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Digital safety for children: A literature review on tackling online gender-based violence and exploitation

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Background: The rapid expansion of digital technologies has dramatically altered the lives of children, offering many opportunities while at the same time bringing grave risks. Of all the critical issues in this digital era, online gender-based violence and exploitation stand out. This literature review aimed to overview existing research on children's safety in digital contexts, focusing on the gendered dimensions of online abuse.

Method: This study utilizes a qualitative synthesis of peer-reviewed articles, reports policy documents from 2015 to 2024. It is being conducted in global and South Asian settings, specifically Sri Lanka, and focuses on online gender-based violence, digital exploitation, and child protection. Case studies relevant to this were thematically coded to ascertain trends, gaps, and the role of gender stereotypes in perpetuating online abuse. Sources were accessed from search databases like Google Scholar and JSTOR, and child protection reports.

Results: Literature indicates that girls are more exposed to internet gender violence like exploitation and harassment, especially on social media. Gender stereotypes deter reporting and trigger victim-blaming. Most countries' legal systems, including Sri Lanka, are patriarchal and archaic in responding to digital abuse. Inability of children, parents, and teachers to be digitally literate further generates exposure. While technologies like ML and AI have promises in detecting abuse, their use is circumscribed. Overall, the results underscore the need for collective action among policymakers, educators, tech developers, and communities to establish a safer digital world for children.

Conclusion: The study finds that while AI and ML help identify online exploitation, current protections remain insufficient especially for girls. A safer online world requires joint action from policymakers, educators, tech developers, and communities.

Keywords: e-safety, gender-based violence, exploitation, online protection measures, media literacy, legal frameworks.