

- UN ITU Conference Special Speech - ITU Forum for Europe on Child Online Protection organised by the International Telecommunication Union and supported by A.S. Popov Odessa National Academy of Telecommunications, Ukraine on the 26-27<sup>th</sup> November 2020 – Online Meeting

## **UN ITU Conference: Special Speech**

### **Marie Louise Coleiro Preca**

Dear Chairperson

Dear Friends

**I would like to start by thanking ITU for organizing this two day conference.**

**It is indeed a perfect opportunity for all stakeholders to share thoughts, ideas and best practices in implementing child online protection.**

**It is also an opportunity to explore and discuss the obstacles and the hinderances, that is faced in trying to achieve a safe digital environment for our children.**

**It is therefore my sincere pleasure to be addressing all of you this afternoon.**

**I would indeed like to thank ITU for giving me this opportunity, whilst thanking them for their invaluable work and efforts, in the field of child online protection.**

**This conference comes at a very opportune time.**

**We know that one third of all internet users nowadays are children and young people.**

**The COVID 19 pandemic has resulted in more children and young people making use of the internet in a more intensified**

**manner, including to carry out everyday tasks and activities such as tuition.**

**Whilst the digital environment undoubtedly provides real and important opportunities for children, there are also downsides and risks.**

**Indeed, the importance of internet safety during the COVID 19 pandemic has increased multiple fold since more internet usage is resulting in more potential risks.**

**Unfortunately, it has also been confirmed that the COVID 19 pandemic has given rise to prevailing social issues such as domestic violence.**

**Already in a pre-COVID 19 context 70% of young people globally have experienced online violence, cyberbullying and digital harassment.**

**The COVID 19 pandemic, increased the risks of digital abuse.**

**Moreover, the limited use of entertainment and leisure facilities has further enhanced the use of social media. It has been proven that social media, hosts the main sources of online abuse for children and young people.**

**As a matter of fact, the upsurge of social media usage has translated into an increase in cyberbullying, hateful content that**

takes the form of pictures, words, videos games, symbols and even songs amongst children and young people.

According to a research study by S. Livingstone (2020) titled: *Coronavirus and #fake news: what do families do?* Emphasis that:

Children are also at risk at being troubled by a wide variety of harmful or illegal content such as pornographic pop-up advertisements, unpleasant or scary news or pictures, misinformation even about COVID-19, that can cause them anxiety and fear.

Another indicator by OECD is that: A lack of physical social interaction during the crisis, including with partners for the older children, may lead children to engage in sexting, which can cause a multitude of problems, both social and legal for the creator of the content.

Research is also showing that these risk manifestations, have the potential to have a more adverse effect on girls than boys. For example: a study titled *Non-Consensual Sharing of Sexts: Behaviours and Attitudes of Canadian Youth* by M Johnson et al. in 2018, has found that boys who accept traditional gender stereotypes were much more likely to share sexts than girls who shared the same beliefs. At the same time, girls who share sexts can be perceived as violating gender norms and even giving up the right to their pictures. Consequently, sexism and gender stereotyping were found to play a significant role in the 'culture of sharing'.

This indicator, on the feminization of the risks and effects of online abuse, is further explained in a research study by J

**Ducharme in 2019, titled: *Social Media Hurts Girls More Than Boys*. Ducharme establishes that girls may experience more cyberbullying than boys, and could be particularly disturbed, by certain aspects of it, including comparison with others and comments about appearance.**

***Why Children are at risk of sexual exploitation*, an FBI press release in 2020, about School Closings due to COVID-19, and a news item on news online by National Crime Agency in 2020, also confirm that risks of sexual exploitation increases, whereby it manifests itself in the form of sextortion.**

**In this day, and age, where posting and sharing online has become the norm, it is a challenge, in itself, to foster a culture whereby the internet can also be seen as the possible ‘invisible’ enemy.**

**In Malta, it has been observed that there is a trend of increased cases of children being willing to take indecent photography of themselves but also a decrease in age of the children involved.**

**We are therefore, all much aware of what is happening in our societies and the effect that lack of online protection and safety, have on children in general and even more so, on girls.**

**To this effect, the role of the UN ITU is pivotal, in intensifying dialogue with major social media stakeholders such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok on increasing online safety safeguards for our children and young people.**

**Further collaborative and joint initiatives should be explored.**

**A ‘Child friendly’ or ‘child champion’ mark whose awarding would entail satisfying a series of criteria that ensure child online protection is one of the potential initiatives that could be implemented in this regard.**

**Governments and authorities must support parents, teachers and carers in educating children on how to become responsible participants in the digital environment and by providing information and guidance on the benefits and risks that children can encounter in the digital environment.**

**Furthermore, we need to ensure that children and their parents are aware of their rights in the digital environment. Governments and authorities should take measures to ensure they are able to access mechanisms for enforcing such rights, including complaints mechanisms or legal remedies.**

**We must also make children aware of available support services, such as hotlines, helplines and awareness centres, in case they require assistance as a result of online activities.**

**We need to promote digital literacy skills in our schools and elsewhere, as this is an essential tool in such an environment.**

**Mandatory reporting could also be explored with major social media stakeholders as this would be highly contributing in addressing online abuse at source.**

**Awareness raising about the child online protection continues to be crucial in our work.**

**Regrettably, the very existence of online abuse, risks and repercussions of such abuse, are still unknown ignored by many, including parents, carers, guardians, educators as well as policy makers.**

**This renders awareness raising about the incorrect use of internet and digital platforms, by our children and young people, one of the most crucial, if not the most crucial factor, of the ITU guidelines' implementation.**

**Effective communication strategies therefore play a crucial role in disseminating information about the dangers of internet misuse, and the consequential effects on the wellbeing of children.**

**It is only by ensuring such awareness, that it will be possible to allow for measures to tackle online abuse to be effectively implemented.**

**Adequate and appropriate capacity building in its wider sense is of utmost priority in achieving a safe digital environment for our children and young people.**

**Awareness raising and reporting, both voluntary and mandatory in nature, can only be effective in concrete and real terms if national systems are supported by proper and satisfactory resources.**

**In this regard, the uptake of academic courses, training and tuition of professions related to the field of child online protection should be encouraged.**

**This can be achieved through HR strategies coupled up by PR and marketing campaigns, particularly amongst young students. In addition to this, more guidance on the applicability of respective university degrees should be provided in order to ensure that university students put their studies and knowledge into effective use upon completion and finalization of their studies.**

**Financial incentives should also be provided in order to attract professionals related to child online protection to work in the public service and public sector.**

**Very often, valid professionals opt to work in the private sector due to lack of proper acknowledgement to their academic qualifications, and discrepancies in financial remuneration. This hinders the possibility for the public service and sector to have a fully-fledged and effective prevention and support system.**

**Indeed, capacity building in its wider sense should be at the forefront of our work in ensuring a safe online environment for our children and young people.**

**In this regard, it is crucial that professionals working in the field are equipped with the necessary resources to enable them to carry out their work professionally and effectively.**

**Moreover, it is essential that continuous training is prioritized. This would ensure that the professionals on the ground, including the due to the judiciary, the police including all security corps and teachers. This is not an exhaustive list of the necessary professionals in the field.**

**They must therefore be properly equipped with the right know how to handle such situations, to be able to ensure that the respective appropriate support is provided.**

**Mandatory reporting is key in order to ensure that online abuse on our children and young people is tackled in an effective manner, whilst also making sure that the necessary and appropriate support for victims is provided.**

**To this effect, I would like to encourage regulations that allow for such reporting, in notifying the respective authorities about such incidents.**

**An effective and fully equipped support system, would thus assure that the victim would be supported at an early stage without allowing further consequential effects of online abuse to kick in.**

**Nevertheless, mandatory reporting should also be coupled with protection for individuals who report cases of online abuse on children and young people.**

**Unfortunately, hesitance, fear and insecurity due to the lack of proper protection for individuals who report cases of online abuse result in under reporting.**

**Protection, therefore, is key.**

**It is the responsibility of our authorities to make sure that individuals, who report such abuse, do not fear any potential consequence.**

**I would like to take this opportunity today, to call upon, each and every one of us, whichever responsibility we carry in our respective societies, to put children, and their wellbeing, at the focus of our work.**

**In this regard, it is essential that child participation is at the core of the implementation of our work.**

**We should thus work *with* children rather than *for* children.**

**It is only by letting their voices be heard that we can ensure that, the effective implementation of our work will be, really and truly, about them, apart from, for them.**

**Every day counts.**

**Let us thus all join our efforts in ensuring that our children and the generations to follow, avail themselves, from a digital environment that is safe and secure.**

**A holistic approach is fundamental – a safe digital environment can only be achieved if each and every one of us: parents, educators, governments, authorities, policy makers, business owners, civil society organisations, contribute towards this common goal, that of making sure that the internet is a source of education, development and empowerment for our children and young people.**

**Collaboration with different stakeholders including the European institutions and other regional and international organisations is fundamental.**

**Valuable work is already being carried out by various organisations, which share a common goal in making the internet and digital platforms a safe environment for our children and young people, for them to learn and grow.**

**More cooperation amongst organisations on an international level is therefore required in order to ensure that work is carried out in tandem, and therefore, ensure the best outcome from the available resources.**

**The wellbeing of our children is at stake here, and we simply cannot afford, to get it wrong.**

**It is only a few days ago, when we have celebrated international children's day, and it has never been as crucial as today, to remind ourselves about the importance of safeguarding our children's wellbeing in its entirety.**

**I therefore would like to encourage all of our governments and authorities to INVEST in OUR CHILDREN. Investing in children is key to achieving sustainable growth, inclusive prosperity and meaningful wellbeing.**

**In conclusion, I would like to encourage UN ITU to hold more and regular exchanges similar to the one of today and tomorrow.**

**This will allow us to continue to share knowledge, expertise and best practices, throughout the implementation of child online protection projects in line with the UN ITU guidelines issued earlier this year.**

**I thank you all for your kind attention and I look forward to continuing this exchange of views with you all.**