

**Input of
The Office of the Special Representative of the
United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict
To
The Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children to
the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
On
Existing and Emerging Sexually Exploitative Practices against Children in the Digital
Environment**

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General

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) is responsible for the protection of children affected by armed conflict and for advocating to prevent the six grave violations against children identified by the Security Council from occurring in the first place. These six grave violations are: recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access to children. The Office of the Special Representative covers 25 conflict situations and promotes enhanced monitoring and reporting at the subregional level in the Lake Chad basin region, in accordance with the latest annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (A/77/895-S/2023/363).

The key elements of the mandate of the Special Representative are to: (a) provide political leadership and high-level advocacy for the improved protection of children affected by armed conflict; (b) lead the collection of information and reporting on the plight of these children; (c) advocate, build awareness of and give prominence to ending and preventing grave violations; (d) work with Member States, United Nations partners, civil society and pertinent intergovernmental bodies to propose ideas, undertake research and facilitate discussions on the best approaches to enhance the protection of children in situations of armed conflict, including through improved accountability processes; (e) undertake diplomatic engagement with parties to armed conflict and affected Member States in order to secure commitments to end and prevent violations against children; and (f) facilitate the work of operational child protection actors on the ground through the development and promotion of best practices, such as ensuring that child protection issues are included in peace processes, appropriate release procedures are in place, reintegration programmes are strengthened, child protection expertise and capacity are reinforced, and regional and national prevention plans and policies against the six grave violations are promoted.

Consultative initiative on protecting youth in digital spaces

In 2023, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG CAAC), in cooperation with the Office of the African Union Youth Envoy, conducted a consultative process with over 200 young people in Africa to seek their views and recommendations on required response and prevention measures to better protect children and

youth in digital spaces, particularly with a view to address the misuse of social media by parties to conflict for the purpose of committing grave violations against conflict-affected children – most often rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, the recruitment and use of children, as well as abduction and killing and maiming of children. The OSRSG CAAC used the recommendations emanating from the consultative process to design a social media advocacy campaign aimed at raising awareness and preventing the misuse of digital spaces by parties to conflict. Key messages were focused on informing about risks in digital spaces, raising awareness about the rights of conflict-affected children, providing information about how children and young people can protect themselves in digital spaces, and promoting empowering messages about the positive roles of children and youth in peace and security. The campaign was launched on 29 February 2024 (Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram).

Main gaps and challenges to children and youth’s protection from online threats, including sexual exploitative practices

During the consultative process conducted by OSRSG CAAC with African youth in 2023, participants underlined a worsening trend of misinformation circulating on social media platforms as well as the misuse of such platforms to disseminate hate speech, and fuel sexual and gender-based violence, violent extremism, and armed conflict. Attention was also placed on the prevalence of cyberbullying and cyberstalking with negative impacts on the mental health and development of young people. It was stated that there is an overall lack of reliable information on the types of harmful content children and young people encounter when using social media, and a lack of awareness among these age groups on how to protect themselves. It was noted that even in contexts where laws on cybercrime have been adopted, legislation remains inadequate to address the numerous types of online violence, including sexual violence, experienced by young people. Legislation on online sexual violence, for example, was often exclusively focused on child pornography, rather than other types of online sexual violence, such as harassment and stalking. Due to lack of content regulation and weak enforcement of rules and regulations in the digital space, most types of online harm thus remained unaddressed. Attendees stressed that the recruitment and use of children in conflict remained a severe concern, especially in contexts where limited access to education for children as well as limited employment opportunities for young people are provided. Participants further shared information about parties to conflict misusing social media to recruit and use children via sophisticated social media strategies and harmful masculinity narratives. Participants specifically mentioned glorifying the lives of combatants and creating a sense of belonging to a community or cause to recruit children and young people. For example, participants shared that they had encountered videos posted online by armed groups that depicted young combatants as having gained wealth, power, respect, and community through their association with an armed group. Participants noted that children often lack awareness of the harmful consequences of associating themselves with armed groups and forces, which made them particularly vulnerable to recruitment and use, a grave violation that puts children at significant risk, including for other grave violations such as rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Recommendations and good practices to ensure that children and young people are protected from online threats, including sexual exploitative practices

During the consultative process conducted by the OSRSG CAAC with African youth in 2023, participants highly recommended to increase counter-messaging to combat harmful content and misinformation and to transform social media into safe spaces for positive engagement, including for meaningful youth participation in political, peace and security processes. The work of youth-led civil society organizations was underscored as particularly important in this regard and participants called for increased support to such organizations and for the full realization of the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda. In line with this notion, the OSRSG CAAC's youth consultation initiative was highlighted as a best practice. Participants called for increased cooperation with social media companies with the aim of developing safeguarding approaches and distributing positive counter-messaging.

They also called for digital skills building initiatives to be inclusive of all age groups, and for the publication of messages on digital safety to go beyond social media and also target traditional media, including radio and television programmes and newspapers, in order to reach older audiences. Several participants called for engaging grassroots civil society actors as multipliers of messages and for partnering with small media outlets in rural areas to promote digital skills. The establishment of parental safety initiatives and partnerships with national education institutions was also recommended. All attendees underlined the need to engage with Governments to strengthen online protections, especially for children and young people. Additional research, increased content monitoring, and new effective policies to safeguard children and youth online were deemed urgently required, including realistic assessments of actual threats and types of online violence, including sexual violence, and adequate legal and policy responses. Participants also called for increased support to non-governmental organizations working on addressing online threats.