2022– 2023 Biennium

SI Where We Stand Statement

Cyberbullying

Where Things Stand…

The right of girls to be protected from such crimes as cyberbullying was originally enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of a Child. In 2014, in view of a UN report which addressed the potential risks of violence against children regarding ICT's and the internet, the UN General Assembly, in resolution 69/158, recognised that bullying, including cyberbullying, could have a negative impact on the rights of children and called for a report to be prepared regarding protecting children from bullying. In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development added a specific target "to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children" (target 16.2) and, under Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, highlighted the importance of the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence (target 4.7), as well as the provision of child, gender, and disability sensitive facilities and safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all (indicator 4.a).

Recent Agreed Conclusions (CSW 66 E/CN.6/2022/L.7; CSW 65 E/CN.6/2021/L.3), U.N .Resolutions, (UNRES 77/201 December 2022), U.N. Secretary General reports (A/73/265 (2018) A/71/213 (2016)), annual reports of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection (2021), Council of European Guidelines (2018), a European Strategy for a Better Internet for Kids (2022), Recommendations by CEDAW (CEDAW/C/GC/36 (2017)) and the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC/C/GC/25) children's rights in relation to the digital environment (2022, see also GR/C/16 (2013)) have all recently upheld this right. Cyberbullying has also been viewed to violate other rights as well, such as children's right to non-discrimination (Article 2), freedom of expression (Article 13), and privacy (Article 16), to name a few.

These critical times and the impact of multiple global crises continue to demonstrate that, whilst digital and new technologies offer many positive opportunities for women and girls, gender-related online violence, including cyberbullying, represents one of the adverse consequences of technology and has become a topic of increasing societal concern as it is presenting new risks and threats. To begin with, the COVID-19 Pandemic has made girls and young women more vulnerable to being exposed to

cyberbullying as they are spending more time on digital devices and are often not aware of the risks they take when they communicate online. E.g. The pandemic has exacerbated girls exposure to the risk of all forms of violence and harassment, including in digital contexts, inter alia peer-to-peer sexual harassment and cyberbullying, child sexual exploitation and abuse, child grooming, trafficking in persons, hate speech, stigmatisation, racism, xenophobia and multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Recent studies show how a 106 per cent increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation globally was recorded during the pandemic. Cyberbullying has increased and "self-generated" imagery/online material has spiked, with 95 per cent of the content being from girls in early adolescence aged 11–13.

Children, especially girls, are also increasing as a target of cybercrimes. Over 99 per cent of the online reports received by CyberTipline in 2021 related to suspected child sexual abuse material. There are also numerous reports on the increase in risks of cyberbullying and child abuse. Mafia networks have also been known to take advantage of the economic needs of families by grooming children and exploiting them through sexting and sextortion. It has also been noted with concern that children who are marginalised or in vulnerable situations, who face stigmatisation, discrimination or exclusion, are also being disproportionately affected by bullying, both online and offline and that bullying often includes a gender dimension which can be associated with sexual and gender-based violence, stereotyping, and negative social norms that affect all boys and girls. Girls with low esteem suffering from isolation, psychological problems, and anorexia are falling victim to men with sexual intentions, in particular on the internet.

It has also been noted with concern that children who are marginalised or in vulnerable situations, who face stigmatisation, discrimination, or exclusion, are also being disproportionately affected by bullying, both online and offline; E.g. *Children perceived to be different from the majority are at a higher risk of cyberbullying*. According to a survey conducted in 13 states in the USA, 61% of children said they were cyberbullied because of their appearance. Other reasons for being cyberbullied, according to children in the USA, are perceived intelligence (one quarter), race or sexuality (one seventh), and religion (one tenth). According to UNESCO in 2021, other parts of the world were also affected: 1 in 2 children aged 11-18 surveyed in 11 European countries, 6 in 10 children aged 13-17 in the USA, and 1 in 3 primary and secondary school students surveyed in South Africa reported they experienced cyberbullying; at the same time, 44% of the children surveyed in 11 European countries who had been cyberbullied before lockdown said it happened even more during lockdowns in 2020. According to a 2021 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Child Protection regarding a study of young people aged 9 to 16 years which involved seven countries (including Ireland), they found that 26% of girls and 17% of boys had experienced bullying online. Further, 35% of girls aged 13-16 had encountered content such as hate messages, anorexic or bulimic content (14%), self-harm sites (9%), and sites discussing suicide 8%. Cyberbullying can cause profound harm as it can affect the child victim at any time, quickly reaching a wide audience, allowing technology to perpetuate cyberbullying threats as messages that may be posted and reposted over time. Bullying and cyberbullying can also easily feed into each other, forming a continuum of damaging behaviour.

These threats need to be urgently addressed as it is affecting a high percentage of women and girls and compromising their health, their emotional, psychological and physical well-being, their academic work

as well as safety as children and young people who are victims of cyberbullying or other forms of online violence are usually also victimised in person. In addition, potential long-term effects include their individual ability to realise their own potential as cyberbullying is associated with long-lasting consequences that continue into adulthood.

And Where Things Need to Go…

Fundamental Action

Women's and girls' rights which are protected offline must also be protected online. This must be balanced with respect for the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy and data protection. States must protect and fulfil a child's right to an effective remedy if their human rights and fundamental freedoms have been infringed in the digital environment.

States must fulfill their obligation to provide effective remedies and reparations for violations of the rights of a woman or girl, including by third parties such as business enterprises. This should include provisions which call for penalties, compensation, judicial action, and measures to promote recovery after harm caused or contributed to by third parties. Meeting this obligation entails having in place gender-sensitive mechanisms – criminal, civil, or administrative – that are known by women and girls and their representatives, that are also prompt, genuinely available, and accessible, and that provide adequate reparation for harm suffered. In all cases, women and girls should have recourse to independent and impartial justice, or judicial review of administrative proceedings.

States should also establish monitoring mechanisms for the investigation of rights violations, with a view to improving accountability of ICT and other relevant companies; this should occur alongside a strengthening ofregulatory agencies' responsibility for the development of standards relevant to children's rights and ICTs, including implementing fast and effective procedures for removal of prejudicial or harmful material involving women and girls.

Additional Action

- Within their jurisdiction, Member States should prohibit and criminalise online violence against all women and girls, in particular the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, online harassment, and stalking.
- Member States should adopt or adapt (as appropriate) legislative measures to hold perpetrators liable and allow all women and girls who are victims to pursue legal action. Such legislative measures should be applicable also to threats of releasing harmful information or content online.

- Member States should provide victims with legal recourse and appropriate legal aid in order that they may pursue a relevant course of action against the perpetrator.
- Member States should provide reparation measures such as restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition.

Where Soroptimist International Stands…

We urge Member States, with support from the United Nations and its agencies to:

- Ensure that their present legal frameworks adequately protect all women and girls' human rights online, including the right to life free from violence, freedom of expression and access to information, and the right to privacy and data protection.
- Take effective measures to prevent the publication of harmful material that comprises gender-based violence against women or girls, and for their removal on an urgent basis.
- Provide protective measures and services for victims of online gender-based violence.
- Inform children and teenagers about the risks of taking, or allowing others to take, intimate images, and that the dissemination of such images is a form of gender-based violence and a crime. Girls should also learn about safety on social media platforms and the Internet, and how to protect their own privacy online.
- We urge all corporate organisations providing internet platforms to Commit to eradicating online gender-based violence.
- Allocate resources to information and education campaigns on preventing ICT facilitated violence against women and girls.
- Promote a 'human rights for all' based digital security system across their platforms.
- Adopt transparent complaint mechanisms for cases of online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls ensuring these are easily accessible for reporting and requesting removal of harmful content.

Resources

Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection
https://www.ucc.ie/en/law/news/annual-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-child-protection-published-by-prof-conor-omahony.html

Releasing children's potential and minimising risks
https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/documents/publications/6._releasing_childrens_potential_and_minimizing_risks_icts_fa_low_res.pdf

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