organizations are all key and we should be working together to strengthen online safety laws or policies. The detection of online exploitation and currently law enforcement NGO's are struggling to deal with two things. One, is the volume of cases. It's overwhelming. And two, how to deal with the encryption issues, so the role of tech companies and platforms are really important, critical and key to address as well.

Gina Jurva: And actually, that was going to be my next question to you. And you and I talked a little bit about this before recording the podcast today, but then we could probably do an entire podcast on this, but what recommendations do you provide, or do you - would you suggest for addressing technology's role in this issue? Like, what is their responsibility?

Heather Fischer: It's a great question. So, my first recommendation to technology space is protection by default or safety by design. In my mind, I sort of think how easy would it be for phones, computers and gaming devices to inherently protect children right in the factory settings. Adults could easily change their settings, of course, after they purchase a new device or a gaming system to be less restrictive, but if we were to do this protection by design, then at least the littlest kiddos who don't do not know how to change the settings would be inherently protected. My second recommendation is around robust trust and safety teams, they are absolutely crucial. I think tech companies could step up these efforts. I see the great lengths social media platforms go to, to counter stop disinformation and misinformation, and rightfully so. We now know that they have these capabilities to monitor at a very granular level, and I'm hoping that these capabilities will now be adapted for detecting and countering online child exploitation materials as well.

Gina Jurva: That's such a great point. I mean, what you say is they're able to identify counter stop in some ways, misinformation, whether it's about whatever the topic is, whether it's COVID or whatever the topic is for that. If they can get that granular, as you said, about things like misinformation or disinformation, this is such a critically important area they could do that too, so that I agree with you there. Also, what about financial institutions? What role do they play? Do you have any recommendations for them?

Heather Fischer: I do. I also think financial services industry has a really critical role to play in the fight against online sexual exploitation. When we think about human rights work, we often think of social

workers and law enforcement, healthcare workers as being on the frontlines of combating crimes such as human trafficking and online sexual exploitation and views, but the reality is if we really want to end online sexual exploitation, we have to follow the money back to the perpetrator. The scale of this problem is too large to solve with law enforcement alone. And honestly, it does sometimes, despite our best efforts, the only way we can actually detect and for perpetrators and unmask who they are is by following the money back to the offender. So, that means in my mind we need forensic accountants and analysts and others to lend us their expertise. We really can't continue to do this work alone or in silos because we will not arrest our way out of this problem, and we must have the financial institutions involved to really make progress in this space.

Gina Jurva: Absolutely, and I think this is something we say a lot, probably heard this a lot on this podcast, is the public-private partnership space, like really having law enforcement, financial institutions, public and private, working together to combat this, but as you said, following the money is certainly one way to do that. Any final thoughts on the future of stopping online sexual exploitation and abuse? Any words of wisdom or advice you could provide the audience?

Heather Fischer: I'm so glad you asked and I hope you'll permit me 'cause I have several.

Gina Jurva: Yes, please.

Heather Fischer: I will note that while the focus of this report is on women and girls that would be remiss not to mention the boys and LGBTQI+ youth are also sexually exploited online certainly invoked with many survivors coming from that community, and it's primarily through gaming systems and online platforms. We know that boys and LGBTQI+ children are lured and groomed into online sexual exploitation. It's thought that because the sexual exploitation of boys is a taboo topic we don't receive as many tips or disclosures from that population, but as a society, to me, I think we need to reassess and consider ways to really provide a safe space for this population of children to disclose. I also wanted to share that through my work with survivors, survivors of exploitation they have shared with me that prevention skills to recognize the signs of grooming could have really served as red flag indicators and warning signs that then would have made a difference in their situation. And I think if we really wanted to go upstream and make it done and stopping online exploitation, we really do need to invest in this next generation. And I think that looks like going upstream with prevention programming for children and equipping parents, caregivers, and children and youth of the knowledge to deal with online safety, right? And here in the US we're very fortunate that federal law enforcement takes these cases very seriously and have they've been really great. Thought partner partners to us actually and how to reach classrooms and use online videos to reach this next generation of children. So, we've been outlining some free curricula and resources, so if there's anybody kind of in your audience who wants to know what exists and what are the toolkits available for parents and caregivers and children, I'm pleased to say that we do have those available. I've worked on passing some prevention, education policy and laws in the United States and worked with the NGO's and survival leaders here across the United States so that we do have a whole of society approach to this effort on prevention education. And honestly, I'm very pleased to say we have to work with the technology companies two years ago while I was still in the US government, we worked with the tech coalition to issue a series of public service announcements about the risks of online sexual exploitation, especially during COVID-19, that really were geared towards reaching caregivers and children. And we also developed a set of voluntary principles with the

tech companies, and we think that's a good start, but I really would like to see more collaboration because after working on this issue from multiple facets, from think tank world, NGO space and the US government, now here in the private sector, I'm really convinced more than ever that we have to work together through public private partnerships with tech companies to raise awareness and promote prevention programming globally.

Gina Jurva: Well, Heather, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk about this very important issue. Thanks to you and Tsitsi for all your work in this area and we will continue to follow it closely here at the Thomson Reuters Institute. Thank you for joining me and everyone for listening. Please do download a copy of the report on the Equality Now website or follow the link from our website thomsonreuters.com/institute. Thank you very much again.

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