

National Day Against Paedophilia and Child Pornography
Telefono Azzurro Rome
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Your Excellency Archbishop of Malta – Mons Charles Scicluna
President of SOS Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus – Prof Ernesto Caffo
Dottore Emilio Puccio – Secretary General of the EU Parliament – Inter-Parliamentary Group on Children’s Rights
Distinguished speakers
Dear Colleagues and Friends

Prof Caffo, thank you so much, for the tireless initiatives that you and your team take, in highlighting the many concerns we have, as Children’s Rights Defenders, about the ongoing violations of Children’s Rights.

This Conference, being held on Italy’s National Day against Paedophilia and Child Pornography, is another important opportunity to highlight the horrendous attacks, on the dignity of children and their rights.

The statistics we have available are worrying to say the least. The situation is crying out loud to all relevant stakeholders for necessary collective action.

Let me put this in context.

- **The World Health Organisation** reports that:
 - 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child

- 120 million girls and young women under 20 years of age have suffered some form of forced sexual contact.
- **Facebook** flagged a staggering 73.3 million instances of child abuse in 2021.
- In 2022, **the Internet Watch Foundation** found that
 - There was a webpage showing a child being sexually abused every two minutes.
 - Almost 256 thousand webpages were confirmed as containing child sexual abuse imagery, and 66% of all material was hosted in a European country.

Let me share with you what Eurochild is doing in the field of child online abuse.

For those who are unfamiliar with Eurochild, it is important to know that Eurochild, is the European Network of over 200 member organisations, that work with and for children, of which 23 are National Partner Networks, that bring together nearly 2000 national organisations on the ground.

Eurochild is present across 37 countries in Europe, including in all the members states within the European Union.

Eurochild is focusing on protecting children's rights in the digital environment too.

We believe that children should enjoy the same rights online, as they should do in the real world.

We have been advocating for children's rights and well-being to be at the heart of all policymaking in Europe.

In this regard, Eurochild has two main goals, which are:

1. To influence EU policy and legislation on children's rights in the digital environment, so as to prevent online harm; and
2. To develop the knowledge and capacity of members and children, to engage in Eurochild's advocacy work - including peer-to-peer learning, and the sharing of experiences.

In fact, Eurochild set up a members' taskforce and a children's group with different capacity-building and advocacy opportunities.

More importantly, we are working together with the European Union and other civil society organisations, to ensure that the proposed European regulation, upholds the best standards of child protection.

We work to ensure that children's views on online safety, and their role in the digital environment, are heard.

At Eurochild we believe that every child, whoever they might be or from wherever they come from, should have the opportunity to be safe, and happy.

We believe that a child has the right to be - simply a child.

We believe that children have a right to enjoy their childhood.

As the internet evolved and grew, we have seen the increase in the viral spread of child sexual abuse in many forms.

To make matters worse, the internet allows for abusive material to be re-shared multiple times online, with Children being victimised and traumatised over, and over again.

Simply put, children's dignity is continuously attacked, and their childhood and their youth robbed.

We might feel that we are dealing with an overwhelming situation, however, we cannot be complacent or powerless to act.

Together, with all stakeholders we can act in addressing this worrisome situation.

Children hold the same rights, offline and online, and decision-makers have a moral and legal responsibility to ensure this. This is recognised in the General Comment N. 25 to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Decision-makers must recognise the full spectrum of children's rights when discussing their protection online, including their privacy, the right to non-discrimination, and the rights to participation.

Undoubtedly, the standards of data protection and security concerning children should be set at a higher level, and legislation on online data governance must address key concerns related to children's data.

I want also to stress, that it is essential that children are directly involved in the development of legislation and in industry-led solutions.

Children must be given the rightful space to voice their online experience, to inform the process.

I therefore encourage authorities and all stakeholders to ensure that child participation processes must be at the heart of all policies and regulations.

Policies and regulations should be clear.

The responsibility of a 'safe' and 'wise' use of online products should not fall on children.

Instead, online platforms and services must be designed in a way that they are safe for children.

We must engage with the industry, as it plays a key role in ensuring safe online platforms to prevent children from falling victims to online abuse.

Technology companies have little incentive to voluntarily deliver in our fight against child sexual abuse.

Therefore, there is an acute need for children's rights organisations to advocate to put children's best interests at the heart of the debate and the minds of policymakers.

Policymakers should hold companies accountable.

We must admit that the technology sector has often enjoyed lack of regulation in terms of the socio-economic impact, in the pursue of innovation and technological advancement.

Voluntary detection and reporting, by companies, has proven insufficient to adequately protect children.

In fact, in 2020, up to 95% of all reports received, were from just one company. We very well know that the problem does not only exist on one platform.

If we mean business, we must transition towards a system where all companies are held accountable for hosting, and for allowing the dissemination of child sexual abusive material, including the solicitation of children.

Hopefully, the European Union will become the first jurisdiction in the world, to oblige companies to carry out risk assessments, and mitigation of their platforms.

From my own experience, when conversing with children, about online protection, they highlight the need for more awareness and education, of how to stay safe on the internet.

Children also made this clear to us, during the United Nations European Dialogue, on violence against children in the digital environment, where Eurochild was involved as an active partner.

The 'Disrupting Harm' report from ECPAT, the organisation that coordinates research, advocacy and action to end the **sexual exploitation of children**, states that children need safe spaces to share their experience online. Children stated that they need guidance in understanding internet rules, and what to do in case of abuse.

We know that child sexual abuse does not happen in isolation.

There are clear interlinkages between online and offline abuse. Children's experiences of violence in digital spaces are connected to violence in other contexts.

Research shows that children who are more vulnerable to sexual abuse offline, are also at higher risk online.

Online child protection requires national child protection systems that take into account the interplay between online and offline child sexual abuse.

Moreover, caregivers, educators and other professionals that work in child protection systems, must be trained and informed, on how to support children from online abuse.

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

We have quite a tall order, however I do believe that by acting together, we can overcome this horrendous silent killer of our children's dignity and humanity.

The time is now!

Let's work together!

Let's join our efforts to put our worries to effective action.