**Preliminary observations on the visit to Mauritius by the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, Mama Fatima Singhateh 21-30 June 2022.**

Good afternoon and thank you for being here.

I want to start by thanking the Government of Mauritius for the invitation extended to me to undertake this visit from 21 to 30 June 2022, and the full cooperation extended to my mandate prior to and during my visit. The objective of my visit was to assess the situation of the sale and sexual exploitation of children and measures adopted to prevent and combat the phenomena with a view to making recommendations to prevent and eradicate all forms of sale and sexual exploitation of children and assist in the care, recovery, and reintegration of child victims.

During my 10-day visit to The Republic of Mauritius, I met with representatives of the executive, legislature and judiciary, the Ombudsperson for children, civil society organisations, members of the international community, and children in mainland Mauritius, I had an opportunity to travel to the island of Rodrigues to meet with local and municipal authorities as well as child protection service providers.

I also had the opportunity to visit residential care institutions, shelters, and a drop-in centre.

I am grateful to the Government of Mauritius for its excellent collaboration and would also like to thank all State interlocutors for the constructive dialogue and look forward to continuing my engagement and receiving additional information from them when required.

To everyone who met with me, and especially the children, service providers and representatives of civil society organizations, I want to express my gratitude for their readiness to engage in an open dialogue on the issue of sale and sexual exploitation of children in the country. I commend their dedication and commitment to providing protection and assistance to child victims and children in vulnerable situations.

I also wish to express my gratitude to the UN Country Team for its support to me throughout the mission.

***Positive developments***

My visit to Mauritius came at unique time against a backdrop of the recently promulgated Children’s Act, the Child Sex Offender Register Act and the establishment of the Children’s Court which has effectively changed the child protection landscape by creating new and increased responsibilities for virtually all child protection actors. I am encouraged that the new Children’s Act is largely premised on the overarching principle of the best interests of the child and on the importance placed on eradicating the scourge of sexual abuse and exploitation. This is therefore a unique opportunity for government to put in place a comprehensive child protection policy for the effective implementation of the legislation. The remaining task, however, of tackling the root-causes and the risk factors rendering children vulnerable and at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation is equally as important. This, coupled with ensuring a child-friendly justice system, care, recovery and rehabilitation provided through a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach by a team of professionals, specialised in identifying and handling cases of sexual abuse and exploitation and guided by child-rights standards to support the health and dignity of children and their social integration is also crucial.

For the purpose of my preliminary observations, I have identified the foregoing issues. These preliminary observations will be further elaborated on in my final report to be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2023.

***Sale of children and or Child trafficking***

I received very little information on child trafficking. While the legislative developments related to the new Children’s Act are commendable, I note with that the Act does not make any provisions for the sale of children and has not been distinguished from child trafficking because the concepts of sale and trafficking should be kept distinct in line with the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on the sale of children which the government of Mauritius has ratified. From the discussions held with interlocutors its appears that there have been some instances of alleged sale of children this country. Regulating the process of adoption is one of the legal means to prevent the sale of children and I strongly encourage the Government to accelerate the long overdue Adoption Bill and the establishment of an Adoption Agency.

***Online child sexual abuse and exploitation***

As online connectivity rates continue to rise across the globe, sexual violence against children is increasingly committed through or facilitated by information and communication technologies, this together with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented rise in screen time amongst children. The most common risks children face online relate to bullying, sharing sexually explicit materials, indecent invitations, photos, and messages on social media, as well as access to pornographic websites.  Yet the incidence and scope of child sexual abuse material offences is unknown in Mauritius given absence of disaggregated crime statistics related to investigations and convictions on child sexual abuse material offences.

There is currently no framework or policy in place to promote children’s rights in digital age. Such framework would enable policy makers, service providers and the technology sector to be guided in better understanding their responsibilities towards protecting the rights of children in the digital space. There is also a need for regular campaigns and sensitizations programmes to be conducted to complement the programs that are already taking place.

I was informed that the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare in 2021 established a Technical Committee to study the phenomenon of child/revenge pornography, following reports of the circulation of indecent photos and videos against payment on social media. I commend plans by the Ministry to devise appropriate Standard Operating Procedures, institutional interventions, and assistance to victims, to identify gaps in existing legislations and promote research analysis, develop collaborative institutional protocols, amongst others. I was also happy to learn about the initiative of the Ministry of Gender Equality in collaboration with the University of Technology, Mauritius to conduct a study on the Phenomenon of Child/Revenge Pornography.

Because the issue of online child sexual abuse and exploitation transcends borders, collaboration with law enforcement agencies in other countries on this issue is highly recommended.

***Sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism***

Mauritius is a well-known tourist destination, yet I note with dismay that officials in this sector are not much sensitized on the issues and manifestation of sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism. I also note that there is no explicit legal provision penalising the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism. There is a need for government to formulate policies, strategies, and legislation to raise awareness on, detect, prohibit and punish offences and activities relating to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in the context of travel and tourism.

***Prevention and Response***

I had the opportunity to visit residential care institutions, shelters and a drop-in centre for children.  These facilities that I visited accommodate children who suffer wide range of abuse, including physical, and or sexual abuse and abandonment. The Drop-in Centre which was originally established to address the needs of child victims of sexual exploitation, has become a counselling and information centre for pregnant teenagers. It is also in dire need of human and financial resources and specialized training to address cases of victims of sexual exploitation, abuse and neglect. While I commend the dedication of the staff to their work and to the children they support, they do face difficulties in offering comprehensive methods of rehabilitation and reintegration for child victims due to limited resources. Many of the constraints faced within these institutions include limited financial resources, specialized personnel, and the need for more carers. Because the issue of sale and sexual abuse and exploitation of children requires a holistic and multidisciplinary approach for the care, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims, there is a need for a dedicated home for children victims of sexual abuse and exploitation where all services are coordinated in a child-friendly and safe environment and provided under one roof.

**Gaps**

Some of the gaps identified during my mission include.

***i. Data***

There is a lack of adequate and reliable and disaggregated data on the phenomena of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation and its different manifestations.

There is a need to establish a proper system for comprehensive, systematically collected reliable and disaggregated data with emphasis on children who are particularly vulnerable including children with disabilities on the phenomena of child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation and its different manifestations, including data on reported cases and the successful prosecutions of the different manifestations of sale and sexual exploitation of children.

There is also a need to establish a database or record of children who have been supported by the system, in order to keep track and follow up on their situation and provide them with further relevant support.

***ii. Cooperation***

I note with concern about the lack of coordination and communication among institutions within government. This is an impediment to ensuring multisectoral and holistic support for children victims of sexual abuse. I look forward to learning how this communication and cooperation gap will be bridged with the recently established Child Service Coordinating Panel under the Children’s Act. I also encourage regular cooperation between government and the civil society.

***iii. Training and awareness raising***

During the discussions held, I learned that there is a need for more and sustained specialised training and capacity building for professionals working with or in contact with children. There is also a need for public and nationwide sensitization and awareness raising on issues surrounding the different manifestations of sale, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children.

***iv. Sex education and access to sexual and reproductive health services***

There is a need for an effective sex education in schools. Mauritius must be commended for the remarkable progress made in the field of inclusive education, yet effective sex education in schools is one of the few interventions the government can take to accelerate efforts to address teenage pregnancies which from my discussions I understand is a growing problem amongst very young teenagers. There is also the need to provide them with access to accurate information and sexual and reproductive health services to enable them to make responsible decisions on sexual relationships.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude by reiterating that I am grateful to the Government of Mauritius for inviting me to visit the country. This invitation and the cooperation provided during my visit indicates that there is a commitment to address the scourge of the sale and sexual exploitation of children and provide victims with the vital care and support. I am encouraged by the work already done and hope that my visit and my forthcoming report will assist the country in making further progress in this area.

Thank you for your attention.