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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children**

### *Summary*

In the present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 74/133, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, Najat Maalla M'jid, reviews actions she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate. She provides an overview of the results achieved and an update on her work since her previous report<sup>a</sup> and emphasizes that the need for investment in cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive prevention and protection services is more urgent than ever. The report, which is focused on the protection of children in the digital environment, contains an outline of the diverse forms of violence to which children are exposed online, emphasizing their co-occurrence in that setting, as well as the continuum between violence online and offline. Also contained in the report are key recommendations aimed towards ensuring an inclusive, safe, protective and empowering digital environment for children, where no child is left behind.

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<sup>a</sup> [A/HRC/49/57](#).



## I. Introduction

1. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, guided by General Assembly resolution 62/141, is an independent global advocate for the prevention and elimination of all forms of violence against children. In its resolution 76/147, the Assembly reaffirmed its support for the work of the Special Representative, recognizing the progress achieved and the role of her mandate in promoting further implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children<sup>1</sup> and supporting Member States in their implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Assembly has also expressed appreciation for the leadership of the Special Representative in the follow-up to the United Nations global study on children deprived of liberty<sup>2</sup> and has encouraged her to continue her work in that area.

2. In the present report, the Special Representative reviews actions she has taken at the global, regional and national levels to fulfil her mandate as established by the General Assembly in its resolution 62/141 and provides an overview of the results achieved. She emphasizes that the need to prevent and respond effectively to violence against children is more urgent than ever. Ending violence against children cannot wait, as violence continues to rise and becomes ever more normalized. Too many children are being left behind as a result of the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, just as ongoing humanitarian and climate crises have magnified children's exposure and vulnerability to violence. The Special Representative stresses that, with less than seven years remaining to keep the promise made through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals to end all forms of violence against children and to address its drivers, it is time to invest in an inclusive, resilient, healthy, just and safe recovery for all children worldwide, leaving no one behind.

3. The present report, which is focused on violence against children in the digital environment, contains an outline of the diverse forms of violence to which children are exposed online, emphasizing their co-occurrence in that setting, as well as the continuum between violence online and offline. The Special Representative stresses the need for holistic responses to the challenges posed by violence against children in the digital environment, highlighting the crucial role of children as agents of positive change through identifying and implementing solutions. The Special Representative invited Member States to inform the report by submitting information on initiatives related to children's participation in decision-making processes, as well as measures to address children's rights in the digital environment and the risks they experience online. The Special Representative is grateful for all submissions received<sup>3</sup> and inputs from a wide variety of stakeholders.

## II. Accelerating action to end violence against children by 2030

### A. Investment in child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention is needed now more than ever

4. Children's vulnerability to violence continues to be exacerbated worldwide by multiple and overlapping crises. These include increasing poverty, social and economic inequalities, forced displacement, conflict, climate change, environmental degradation, natural disasters, food insecurity, widespread violence and political instability.

5. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that about 1 billion children are in multidimensional poverty, while an estimated 356 million children live in extreme poverty. An additional 100 million children have been plunged into multidimensional

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<sup>1</sup> A/61/299.

<sup>2</sup> A/74/136.

<sup>3</sup> In response to a note verbale transmitted by the Special Representative on 2 November 2022, contributions were received from the following Member States: Bulgaria, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, Poland, Republic of Moldova and Senegal.

poverty by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Poverty drives various forms of violence, including through child labour, child marriage, trafficking in and smuggling of children, sexual exploitation of children and recruitment of children into criminal, armed and violent extremist groups. For example, UNICEF estimates that over the next decade, more than 10 million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have warned that without mitigation strategies, the number of children in child labour could rise by 8.9 million by the end of 2022 as a result of higher levels of poverty and increased vulnerability.<sup>6</sup>

6. According to estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of people who have been forcibly displaced worldwide may have reached 103 million by mid-2022, the highest number ever.<sup>7</sup> If the trends from 2021 hold, about 42 million may be children. Displaced children are more likely to experience various forms of violence at every stage of their journey. In addition, they continue to lack access to humanitarian assistance and services; risk being deprived of liberty under policies that criminalize irregular migration because of their migrant status or that of their parents; and face discrimination and the possibility of statelessness.

7. The impact of violence is devastating, immediate and lifelong. Violence against children impairs their brain development, their physical and mental health and their ability to learn. The economic costs are also staggering, as stressed in the annual report of the Special Representative to the Human Rights Council at its forty-ninth session.<sup>8</sup> A paradigm shift is needed in response. Throughout the reporting period, the Special Representative and key partners have stressed that spending on cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention yields high returns and must be viewed as an investment. Cost-effective prevention and response measures already exist and should be embedded in Governments' economic growth and development plans, supported by adequate resources, monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

8. Today's challenges underline the essential role of multilateralism and international cooperation and partnerships, the strengthening of South-South, North-South and circular cooperation and the exchange of promising practices. The Special Representative, who has emphasized this in every interaction with Member States and other partners, is grateful for their support in facilitating the sharing of experiences and peer learning across all regions.

## **B. Mobilizing action, building bridges and strengthening cooperation with key stakeholders**

### **Support for Member States**

9. The Special Representative continued her close engagement with Member States in their preparation of voluntary national reviews as part of the 2030 Agenda follow-up and review mechanisms. These regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven, are the basis for the regular reviews by the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

10. In 2022, the Special Representative engaged with 44 Member States that were presenting their voluntary national reviews or in which voluntary local reviews were being undertaken. The Special Representative supported them during the process by advocating for a comprehensive, multisectoral and integrated approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals as they relate to violence against children and its drivers. She mobilized the United Nations system at the global, regional and country levels to enhance technical support for Member States, particularly through her engagements with resident

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

<sup>6</sup> See [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_845351/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_845351/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/635a578f4/mid-year-trends-2022>.

<sup>8</sup> [A/HRC/49/57](#).

coordinators, country teams and regional commissions, as well as her participation in all regional sustainable development forums.

11. The Special Representative met regularly with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams to focus on violence in common country analyses and strategic outcomes as they prepare the new generation of United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks, as a means of supporting States in their commitments to end violence against children and engage with human rights mechanisms. The reinvigorated resident coordinator system and United Nations programmatic processes provide renewed opportunities to mainstream the protection of children and their rights, thereby ensuring that no one is left behind in the United Nations cooperation framework. This aligns with the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda” and with “The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights”.

12. Guidance by the Special Representative on incorporating action to address violence against children and its drivers in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals complements other forms of support for United Nations country teams. These include the learning package developed by the United Nations System Staff College, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), UNICEF, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Population Fund and the Development Coordination Office to increase the capacity of United Nations country teams to apply the first three of the six United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework guiding principles – namely, the human rights-based approach; gender equality and women’s empowerment; and leaving no one behind – in an integrated manner across United Nations interventions. The Office of the Special Representative has cooperated and engaged with the Development Coordination Office, resident coordinators and the United Nations country teams throughout the year in support of efforts to enhance the inclusion of initiatives on prevention of and protection of children from violence. Some have been supported at the country level by the Human Rights Mainstreaming Multi-Donor Trust Fund. Throughout her engagements with United Nations country teams, the Special Representative has recognized the value of the presence within the teams of human rights advisers. Their expertise supports, for example, interlinkages between the process for preparing the voluntary national reviews and the follow-up of relevant outcomes from the universal periodic review.

13. Moreover, the Office of the Special Representative has prepared an overview of the voluntary national reviews and the presentations made by Member States during the high-level political forum on sustainable development held in 2022, focusing through a child protection lens on the interlinkages between the Sustainable Development Goals which echo the interdependence of children’s rights as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

14. Throughout voluntary national reviews processes, extending from report preparation to presentations at the high-level political forum, the Special Representative has noted that several Member States expressed their commitment to prioritizing the well-being and protection of children. However, while many stressed the plight of children in vulnerable situations, there was limited reporting on action taken for their protection and care. She also noted the positive impact of a system-wide approach taken by the United Nations at the country level to support the preparation of national reviews. Finally, in the overview prepared by the Office of the Special Representative, which will be widely disseminated among Member States, United Nations partners, civil society and other stakeholders, it is observed that 19 Member States had highlighted the involvement of children and young people in their national review processes. The Special Representative is encouraged by the responses and support received from Member States in terms of input and guidance provided through the process.

15. The 2022 high-level political forum, on building back better from COVID-19 while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda, offered an opportunity to highlight the need for investment in integrated, cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention. The Special Representative, who was a lead discussant at the session on building back better and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, reflected on the opportunity for bringing about a paradigm shift to end violence and achieve a truly

human- and child-centred development. The Special Representative, UNICEF and civil society partners launched an advocacy brief during the high-level political forum entitled “The violence prevention dividend: why preventing violence against children makes economic sense”.<sup>9</sup> Building on this step, the Special Representative and the Permanent Mission of Luxembourg to the United Nations convened a ministerial-level meeting in September 2022 where Member States from different regions exchanged experiences on the investment case for preventing and ending all forms of violence as being vital for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

16. The Special Representative’s annual report to the General Assembly focused on the current climate crisis as a threat multiplier which magnifies children’s exposure and vulnerability to violence.<sup>10</sup> An accompanying advocacy brief was launched at a high-level side event co-hosted with the European Union and including the participation of representatives from regional organizations and Member States in Africa, Latin America and the Pacific and the United Nations. The advocacy brief outlines key steps towards incorporating children’s rights and their protection from violence in action to tackle the climate crisis.

17. Advocacy and advisory services at the national level remain critical components of the work of the Special Representative. As travel restrictions eased, she resumed in-person country visits at the invitation of States and in close cooperation with permanent missions in New York and Geneva, as well as resident coordinators and regional and country teams. These visits are key entry points for her intensive engagement with stakeholders at the subregional, national and local levels, enabling her to support them in accelerating the implementation of commitments to end violence against children; promote investment in cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention; and promote the sharing of experiences among Member States.

18. The number of invitations for country visits greatly expanded over the reporting period and the Special Representative is honoured by the interest in her views and support throughout these in-country engagements. As requests from States grow, she is paying particular attention to geographical coverage and balance as well as ongoing commitments and pledges, including those linked to the voluntary national review and universal periodic review processes, as well as human rights treaty monitoring bodies. Opportunities linked to the elaboration of national development plans, legal reforms and the development of the new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks are also being considered, together with key thematic areas under the mandate such as deprivation of liberty, the investment case for ending violence, children’s access to justice (including social justice) and addressing the prevention of and response to violence in an integrated manner across all Sustainable Development Goals.

19. During her country visits, the Special Representative meets with Heads of State and Government; relevant ministers; parliamentarians; representatives of national human rights institutions; civil society actors; community and religious leaders; local authorities; public service providers; representatives of multilateral financial institutions, the corporate sector and the donor community; members of the media; and children, particularly those at increased risk of violence. Her visits conclude with the preparation of a road map or outline for follow-up engagement, closely coordinated with national authorities and United Nations partners on the ground. Through online and in-person follow-up, the Special Representative and her staff engage in continued dialogue and respond to requests for technical advice from key stakeholders at the national and local levels, share promising practices and work to strengthen South-South and triangular cooperation.

20. Since her last report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Representative has visited Austria, Belgium, Côte d’Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, France,

<sup>9</sup> See [https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/documents/publications/violence-prevention\\_dividend\\_final.pdf](https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/documents/publications/violence-prevention_dividend_final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> [A/77/221](#).

Greece, Iceland, Jamaica, Morocco, Romania, Spain and Viet Nam. She also undertook a follow-up in-person visit to Lebanon and an online visit to the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

21. The crisis facing refugee and migrant children, including the situation of unaccompanied children who have fled the armed conflict in Ukraine and other ongoing complex crises around the world, was an area of engagement with multiple partners in countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Romania, Spain and Sweden, as well as with representatives of Ukraine. The Special Representative highlighted the urgent need to establish specific mechanisms for unaccompanied children in Greece and a rapid protective response in Romania. Support for law reforms and the development and launch of national strategies to end violence against children constituted one area of her active engagement during these visits. In Spain, for example, a pioneering comprehensive legal framework adopted in 2021 has led to a cascade of policy interventions and decisions which are expected to result in the establishment of a robust package for protection. Similarly, the Special Representative supported Côte d'Ivoire in the validation of the national strategy for the protection of children and adolescents in street situations. The implementation of the national integrated child protection policy was discussed during her visit to Morocco.

22. Progress on ending child institutionalization and the need to shift to family-type care were areas of engagement during the visits to Côte d'Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Morocco, Romania and Viet Nam. Discussions in these areas included the need for a robust, coordinated and well-trained social workforce combining cash, protection and care services as well as alternatives to institutionalization.

23. Another key area of engagement with Members States has been the evidence-based case for investment in child- and gender-sensitive cross-sectoral violence prevention and protection services for children and their caregivers. In Iceland, there are encouraging efforts to implement legislation and policies to support the prosperity of children, underpinned by analysis of the high returns on investment in cross-sectoral violence prevention and protection services. All the countries visited expressed interest in support for the prioritization of investment in cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention to generate substantially higher returns.

24. The interlinkages between gender-based violence and violence against children encompassed cross-cutting issues and actions across a number of visits, including the critical importance of ending domestic violence, female genital mutilation and child marriage, as well as promoting gender equality and empowerment.

25. The Special Representative is alarmed by the effects and impact of violence, the COVID-19 pandemic and humanitarian crises on children's mental health and well-being, an issue that requires critical attention in all Member States. During her meetings with diverse groups of children across all regions, one of the main concerns raised has been the serious challenges to their mental well-being faced by children, along with the difficulties they face in speaking about these issues and accessing appropriate services. The Special Representative welcomes and is deeply grateful for the interest, engagement and support of Her Majesty Queen Mathilde of the Belgians and Her Majesty Queen Silvia of Sweden with respect to this critical matter. While the Special Representative acknowledges the increase in action to address mental health and psychosocial support for children across all regions, she is deeply concerned by the fact that these services are still not being scaled up to cover the increasing demand and to ensure that no child is left behind.

### **Regional engagement**

26. The Special Representative continues to strengthen her collaboration with regional and subregional mechanisms on the interlinkages between achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and ending all forms of violence against children.

<sup>11</sup> The Special Representative also visited Dakhla, Western Sahara, on 22 November 2022. Her visit should not be interpreted as expressing any political view concerning the present or future status of Western Sahara.

27. The Special Representative has continued to contribute to the development, implementation and monitoring of regional plans and frameworks related to children's protection from violence, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children and the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027). She also engaged with the European Parliament and the European Commission on various legislative initiatives relevant to the protection of children and their rights. The Special Representative supported the integration of the protection and participation of children in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and voluntary national review processes at the regional level, such as through the Community of Practice on Voluntary National Reviews for Latin American and Caribbean countries.

28. The Special Representative has used her engagement with regional and subregional mechanisms to focus attention and share experience on dimensions of violence against children which are of particular relevance to the region. One key example in this regard has been her engagement on climate change. In this context, the Special Representative participated in the Ninth International Policy Conference on the African Child: Climate Change and Child Rights in Africa – Impact and Accountability, stressing that climate change was a threat multiplier for violence against children, which was the focus of her annual report to the General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> In addition, she contributed to the interactive session on “Children’s right to participate in climate action”, convened in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, during the twenty-seventh session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. She has also addressed the regional and subregional dimensions of the displacement of children due to conflicts, the climate crisis and ongoing humanitarian crises; gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation; the violence and discrimination faced by children on the move; and children’s access to justice.

29. The Special Representative has engaged with regional partners in the development and dissemination of practical tools for tackling violence. These include a guidebook for correcting negative expressions and images circulating around children in the Arab media in collaboration with the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, the Arab Gulf Programme for Development and the League of Arab States, as well as the launch, during the regional Arab Girls’ Summit, of a report on the impact of cyberviolence on children and youth.

### **Close cooperation with United Nations and international organizations**

30. As Chair of the Inter-Agency Working Group on Violence against Children, the Special Representative convenes regular meetings for information-sharing and the implementation of joint road maps with United Nations partners. In addition, she convenes meetings on specific themes, the most recent of which focused on the strengthening of child safeguarding mechanisms in sport, including through an engagement with sporting federations. Efforts continue to advance the development of a Secretary-General’s guidance note on mainstreaming of child rights by the beginning of 2023.

31. The Special Representative has deepened her strong collaboration with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, issuing joint statements and pursuing joint advocacy on situations of relevance to the three mandates. These include children being trafficked or going missing as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.. The three mandate holders share information on country visits and aim towards ensuring complementary action in response to the continuum of violence over the periods before, during and after conflicts.

32. The Special Representative mobilized partners from the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to issue a joint advocacy brief calling on Member States to protect the rights of children on the move in times of crisis. The brief, which builds on lessons learned from past and ongoing crises worldwide and outlines

<sup>12</sup> [A/77/221](#).

principles designed to guide action in response to similar crises in the future, draws on the expertise and mandates of the various United Nations entities and offers a road map for achieving a holistic response.

33. As a member of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, the Special Representative took part in several joint initiatives and submissions in 2022. These included a joint statement on the World Day against Trafficking in Persons in which States and stakeholders were called on to leverage technology to end trafficking and a call to action to prevent and combat trafficking in humanitarian crises and conflicts.<sup>13</sup> In 2023, the Special Representative will co-chair the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons alongside the International Organization for Migration, emphasizing the need to amplify the voices of children and advocate for an end to all forms of violence against children, including trafficking in children.

34. Together with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Special Representative strengthened cooperation towards child online protection, emphasizing the critical role of the digital environment for children's protection and well-being. Technical input has supported the development of e-learning training modules on child online protection for policymakers; and the drafting of recommendations on child online protection in sports organizations, with the aim of providing tangible guidance for a variety of sports organizations. The Special Representative has also engaged with the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology to explore ways to promote the inclusion of children's rights and protection in the proposed global digital compact.

35. The promotion of children's participation regarding their well-being online has been another key area of cooperation with ITU and other United Nations partners. In collaboration with the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Youth, the Office of the Special Representative invited Member States to include children in consultations related to the drafting of the Youth Declaration on Transforming Education, which was presented during the Transforming Education Summit. The Special Representative also supported and participated in the high-level event entitled "Leadership of the new generations: children and adolescents with disabilities and their voices post COVID-19" during the fifteenth session of the Conference of States Parties to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, at which the declaration from children and adolescents with disabilities was launched.

36. The Special Representative is encouraged by ongoing cooperation with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and, in particular, by ongoing efforts to develop a joint road map towards increasing the focus in programmatic work on violence and other crimes against children. In her engagement with the World Health Organization, the Special Representative has focused on raising awareness and mobilizing action to tackle sexual violence against children. She has also pursued strong collaboration with the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) on the protection of children from online sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and other crimes against children, as well as on promoting and implementing stronger child victim safeguarding.

### **Close cooperation with civil society and faith-based organizations**

37. The Special Representative continued her systematic engagement with local, regional and global civil society organizations, child and youth-led organizations and faith-based organizations through regular updates and joint and complementary advocacy, events and campaigns, as well as in the context of her country visits. Joint action aims at maintaining momentum on the protection of children from violence, building the investment case for violence prevention and mainstreaming and monitoring children's rights.

38. The Special Representative contributed to the development of a tool kit on nurturing the spiritual development of children in their early years, and participated in its launch, which coincided with the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children.<sup>14</sup> She has also collaborated

<sup>13</sup> See, respectively, [https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/publications/icat\\_statement\\_wdat\\_2022.pdf](https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/publications/icat_statement_wdat_2022.pdf); and [https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/publications/icat\\_call\\_to\\_action.pdf](https://icat.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1461/files/publications/icat_call_to_action.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> See <https://childspiritualdevelopment.org/prueba/>.



with civil society actors, including faith-based organizations, in support of the establishment of the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence. During her country visits, the Special Representative has continued to promote the value of strong engagement with communities and religious leaders for achieving lasting change, including through the Qudwa initiative and the Adyan network in Lebanon, La Rabita Mohammadia des Oulemas in Morocco and the Plateforme Interconfessionnelle in Chad. At the country level, the Special Representative engages with the Scouts, building on her collaboration and memorandum of understanding with the World Organization of the Scout Movement.

### **Involving children and youth**

39. The Special Representative promotes a culture of meaningful and representative child participation, where children, as key stakeholders in all matters concerning their safety and well-being, are also actors and agents of change in the development of integral protection systems. One priority encompasses bridging the gap between children who are taking action and decision makers and creating spaces for the interaction of children with decision makers and United Nations officials. To support this work, the Office of the Special Representative has developed and disseminated resources for the promotion by United Nations entities and Member States of the development of child-friendly versions of reports and the creation of spaces for direct engagement with children.

40. In 2022, on the margins of sessions of the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, the Special Representative held an exchange with hundreds of children and presented child-friendly versions of her reports and discussed them with child participants. Outcomes from these exchanges were transmitted to the Council and the Assembly during her interactive dialogues with both bodies.

41. Following the Special Representative's briefing with children on the climate crisis and violence against children held on the margins of the session of the General Assembly, her Office developed resources for adults engaging with children, including child-friendly assets, videos and children's messages on the climate crisis, and shared them with education ministries globally.

42. The Special Representative promotes the use of institutional means to ensure meaningful child participation in government-led action, including pathways to engaging and involving children in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies, programmes, services or legislation affecting their lives. She invited Member States to share information on how they established institutional modalities for child participation. The initial information suggested that child advisory groups for ministries associated with children or affiliated with government institutions were the most popular means of incorporating children's participation, followed by the inclusion of children in national development strategies and other forms of consultations. Often, periodic reporting under the Convention on the Rights of the Child provided Member States with the opportunity to include children's views.

43. During the reporting period, the Special Representative engaged directly with over 1,000 children during country missions and interactive dialogues organized by her Office or by the children themselves. These engagements included connecting with children in street situations, working children, refugees and migrants, girls and children in institutions.

44. The Office of the Special Representative launched a digital campaign entitled "Let's tell the world" to encourage children to tell others about their actions taken to make the world safer, greener, better and more inclusive. The campaign received information on over 100 new initiatives, which will be added to the Office's digital participation map. The map currently includes over 260 examples of participation from 90 countries, highlighting how children support each other, raise awareness and advocate on issues such as mental health, peer violence, violence online, misinformation, bullying, sexual violence, trafficking in children, violence against children on the move, climate change, poverty and sustainable development.

### III. Ending the deprivation of liberty of children

45. The Special Representative, as Chair of the United Nations task force on children deprived of liberty, continues to work closely with Member States, the Non-Governmental Organizations Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty and other relevant stakeholders to end the deprivation of liberty of children, as mandated by the General Assembly.<sup>15</sup>

46. Preventing and ending the deprivation of liberty of children are both urgent and possible. As highlighted in the previous reports of the Special Representative to the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, there exists a wealth of experience, with Member States adopting child rights-based alternative solutions. There has also been progress on raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility; ensuring child- and gender-sensitive justice; and achieving better use of technology and other innovations to ensure and increase children's access to justice as core components of the 2030 Agenda implementation process. The Special Representative provides specific advice on ending all forms of deprivation of liberty of children in the context of her country visits and engagement with States around their voluntary national reviews, urging the prioritization of child rights-based alternatives and solutions as well as de-institutionalization.

47. In May 2022, on the occasion of the holding of the International Migration Review Forum, the Task Force worked with Member States to ensure that child rights would be at the core of the outcome declaration. The Progress Declaration of the International Migration Review Forum included specific references to child rights to strengthen the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, including steps to end the immigration detention of children, thereby advancing efforts to protect and respect the best interests of the child.

48. The Task Force submitted a joint pledge during the International Migration Review Forum to support the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, particularly objective 13, on ending the immigration detention of children. Through this pledge, the Task Force commits itself to conducting evidence-based advocacy and mobilizing key stakeholders to end the detention of children in the context of migration; supporting Member States in prohibiting the practice; supporting data collection and the dissemination of promising practices; and amplifying the voices of migrant children in determining their best interests.

49. In November 2022, the Special Representative was invited to become a member of the United Nations Migration Network Working Group on Alternatives to Detention as a result of her role in advocating an end to child immigration detention and mobilizing Member States and key stakeholders for that purpose. In addition, the Office of the Special Representative, together with the Non-Governmental Organizations Panel for the Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty, co-organized a global forum in Mauritania on justice for children and deprivation of liberty, for the sharing of promising practices and remaining challenges with respect to ending this rights violation.

50. The Special Representative acknowledges the important academic research on the right to health for children deprived of liberty led by a coalition of the University of Melbourne, Harvard University, the University of Oxford and Curtin University, in support of the advocacy of the Task Force.

### IV. Violence against children in the digital environment

#### A. A wide range of risks

51. 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

<sup>15</sup> See General Assembly resolution 75/185.

entail different forms of violence and harm, which include cyberbullying and harassment; online sexual exploitation and abuse; exposure to violent and sexual content; promotion of suicide and self-harm; hate speech; discrimination, racism and xenophobia; trafficking and smuggling; recruitment into criminal, armed or violent extremist groups; economic exploitation; marketing of harmful or inappropriate goods and services; and fraud and identity theft.<sup>16</sup> Children may be exposed to multiple forms of violence online, which are often associated with experiences of violence offline.<sup>17</sup> The Special Representative has consequently identified the protection of children from violence in the digital environment as demanding particular attention within the context of efforts to end violence against children by 2030.

52. While the forms of risk to children in the digital environment have been well identified, the lack of global, comprehensive data on violence against children in that environment remains a challenge. Welcome steps have been taken to increase understanding of the depth and complexity of such violence, although disparities exist in terms of the volume of research conducted on different types of violence online, with some forms, such as cyberbullying and sexual violence, receiving greater attention than others. Notwithstanding the gaps that remain, the data that already exist on children's exposure to violence and harm online are alarming.

53. In a meta-analysis of international studies, 15 per cent of children reported cyberbullying victimization.<sup>18</sup> Perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to be victims themselves and online and offline perpetration and victimization are highly correlated. Overall, boys are more likely than girls to be perpetrators or victim-perpetrators. Girls tend to be targeted more frequently than boys based on their appearance, weight, or sexuality and are more likely to be the victims of gender-based harassment, exclusion or reputational damage. Being the target of cyberbullying is associated with having a physical or developmental disability, living with a single parent, a perceived poor school environment and social anxiety, including the fear of a negative evaluation by peers. Cyberbullying victimization is also linked to many externalizing behaviours,<sup>19</sup> including self-harm, substance use, the viewing of suicide- and self-harm-related content and more frequent mobile or Internet use. The witnessing of cyberbullying, even if the witness is not a perpetrator or a victim, can have an adverse effect on children's quality of life over time.

54. In 2021, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (United States of America) received 29.3 million reports of child sexual abuse and exploitation from around the world, an increase of 35 per cent over 2020.<sup>20</sup> The Disrupting Harm research project implemented across 13 countries estimates that at least 1-20 per cent 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>21</sup> Research undertaken by the WeProtect Global Alliance indicates that the rate at which children experienced sexual harm was higher for girls (57 per cent) than for boys (48 per cent). The devastating impact of sexual violence in childhood is well established.<sup>22</sup> Technology-facilitated abuse creates extra challenges for

<sup>16</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).

<sup>17</sup> World Health Organization, *What Works to Prevent Online Violence against Children?* (Geneva, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mariya Stoilov, Sonia Livingstone and Rana Khazbak, "Investigating risks and opportunities for children in a digital world: a rapid review of the evidence on children's internet use and outcomes", Innocenti Discussion Papers, No. 2020-03 (Florence, Italy, UNICEF Office of Research (Innocenti), 2021).

<sup>20</sup> See <https://www.missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline/cybertiplinedata>.

<sup>21</sup> UNICEF Office of Research (Innocenti), "The relationship between online and in-person child sexual exploitation and abuse", *Disrupting Harm Data Insight*, No. 6 (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> UNICEF, *Ending Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Lessons Learned and Promising Practices in Low- and Middle-income Countries* (New York, 2021).

children which are related to control, persistence of material depicting their abuse, blackmail, revictimization and self-blame.<sup>23</sup>

55. Drawing on the results of surveys in 11 countries across four regions, the Global Kids Online research initiative has addressed different aspects of violence against children online, including exposure to harmful and inappropriate content.<sup>24</sup> Less than one quarter of children in surveyed countries said that they had seen online content related to physical self-harm in the past year. Children were slightly less likely to have seen online content related to suicide compared with self-harm and in all countries analysed, fewer than 20 per cent of children reported encountering online content on suicide. Children's exposure to hate content is more common than their exposure to content related to self-harm or suicide. There is evidence that online hate targets mostly race, sexual orientation, religion, nationality or immigration status, sex or gender, and politics. Regarding exposure to violent or sexual content, fewer than 40 per cent of children in the past year had come across websites where people talked about or displayed gory or violent images or had seen images of a sexual nature. Among boys, viewing pornography is associated with sexually aggressive behaviour and having negative gender attitudes. A lower level of happiness and life satisfaction is found to be associated with exposure to content promoting self-injury and suicide, gory or violent content, sexual content and hate speech.<sup>25</sup>

56. Overall, the research of Global Kids Online indicated that children were more likely to report having been upset in the past year if they had encountered hate speech or sexual content online, had been treated in a hurtful way or had met someone face to face that they first met online. No direct relationship was found between watching videos, playing games or interacting socially online and the likelihood of children's being upset. However, if the activity exposes children to certain content or conduct then they may find it upsetting.<sup>26</sup>

57. UNODC has highlighted the use of technology by traffickers 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>27</sup> OSCE notes that the Internet has enabled the expansion of the market for trafficking in human beings, allowing offenders to operate more efficiently and to extend their reach to meet demand.<sup>28</sup> When children are moved across borders, as evidenced through the unprecedented scale of displacement in the world today, such risks are multiplied.

58. 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>29</sup> The digital environment has also expanded access to potential victims of exploitation and abuse in the context of travel and tourism, with offenders being increasingly able to share information and make contact with children, with intermediaries and with each other. Another key concern is that children who express their views and identities online may face threats, hostility and punishment.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis and others, *Everyone Deserves to be Happy and Safe: A Mixed Methods Study Exploring how Online and Offline Child Sexual Abuse Impact Young People and how Professionals Respond to it* (London, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Sonia Livingstone, Daniel Kardefelt Winther and Mariam Saeed, *Global Kids Online Comparative Report* (Florence, Italy, UNICEF Office of Research (Innocenti), 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, "Investigating risks and opportunities for children in a digital world".

<sup>26</sup> Livingstone, Kardefelt Winther and Saeed, *Global Kids Online*.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1104392#:~:text=Traffickers%20abusing%20online%20technology%2C%20UN%20crime%20prevention%20agency%20warns,-30%20October%202021&text=Human%20traffickers%20who%20trick%20people,step%20of%20the%20criminal%20activities>.

<sup>28</sup> See <https://www.osce.org/cthb/51414.1>.

<sup>29</sup> UNODC, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System* (Vienna, 2017).

59. When online, children may be exposed to harmful goods, such as weapons or drugs, or harmful services, such as gambling. Threats to children’s privacy online may also stem from data collection and data processing conducted by public institutions, businesses and other organizations, as well as from such criminal activities as identify theft. In a European survey of 19 countries, it was found that 11 per cent of 9- to 16-year-olds had experienced misuse of their personal information or password or theft of their digital identity.

60. In a rapid review published in 2021, the evidence was set out for what is currently known about the violence and harm experienced by children online and how best to advance research in the field.<sup>30</sup> It was found that children who are vulnerable offline are more likely to be vulnerable online, while offline protective factors can reduce exposure to online risks. While some children are more vulnerable than others, this vulnerability varies based on the type of online risk. For example, older teenagers; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer+ children; and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to engage in “sexting” behaviour and to be victims of “sextortion”. Girls are more likely to be victims of online sexual solicitation coercive sexting and cyberdating violence. Moreover, children who experience one kind of online risk are more likely to experience other forms of risk. For example, cyberbullying victimization and perpetration are associated with children’s greater exposure to negative online content and cyberdating violence. Online sexual solicitation is associated with exposure to online pornography, posting of personal information or pictures online, having contact with unknown people on social media, sexting and video chatting with strangers.

61. More robust, high-quality and comparable research is needed overall, with greater representation of the diversity of children’s circumstances and greater understanding of children’s digital ecology.<sup>31</sup> At present, most research examines the experiences of older children and those from the global North. Evidence for pre-teens and the global South is sparse. There is a need for child-centred research methods to complement recent evidence, as understanding of how children see these issues is still insufficient. More evidence is needed on the types of risk that lead to harm, the groups of children that are more vulnerable and the long-term effects on children’s development and well-being.

## **B. A wide range of actions, but still not enough**

62. An extensive range of international and regional instruments guide and support action to combat violence against children online.<sup>32</sup> The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its general comment on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, 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>33</sup>

63. The Committee has outlined key elements of a comprehensive response, including aligning national legislation with international human rights standards; integrating children’s online protection within national child protection policies; ensuring appropriate awareness-raising and training initiatives; ensuring that businesses meet their responsibilities to respect children’s rights and prevent and remedy abuse of their rights; ensuring the investigation of online crimes against children, support for victims and access to justice; and ensuring that the mandates of national human rights institutions and other appropriate independent institutions cover children’s rights in the digital environment.

64. There has been a strong mobilization at the global level to tackle violence against children online. An international call to stand up for children’s rights in the digital environment was adopted at the 2021 Paris Peace Forum, followed by the launch of a

<sup>30</sup> Stoilova, Livingstone and Khazbak, “Investigating risks and opportunities for children in a digital world”.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> UNICEF, *Legislating for the Digital Age: Global Guide on Improving Legislative Frameworks to Protect Children from Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse* (New York, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).

Children Online Protection Lab at the 2022 Forum.<sup>34</sup> The Lab is a multi-stakeholder partnership which will identify, assess and develop concrete solutions to enable children to use digital tools safely and benefit from their full potential while guarding against abuse online. In June 2021, the World Economic Forum created a Global Coalition for Digital Safety to accelerate public-private cooperation in tackling harmful content online. The Child Online Protection initiative led by ITU develops key recommendations and guidance to support efforts to create a safe and empowering online environment for children and young people, particularly through the 2020 Guidelines on Child Online Protection for children, parents and educators, industry and policymakers.

65. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are bringing together Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations and other entities to address specific forms of online violence. The WeProtect Global Alliance works to develop policies and solutions for tackling the sexual exploitation and abuse of children online, including through the implementation of its Model National Response.<sup>35</sup> The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse works to advance policy, increase programming and expand the evidence base to improve prevention of and response to technology-facilitated gender-based violence across the life course. There are also important partnerships that are bringing together or focusing on particular stakeholder groups, including in the areas of law enforcement, tech companies, hotlines and financial institutions.

66. There is a sound normative foundation, extensive guidance and a wide mobilization of stakeholders addressing violence against children online, especially sexual violence against children. 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.

### C. Prevention must be the priority

67. 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.

68. 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>36</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>37</sup> States should also prohibit by law the profiling or targeting of children of any age for commercial purposes on the basis of a digital record of their actual or inferred characteristics.

69. 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>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See <https://parispeaceforum.org/en/press/fifth-edition-recap-and-10-new-scale-up-projects%EF%BD%9Cpress-release/>.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.weprotect.org/response/>.

<sup>36</sup> UNICEF, *Legislating for the Digital Age*. See, for example, the Penal Code of Argentina, Law 11.179, article 131, and the Cybersecurity Act, 2020, of Ghana.

<sup>37</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

70. To ensure preventive action by industry, States should take measures to ensure that businesses comply with their obligations to prevent their networks or online services from being used in ways that cause or contribute to violations or abuses of children's rights. These measures could include the development, monitoring, implementation and evaluation of legislation, regulations and policies.

71. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has highlighted that States parties should require the business sector to undertake child rights due diligence and to implement regulatory frameworks, industry codes and terms of services which adhere to the highest standards of ethics, privacy and safety in relation to the design, engineering, development, operation, distribution and marketing of their products and services. The Committee calls on States parties to require a high standard of cybersecurity, privacy by design and safety by design in the digital services and products that are used by children to minimize the risk of crimes against them.

72. The reality is that purely voluntary approaches are insufficient. It is time to rethink the model for Internet and technology companies, many of which for the most part have not chosen – and have not been required – to prioritize children's rights or safety. While some companies invest substantially in making their products and platforms safe, the approach across the sector is highly inconsistent. Moreover, requiring that products and services for children be safe to use is a central requirement for other industries. States should mandate safety standards and regulations for the online world that are comparable to those that they have mandated for the offline, physical world.

73. Examples of these requirements exist in practice. Regarding safety by design, the eSafety Commissioner of Australia, following extensive consultations with industry, children and young people, parents and guardians, has developed a framework for tech companies. This approach recognizes the importance of proactive and conscious consideration of user safety as a standard risk mitigation and development process, as opposed to retrofitting safety considerations after online harms emerge or damage has occurred.<sup>39</sup>

74. Several jurisdictions have introduced or are considering age verification or age assurance to limit the access of children to age-inappropriate content that may be harmful but not illegal, such as sexually explicit or violent content.<sup>40</sup> This is a crucial dimension of an effective response focused on prevention. Age-based or content-based systems designed to protect children from age-inappropriate content should be consistent with the principle of data minimization.<sup>41</sup>

75. A key dimension of child rights due diligence for businesses is the conducting of child rights impact assessments and disclosing them to the public, with consideration of the differentiated and, at times, severe impacts of the digital environment on children.<sup>42</sup> Legislative measures have been introduced or are planned in some Member States that would oblige online platforms to carry out periodic risk assessments focused on any negative impacts of their services on children's rights, with a corresponding requirement that any identified risks be mitigated through adapting of their service or platform as needed, along with a requirement for transparency.<sup>43</sup> Such transparency is essential because it can pinpoint where weaknesses exist in safety practices and reporting, where enforcement is required and where discrepancies between different companies exist in respect of the extent of their action.<sup>44</sup> It is important that regulatory bodies responsible for ensuring implementation of such child rights due diligence measures by industry and for ensuring oversight are also

<sup>39</sup> See <https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design>.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the age-appropriate design code introduced in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/ico-codes-of-practice/age-appropriate-design-code/>) and in California ([https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=202120220AB2273](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2273)).

<sup>41</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Republic Act No. 11930 (2022) of the Philippines and regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council.

<sup>44</sup> See <https://apo.org.au/node/321193>.

empowered to support and guide online services and platforms in meeting their obligations in this regard.

76. When it comes to identifying and addressing illegal material or content involving online violence against children, businesses should be required to establish “notice and takedown” procedures. An active debate is centred on going beyond the notice and takedown approach and having tech companies proactively seek out illegal content or material, especially in the context of the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. At present, some tech companies are proactively seeking out, identifying and reporting such content on a voluntary basis.

77. The proactive use of tools to seek out such material raises the question of the impact of such an approach on the privacy of those who use the service or platform. While protections for individual privacy are essential, the privacy of children - particularly child victims of violence online – must be protected at all times. The reality is that without engaging in proactive searches for illegal content, companies would remain blind to the enormous volume of such material and content and law enforcement and child protection authorities would therefore remain unaware of their existence. Serious crimes would go unnoticed, leaving no prospect of identifying or supporting child victims. One dimension of this question relates to how technical tools for detecting online crimes against children are applied to encrypted material or content. In order to ensure robust protection for children while ensuring that adequate privacy safeguards are in place, a competent national authority or regulator should be empowered to determine which technical tools are appropriate for the proactive identification of online crimes against children and when their use should constitute a facet of a company’s obligation to ensure that their services or platforms are safe for children.

78. It is important to acknowledge the indispensable role of industry in developing technical tools for tackling violence against children online. This reinforces the need to continue to work constructively with industry to identify solutions with respect to confronting the evolving nature of online violence against children and addressing ongoing challenges, such as the inconsistent use by tech companies of tools that are freely available, gaps in ensuring prompt and efficient cooperation with law enforcement and the barriers erected through maintaining some of those tools as proprietary technology.

#### **D. Ensuring a victim- and survivor-centred approach**

79. 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.

80. These challenges echo some of the conclusions derived from the Disrupting Harm-related research cited earlier. That research identified barriers to accessing justice that included the many obstacles to obtaining convictions after reports are made; the fact that so many children and caregivers never see their cases reach the courts; the fact that children and caregivers are confronted with complex, unfamiliar technical language, witness discussions that are not appropriate based on the age of the child and face proceedings that are conducted in languages other than their mother tongue; and a lack of the comprehensive and ongoing support that is needed for recovery in many countries or outside urban areas. Importantly, compensation has been rare.<sup>45</sup>

81. States must ensure the investigation of online crimes against children and provide remedies and holistic support for child victims and survivors.<sup>46</sup> States should address the

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<sup>45</sup> ECPAT International, “Access to justice and legal remedies for children subjected to online sexual exploitation and abuse”, *Disrupting Harm Data Insight*, No. 3 (Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, 2022).

<sup>46</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, general comment No. 25 (2021).



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.

82. 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>47</sup>

## **E. Children as part of the solution**

83. Policymakers at all levels must empower children, listen to them and respect their views. 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.

84. Children must first and foremost 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>48</sup> The review noted that prevention programmes should address all forms of online violence against children in an integrated way, both across types of violence and alongside its offline forms. 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.

85. Children are also increasingly taking action to connect with and support each other through the digital environment. As outlined in the digital participation map of the Office of the Special Representative, children and young people are creating content and using digital platforms to raise awareness on violence prevention, gender-based violence, peer violence, sustainable development, climate change, mental health and misinformation, among many other topics. They are also conducting digital literacy and capacity-building campaigns, including with children in vulnerable situations and those who are harder to reach. This underscores the importance of providing safe and empowering spaces and opportunities for children to continue acting as agents of positive change.

86. Children and young people are 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. In February 2022, the Office of the Special Representative and 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.<sup>49</sup> Through an online survey, Protection through Online Participation has started to map protection services that support children and youth through online means, having received close to 4,000 examples from 118 countries. Initial results reveal, for example, collaborative approaches taken by Governments, United Nations entities and health services in running online protection support systems. These services provide information on issues related to children and women, enable the reporting of violence, harm or exploitation and provide counselling or advice. The mapping also highlights that children and young people are, together with health and social workers, among those providing support. The main issues addressed include physical

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. See, for example, the role of the Online Safety Commission of Fiji, established in the Online Safety Act 2018.

<sup>48</sup> World Health Organization, *What Works to Prevent Online Violence against Children?*

<sup>49</sup> Further information on the initiative and the list of partners is available from <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/pop>.

violence, online violence and armed conflict, followed by violence against women and girls, bullying and sexual violence and exploitation. This initiative will combine mapping results with lessons learned from industry, child helplines and children and young people themselves and will make recommendations on how to implement or improve these services.

## V. Looking ahead

87. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous ongoing crises, more children than ever are experiencing violence in all settings. However, it is possible to accelerate efforts to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda and put an end to violence against children.

88. The human and economic costs are sizeable but the economic benefits of investing in child protection, development and well-being are even larger. In all countries without exception, there is an urgent need to fully support the reinforcement of integrated and well-coordinated child- and gender-sensitive protection and violence prevention systems which place children and their rights at the centre. The Special Representative is particularly pleased at the interest in the investment case for ending all forms of violence, which is gaining increased political support in many countries across different regions. These experiences should be supported and expanded further.

89. As outlined above, there is a particular need to tackle the wide range of forms of violence and crimes against children in the digital environment as an integral component of wider efforts to keep children safe from harm. 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.

90. Addressing violence in the digital environment requires a broad view of violence and harm online. While understanding that sexual violence is a key rights violation and a crime to be addressed efficiently and promptly, violence against children in the digital environment takes many forms, all of which have devastating and lifelong impacts on them. 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.

91. The current debate in many countries and regions on protections for individual privacy is important and merits careful consideration. 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. Voluntary approaches by industry to ensuring that their services and platform are safe for children are insufficient: more robust regulation built on principles of children's rights must become a reality. While it takes time to enact legislation and regulations, at the same time risks to children in the digital world emerge quickly and spread rapidly, hence the ICT industry has a special responsibility. The ICT industry is uniquely placed to mitigate the negative impact that digital technologies can exert on children: they must put children first and build the rights of children to safety and protection into their business models.

92. The Special Representative will continue to promote the need for a stronger legal and regulatory environment to ensure children's protection and privacy online, including in the context of the development of the global digital compact and the elaboration of a comprehensive international convention on countering the use of information and communications technologies for criminal purposes.

93. Investing in children also means involving them as part of the solution. Worldwide, children are increasingly at the forefront of many initiatives for positive and sustainable social change and the effective prevention of and protection against violence, including in the digital environment. Investing in the empowerment of all children in all settings, regardless of their status and without discrimination, including through their active participation and engagement, can generate enormous gains not only for children, but for societies at large.

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