

Keynote speech by Ms. Mama Fatima SINGHATEH
SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE SALE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF
CHILDREN, INCLUDING CHILD PROSTITUTION, CHILD PORNOGRAPHY
AND OTHER CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE MATERIAL

ITU Forum on Child Online Protection Launch for the CIS Region

27 October 2020

10:00-15:00 (Moscow time zone, GMT+3)

Zoom platform

Chairperson,

Distinguished participants,

I am delighted to deliver the keynote address at this official launch of the ITU Child Protection Guidelines for the CIS Region. The ITU must be commended and congratulated for coming up with this laudable initiative such as the COP guidelines which as a tool, consists of a comprehensive set of recommendations for stakeholders on how to contribute to the development of a safe and empowering online environment for children and young people. These guidelines and the respective regional launches have come at a time when children are spending more time online than ever before.

We can all attest to the fact that technology has made our lives so much better over the years. The continued development and growth of information and communication technologies has created opportunities to communicate, interact and learn.

Whilst there are many advantages of the internet, it has also offered the secrecy, anonymity and opacity that facilitate the commission of illegal activities with utter impunity.

The sexual exploitation and abuse of children online is not a new phenomenon. The past three decades has however seen the increase in the use of the internet and new technology as tools to sexually exploit and abuse children online. Perpetrators use a variety of tools, such as live streaming services, encrypted communication systems and peer-to-peer platforms, and anonymous payment applications to create safe spaces for themselves online, share child sexual abuse materials and communicate with each other and with victims with anonymity. This makes the work of law enforcement agencies very difficult in the detection of these crimes and apprehension of perpetrators.

With the emergence of new forms and manifestation of sexual exploitation of children through communication technologies, the need to tackle online child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be over-emphasized.

In the context of the current pandemic globally, confinement measures, economic shutdown and the disrupted provision of already limited child protection services have exacerbated the vulnerability of children to offline and online abuses.

The amount of child sexual abuse materials online before the pandemic was already staggering. While the number of young children accessing the internet has grown significantly over recent months, awareness of the potential risks remained low and cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation have reportedly increased significantly during the pandemic.

Addressing these real threats require a holistic approach and commitment from all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, governments, regulators, the civil society, UN systems and children themselves.

There have been many instances of good practices in addressing and combating these crimes, including putting in place comprehensive legal frameworks by expressly criminalising specific exploitative activities. The detection of crimes and apprehension of perpetrators require proper legislation and adequate budgetary allocations as well as dedicated and trained law enforcement agents with adequate technical capacity to monitor the encrypted paedophile networks, lawfully access retained IP addresses to secure evidence, and engage with the private sectors, overseas operating companies and foreign enforcement agencies.

The **Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** provides a minimum standard of protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation and serves as a guide in addition to the UN CRC and other legal instruments, for drafting laws that protect children. This protocol should be universally ratified.

Regional instruments such as the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse offer additional protection, for example through the criminalisation of exploitative activities and the provision of additional procedural rights to the child victims.

International cooperation and the sharing of information across borders given the transnational nature of these crimes is also a mode of countering these criminal activities.

The most effective tool in addressing online child sexual abuse and exploitation is prevention. Prevention requires awareness raising, education and sensitization of all stakeholders especially children and their families within and outside the school setting. We need to empower children and youth through training on the safe use of new technologies and social media, and the creation of child-friendly helplines and hotlines to report online abuse and exploitation.

Children from all backgrounds should receive access to protection tools and concrete information on how to identify abuse and report crimes and where to seek guidance and assistance.

Most importantly, children should be sensitized about the dangers of producing and sharing self-generated indecent materials with their peers. These materials may end up in the hands of child sex offenders.

There is also the need to harmonize practices and procedures, share expertise and scale up good practices, and provide technical assistance and capacity-building to States for the development of legislation, policies and strategies to effectively combat and prevent sexual exploitation and sale of children online.

Enhancing corporate social responsibility of Internet service and content providers, telecommunications, financial companies and the media is another important aspect in strengthening child safety online through prevention and protection programmes.

The COP guidelines will therefore complement the already existing good practices and contribute towards ensuring a more coordinated approach in the fight against online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

We all have a role to play in ensuring the protection of children online and we must do so, together.

Thank you.