



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

1. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (OSRSG VAC) is pleased to make a submission to the Second IGF 2023 Open Consultations.
2. Children make up at least one in three internet users worldwide. Despite the digital divide, children and young people are the most connected age group across all regions. They continue to connect in ever larger numbers and at younger ages. Against this background, it is crucial to ensure a safe, empowering and inclusive digital environment for children.
3. Based on the Special Representative's most recent report to the Human Rights Council - which focused on violence online - her country visits and consultation she has undertaken with children across all regions, there are three main points the Office of the Special Representative would like to convey.¹
4. **First: risks of harm to children in the digital environment are spreading rapidly.** While the digital environment offers many opportunities for children, it exposes them to diverse forms of violence and harm. These include online sexual exploitation and abuse; exposure to violent and sexual content; cyberbullying; promotion of suicide and self-harm; radicalization and hate speech; fake news; trafficking and smuggling; recruitment into criminal, armed or violent extremist groups; harassment of child human rights defenders; privacy violations; fraud and identity theft.
5. The ongoing development of technology and the increasing interactivity of online content, social networking, video sharing and instant messaging have increased the risks for children to be exposed to or become victims of violence.
6. Many data gaps remain. But the most recent figures we have are alarming. For example:
 - 85 million images and videos of child sexual abuse were reported globally in 2021, according to hotlines.
 - Up to one quarter of children in 11 countries across four regions said that they had seen online content related to physical self-harm.
 - According to a recent review of international evidence by WHO: 15 % of children reported cyberbullying victimization; 11.5% of children had received unwanted online sexual solicitation; and 8% of adolescents had a self-made sexual image forwarded without consent.²

¹ See A/HRC/52/61

² Ibid.

7. Most online crimes against children go unreported. Most victims remain unidentified. Most perpetrators go unprosecuted. Only a small minority of child victims seek help or advice and access to justice is challenging.
8. Technology-facilitated abuse creates extra challenges for children which are related to the persistence of abusive or harmful material, revictimization and self-blame. The impact of online violence on the dignity, physical integrity, development and mental health of children is both devastating and long-lasting.
9. **Second: proactive protection of children online cannot wait.** Offenders and criminals follow closely the legislative framework and capacities of States, targeting those they perceive to be weakest and where they are most likely to act with impunity. The existing protection gaps must close.
10. This means ensuring sound legislation that appropriately addresses all forms of online violence and crimes against children, guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment 25.³ This also means providing adequate resources to support the effective investigation by law enforcement of online violence, especially given the complexity and transnational dimensions of these crimes.
11. Legislation and regulation take time to enact, while risks to children in the digital world emerge quickly and spread rapidly. Hence the tech industry has a special responsibility. However, purely voluntary approaches are insufficient. Child safety by design, child rights due diligence and regulatory frameworks compliant with the highest standards of ethics, safety, and privacy of children, are needed more than ever. The tech industry must be more proactive in detecting illegal material on their platforms, reporting promptly and collaborating fully with law enforcement agencies and hotlines.
12. Awareness-raising and capacity building for children, families and professionals is also key. In addition, peer violence online - which is increasing and is one of children's top concerns - must be dealt with in line with principles of children's rights and the provision of stronger support to all children.
13. **Third: children must be involved as part of the solution.** Children themselves report that the digital environment is central to their lives. It has given them crucial opportunities to express themselves and make their voices heard in matters that affect them.
14. Children are also increasingly turning to the online world when they are experiencing violence, including through accessing helplines, counselling and reporting services. Children are increasingly taking action to connect with and support their peers through the digital environment. All of this underscores the importance of empowering children, listening to them, and involving them as part of the solution.
15. The challenge of guaranteeing the rights of children online and keeping them safe is not fundamentally new. The challenges have been discussed for many years. Yet efforts to

³ CRC/C/GC/25

date have not yielded the results that are needed. They are not keeping pace with the rapid changes in the digital world and in children's access to it.

16. An adequate response to the full range of risks that children face online requires more leadership, commitment, and accountability from every component of the ecosystem. The Special Representative looks forward to working with all stakeholders to achieve this and to ensure children's rights and their freedom from violence are fully guaranteed in the digital environment.