



Child Protection Online in the MENA region

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The Centre for Abuse and Trauma Studies, alongside the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, recently engaged in research on behalf of UNICEF MENARO exploring online child protection in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. This exploratory study sought to understand the legislative and political frameworks in place for online child protection in four countries; Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, and develop regional and country specific reports and recommendations.

This three-part study consisted of a literature review, interviews and focus groups with government bodies, industry and NGO's, and synthesis of this data in order to develop an informed and culturally sensitive picture of the nature of online child protection in the MENA region. The research team examined academic and grey literature specific to the MENA region and the four countries identified to create a knowledge base and develop interview questions. Interviews focussed on legislation, policy and industry practice, with the aim of building on the literature review, identifying gaps and clarifying anecdotal evidence. Finally, all findings were synthesised to ensure accuracy and relate the literature to the practice in each country. From this, a series of key findings emerged.

Key findings

- ✚ It became clear very quickly the extent to which cultural influence and religion plays a role in the MENA region in general. This can hinder the discussion surrounding online child protection as a result of cultural sensitivity, for example discussing sex, and can impede a shift in public opinion regarding the issues faced by young people online. However, there is also evidence in good practice when it comes to using this cultural influence to raise awareness of online safety, for example, in Jordan religious leaders facilitate these discussions by highlighting key safety messages for young people.
- ✚ It is evident that it would be inappropriate to simply apply western practice and initiatives without adapting these to suit the needs of these cultural sensitivities. This is not just an issue in relation to discussing perceived taboo topics, but also in relation to technological capabilities. The MENA region is in the early stages of developing a technological infrastructure and is focussed on building this infrastructure. As a result of this, there is little, if any, baseline data with regards to young people and their online activities. It is unclear how many young people are online, what platforms they use to access online material and which devices are preferred. It is emerging that mobile devices may be the preferred device in the MENA region however research needs to be conducted to explore these issues in order to create effective practice guidelines and provide relevant information to young people that meets their specific needs.

- ✚ Legislation and policy in the MENA region with regards to child protection is mostly in place, however legislation and policy specific to online child protection issues is under developed, with most of the countries examined applying offline child protection legislation to online issues. There is evidence of change however, with Egypt currently exploring online child protection specific legislation in conjunction with the UN as part of a working group. In general however collaboration and communication is lacking, resulting in a lack of national mechanisms and frameworks when it comes to dealing with online child protection. In some countries national mechanisms are not yet in place for dealing with offline child protection. With communication and government-industry cross collaboration there is an opportunity to develop practice and policy for both aspects of child protection, with acknowledgement that child protection rarely falls into either the online or offline sphere in a dichotomous way. In order to meet the needs of young people, whose online world often forms part of their offline world, child protection must consider both aspects.
- ✚ There is evidence of good practice and a strong focus on creating a positive environment for youth online and showing young people the possibilities that the online world can bring. For example, in Egypt it is acknowledged that the internet can be a positive experience for young people if used safely and using online technology is encouraged when it comes to young people developing start-up companies and exploring creative and engaging business opportunities. An online magazine is one of the most used news sources in the country and there is a want and a willingness to engage young people in terms of digital literacy and citizenship.

Policy recommendations

A number of policy recommendations were made as a result of the in-country visits across the four countries and the literature review engaged in by the research team. It is hoped that these recommendations can begin to set in motion a positive and culturally specific framework for child protection in each of the countries and across the MENA region.

- ✚ Education should be provided to young people on being safe online and the potential risks that may be faced when using online technologies.
- ✚ Industry and government collaboration should be utilised, especially with regards to technological companies such as Microsoft, in order to further investigative practice and capabilities when it comes to identifying and removing child abuse material online.
- ✚ Baseline data should be collected in order to understand how young people in the MENA region are using online technologies.
- ✚ Training on online child protection should be provided for legal professionals, child protection officers, social workers and educators alike.
- ✚ National mechanisms, including at a basic level creating a referral and support system, should be developed and implemented for online child protection.