



# A safer digital environment for children



Now is the time to **ACT**



OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF  
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON

# **VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN**

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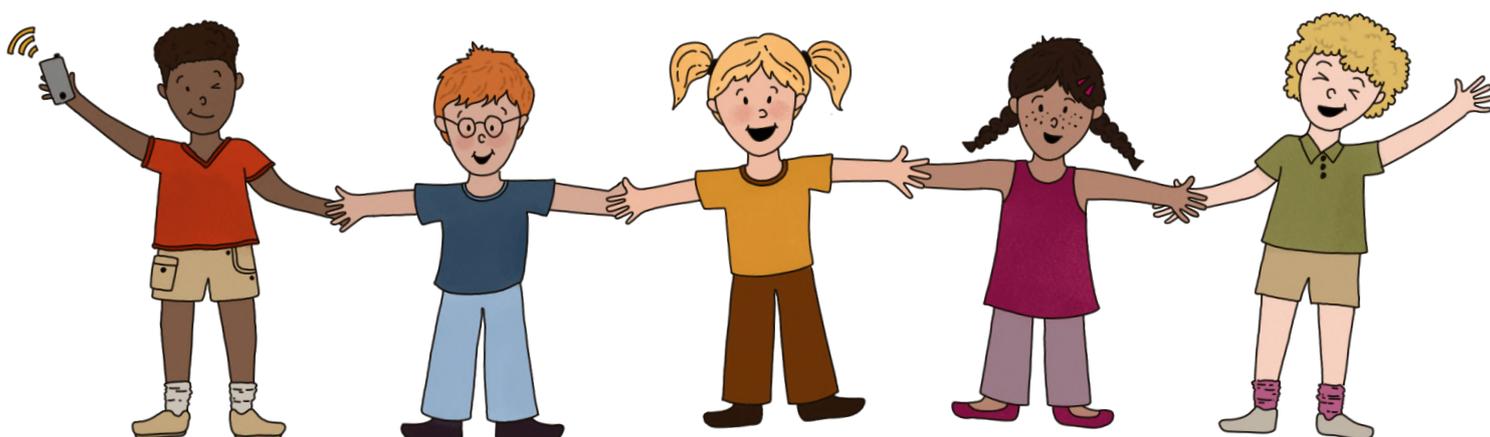
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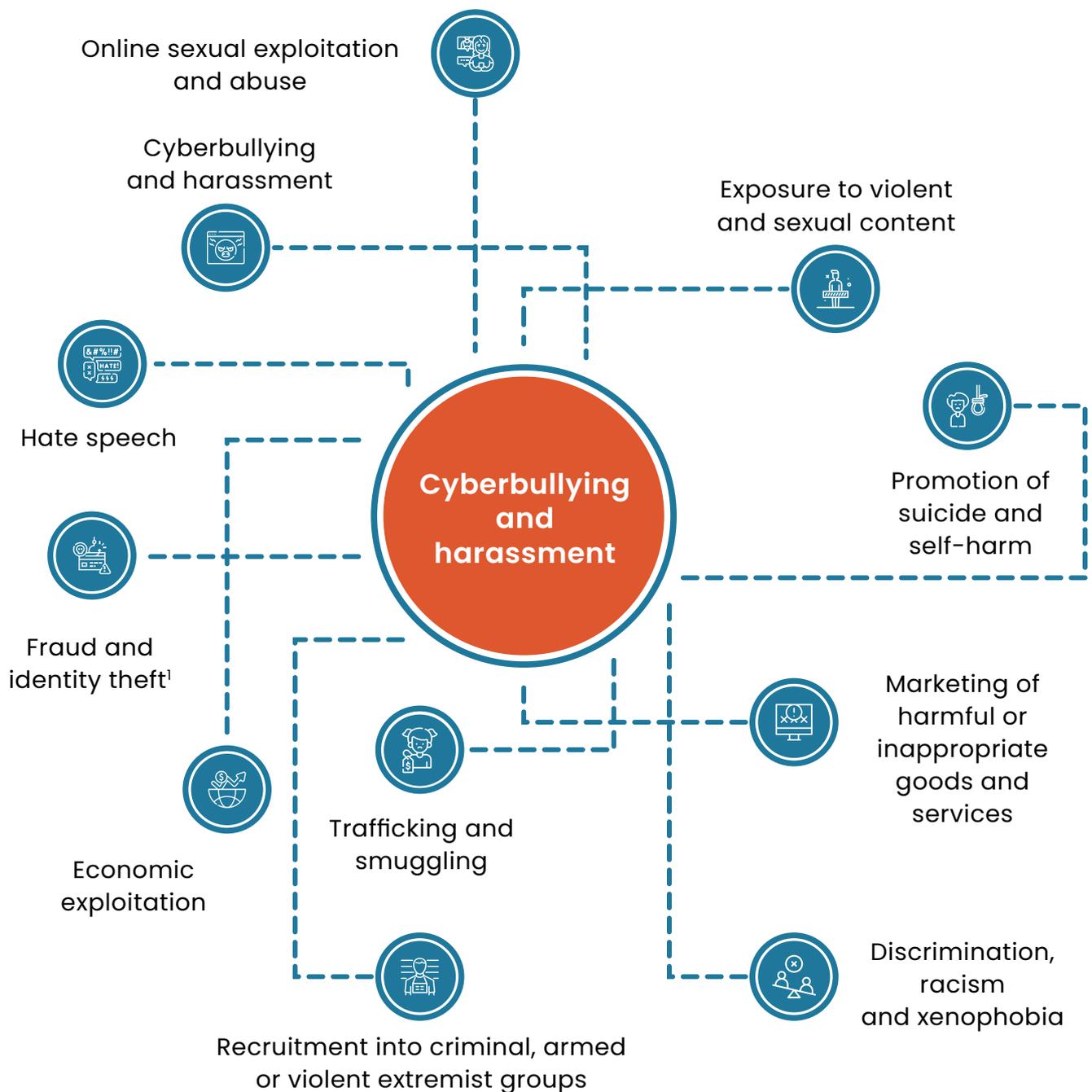


*Illustrations by  
Chiara E.*

# A wide range of risks

It is estimated that one in three Internet users worldwide is under 18 years of age. While the digital environment offers new opportunities for the realization of children’s rights, it also poses risks of the violation or abuse of those rights.

The online risks to children can entail different forms of violence and harm. These include:



*Children may be exposed to multiple forms of violence online, which are often associated with experiences of violence offline.<sup>2</sup>*

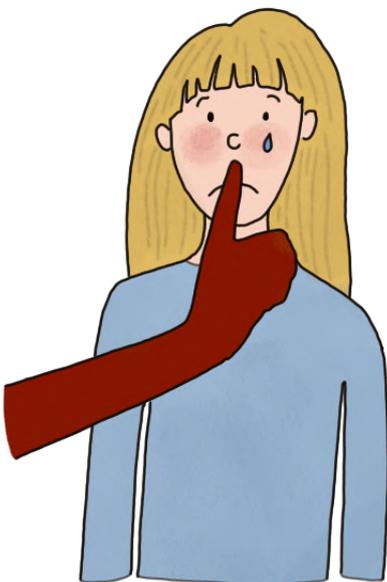


The lack of comprehensive data on violence against children in that environment remains a challenge. Notwithstanding the gaps that persist, the data that already exist on children's exposure to violence and harm online are alarming.

A recent review of evidence by WHO highlighted that according to meta-analyses of international studies regarding different forms of violence against children online: 15% of children reported cyberbullying victimization; 11.5% of survey participants had received unwanted online sexual solicitation; and 8% of adolescents had a self-made sexual image forwarded without consent.<sup>3</sup>

In 2021, the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children received around 29 million reports of suspected child sexual abuse material, an increase of 35% from 2020.<sup>4</sup>

The Disrupting Harm research project implemented across 13 countries estimates that between 1-20% of children were subjected to online child sexual exploitation and abuse in the past year alone. Scaled to the general population of Internet-using children, these estimates represent tens of thousands or millions of children, depending on the country.<sup>5</sup>



Comparative research from 11 countries across four regions found that up to one-quarter of children had seen online content related to physical self-harm in the past year. Up to one-fifth of children reported encountering online content on suicide.<sup>6</sup>

Traffickers are using technology to profile, recruit, control and exploit their victims, as well as the use of the Internet, particularly use of the dark web, to hide illegal materials associated with trafficking and their real identities from investigators.<sup>7</sup>

Children are recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups through use of the digital environment. UNODC notes that cartoons, computer games and other interactive media on the Internet have been designed to appeal to children in particular and that children are approached through both grooming and targeted advertising techniques.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of online violence on the mental health and development of children is both devastating and long-lasting. Violence against children online is also vastly under-reported and online crime against children are under-prosecuted.

Overall, more robust, high-quality and comparable research is needed, with greater representation of the diversity of children's circumstances and greater understanding of children's digital ecology.<sup>9</sup>



# A wide range of action but not enough progress

An extensive range of international and regional instruments guide and support action to combat violence against children online.<sup>10</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child has elaborated on the framework within which States parties to the Convention can address the protection of children's rights online, including freedom from all forms of violence.<sup>11</sup>

The Committee has outlined key elements of a comprehensive response, including:



There is a sound normative foundation, extensive guidance and a wide mobilization of stakeholders addressing violence against children online. Yet, efforts to date have not yielded the results that are needed and are not keeping pace with the rapid changes in the digital world and in children's access to it.

*An adequate response to the full range of risks that children face online requires leadership and an even deeper commitment from every component of the ecosystem.*



# Prevention must be the priority

While the response to cases of online violence against children once they emerge must be strengthened, this must not detract from the need to minimize the risk to the greatest extent possible. This means ensuring that criminal law appropriately addresses all forms of online violence and crimes against children. With regard to sexual exploitation and abuse of children, gaps in legal frameworks on the prohibition of child sexual abuse material, live-streaming, sextortion and grooming, including through use of social networking platforms and online games, must be filled.<sup>12</sup> It is also necessary to prohibit the use of information and communications technology in the recruitment of children by terrorist or violent extremist groups and in the context of child trafficking.<sup>13</sup>

*Instances of peer violence must be dealt with in line with principles of children's rights.*

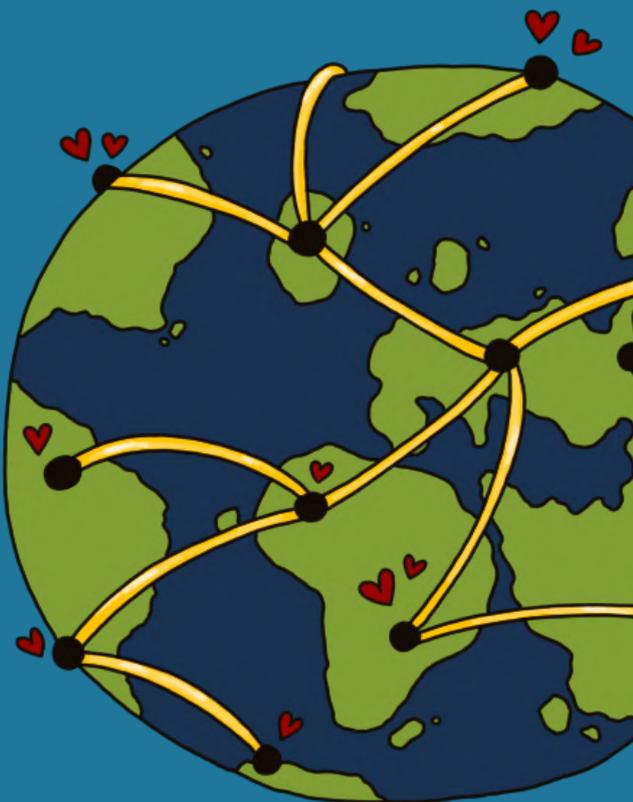


There are forms of online peer violence, such as most cases of cyberbullying, that, although harmful, should not in principle be criminalized but rather addressed through different means. Where online crimes against children are carried out by other children, States must make every effort to create, and use, alternatives to a criminal justice response. Self-generated sexual material that children possess and/or share with their consent and solely for their own private use should not be criminalized.<sup>14</sup> To ensure preventive action by industry, States should take measures to ensure that businesses comply with their obligations. This includes requiring undertaking child rights due diligence and to implement industry codes and terms of services which adhere to the highest standards of ethics, privacy and safety for children. Providing for risk assessments of products and services, as well as age verification mechanisms, could also form part of this range of preventive measures.

Clear and unambiguous reporting requirements are equally important. In this regard, it is important that the business sector be provided with guidance by appropriate regulatory bodies to support them in meeting the required standards. The role of industry in developing technology solutions to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse is key, reinforcing the need to work constructively to identify and develop detection, removal and blocking measures that are swift and effective.

However, purely voluntary approaches by industry are insufficient. While some companies invest substantially in making their products and platforms safe, the approach across the sector is highly inconsistent. More robust regulation built on principles of children's rights must become a reality.

*Current debates in many countries and regions on protections for individual privacy in this context are important and must be considered carefully. However, the privacy of children – particularly child victims of violence online – must be protected and their protection as victims first and foremost must be ensured.*



# Ensuring a victim- and survivor-centred approach

Children face particular challenges in accessing justice relating to the digital environment, which arise because of a lack of legislation placing sanctions on relevant violations of children's rights; difficulties in obtaining evidence or identifying perpetrators; and a lack of knowledge among children and caregivers regarding their rights. Further challenges may arise if children are required to disclose sensitive or private online activities or fear reprisals by peers or social exclusion.

States must ensure the investigation of online crimes against children and provide remedies and holistic support for child victims and survivors.<sup>15</sup> States should address the ways in which the uses of digital technologies may facilitate or impede the investigation and prosecution of crimes against children and take all available preventive, enforcement and remedial measures, including in cooperation with international partners. They should provide specialized training for law enforcement officials, prosecutors and judges on violations of children's rights linked specifically to the digital environment, including through international cooperation.



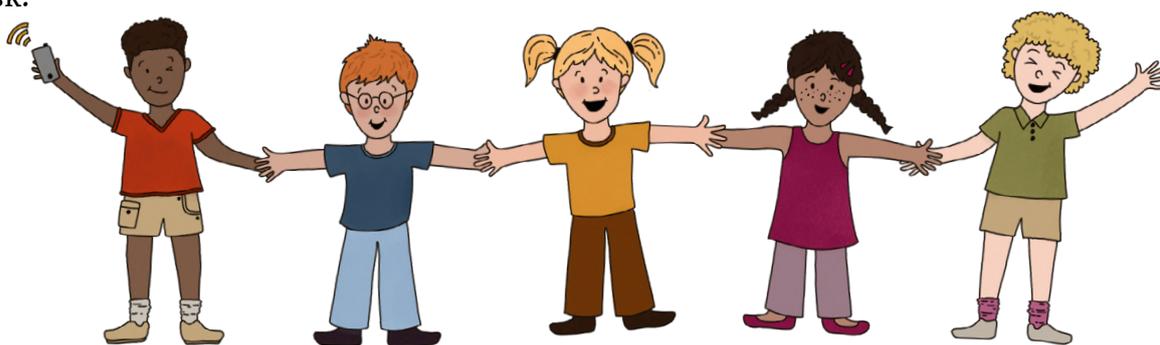
Furthermore, it is essential that children and their caregivers have effective access to child-friendly complaint mechanisms regarding online violence, through both national human rights institutions and other national authorities, including those institutions or authorities that are responsible for health and safety, data protection and consumer rights, education and advertising and marketing. Businesses should also have accessible and child-friendly complaints processes.<sup>16</sup>

#techforequality

# Children as part of the solution

The digital world has opened the door to far greater involvement by children in every aspect of the fight against online violence. Children themselves report that the digital environment is central to their lives and has given them crucial opportunities for their voices to be heard in matters that affect them.

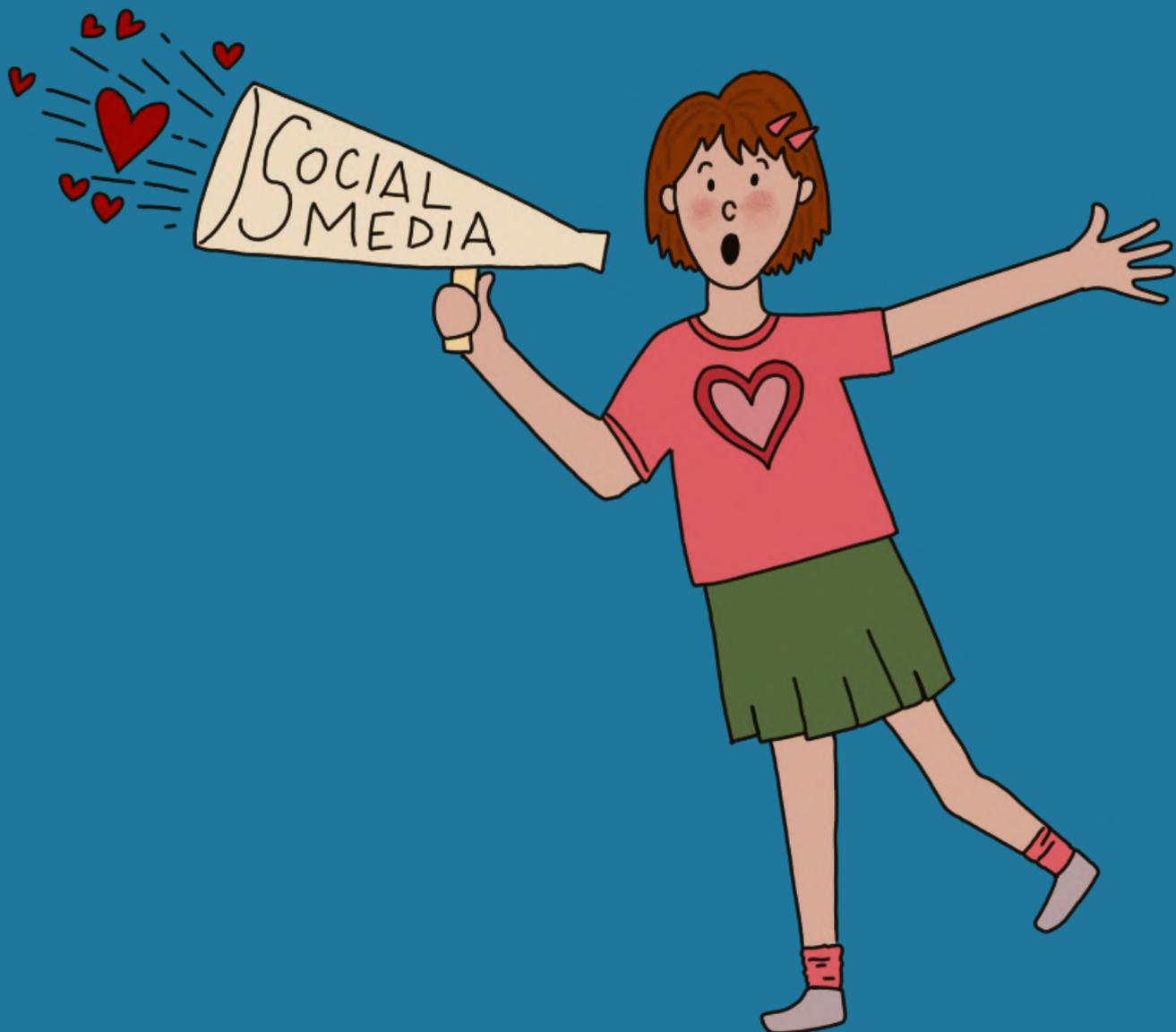
Children must be empowered with the knowledge and skills needed to keep themselves safe online. The WHO review of what works to prevent online violence against children found strong evidence that prevention education for children can work and identified key components of an effective approach.<sup>17</sup> However, it must be emphasized that while empowering and educating children and caregivers are important, this must not result in a shifting of the burden for keeping children safe onto their own shoulders. Children are also increasingly turning to the online world when they are at risk of experiencing violence, including through accessing helplines, hotlines, counselling services and violence reporting systems. The online world can be a source of protection and connection, not just of risk.



In February 2022, the Office of the Special Representative together with ITU launched Protection through Online Participation (POP), an intersectoral and collaborative initiative which aims towards achieving a better understanding of how children and young people use digital platforms to be safer.

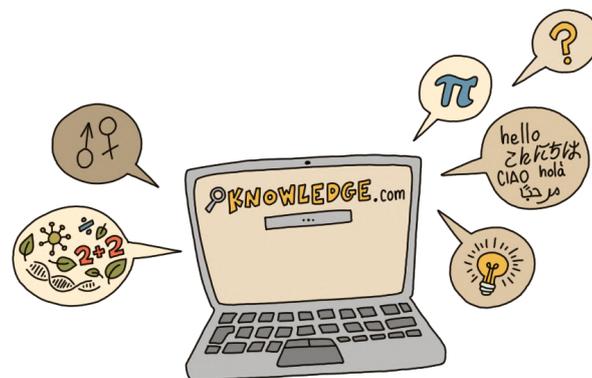
Through an online survey, the initiative has started to map protection services that support children and youth through online means, with examples drawn from 118 countries. This initiative will combine these mapping results with lessons learned from different sectors to make recommendations on how to implement or improve services protecting children through online means.

*Children are increasingly taking action to connect with and support each other through the digital environment.*



# Looking ahead

Children live in an interconnected, digital world. More and more children are online, and at younger ages, which brings with it a wide range of risks. Guidance exists on what constitutes a children's rights-based approach to tackling these issues and how to respond effectively. There are strong partnerships for coordinated action which bring together States, civil society, industry, academia and other entities.



Yet, this has not been translated into action at the scale or speed required at this critical moment to keep pace with the threats faced by children in the digital environment. Moreover, new tools and options are being developed without proper frameworks in place to address risk and mitigation from the outset.

Addressing violence in the digital environment requires a broad view of violence and harm online. Different forms of violence occur at the same time and are often closely linked to violence offline. Moreover, children facing vulnerabilities outside the digital environment are also more likely to be vulnerable online. For this reason, it is important to stress the crucial role of protective frameworks for addressing the risks and drivers of violence outside the digital environment.



*Too often, online protection of children is treated in isolation from action to prevent and address violence against children more broadly.*

While it takes time to enact legislation and regulations, risks to children in the digital world emerge quickly and spread rapidly. For this reason, the tech industry has a special responsibility. It is uniquely placed to mitigate the negative impact that digital technologies can exert on children: they must be required to put children first and build the rights of children to safety and protection into their business models.

The Special Representative will continue to promote the need for a stronger legal and regulatory environment to ensure children's protection and privacy online. In doing so, the Special Representative will continue to emphasize that investing in children also means involving them as part of the solution.

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15. Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).
16. Ibid. See, for example, the role of the Online Safety Commission of Fiji, established in the Online Safety Act 2018.
17. World Health Organization, What Works to Prevent Online Violence against Children?



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