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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Human Rights Advocates Inc., a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 January 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Rights of the child: Exploitation of children - Social Media grooming

Introduction

While recognizing that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (“CRC”), its Optional Protocols, and mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography have all been critical steps in addressing the global needs of children, there remains a wide variety of illegal acts and illicit practices perpetrated through the use of social media applications and platforms.

The preamble of the CRC recognizes that the child needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal action, due to their physical and mental immaturity. Article 19 of the CRC emphasizes the need for state parties to take appropriate measures to protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in the care of parents, legal guardians or any other person who has the care of the child. Article 34 of the CRC establishes that all State Parties should undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, and outlines three instances in which State Parties shall take particular measures to prevent including the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, the exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices, and the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials. Article 35 establishes that “State Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form.”

The act of online grooming

The Human Right Council (“HRC”), in accordance with resolution 7/13, mandated the Special Rapporteur to analyze, address, and report her findings on the causes of the sale and children, child pornography and child prostitution; in resolution 7/13, the HRC requested the Special Rapporteur to “identify and make concrete recommendations on preventing and combating new patterns of sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.¹ Resolution 34/16 further expanded the mandate to include other child sexual abuse material.²

Social media grooming is growing rapidly as the popularity and use of social media applications increases. The act of grooming violates an assortment of human rights, including the right to fundamental dignity. Mindful of HRC resolution 34/16, which calls upon state actors to pay particular attention to children in marginalized and vulnerable situations,³ additional attention, concern and resources should be devoted to the issue of social media grooming and the multitude of ways in which this illegal activity violates children’s essential human rights.

Forms of social media grooming

Social media grooming is the intention to secure the trust of a minor as a step towards future engagement of sexual conduct.⁴ “Groomers” are people that make an emotional connection with someone to make them do things such as have sexual conversations, send illicit images

¹ Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography U.N. Doc. A/HRC/7/13 (March 2008).

² Rights of the child: protection of the child in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A/HRC/RES/34/16, para. 31, (March 24, 2017).

³ *Id.*, para. 5.

⁴ Amparo Elizabeth Cano Et. Al., *Detecting Child Grooming Behaviour Patterns on Social Media* 412 (Luca Maria Aiello & Daniel McFarland eds., 2014).

and videos of themselves, or meet up with them.⁵ The act of using these illicit photos or videos in a forceful manner is described as sextortion. Sextortion is the threat to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something for the purposes of revenge or humiliation among other things.⁶ Other forms of social media grooming take the form in romantic relationships, mentorships, authority figures and dominant and persistent figures.⁷ These forms of social media allow predators to force children into further sexual acts or explicit behavior that violates human rights standards.

Among the most common methods to use social media for grooming is the use of the social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, or Snapchat.⁸ Experts fear that child sex trafficking statistics will drastically increase because of the wide availability of social media platforms. One expert noted that the trafficking and sexual abuse of children has changed the way groomer and predators connect with children via social media platforms. Other commonly used social media platforms used to groom children are dating applications such as Tinder or Blendr and Yellow, and some webcam sites like Chatroulette.⁹

Factors associated with social media grooming

The nature of the advancement of technology and the internet, as well as a political, legal, socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors contribute to social media grooming of children. Research shows that there is no single factor that is the principle factor for abuse against children.¹⁰ Gender is among one of the factors discussed by major researchers in the context of social media grooming. Researchers have seen that there is a disproportionate number of young girls that are being targeted; one study found that when age and gendered were logged, 62% of victims were girls aged 12-15.¹¹ Gender based crimes are of great concern when the disproportionate numbers are exponentially increasing.

Social media grooming may happen to children of any age, background, socio-economic status, gender, and sexual orientation because the availability of access to the internet and these applications is growing. Grooming can occur on any platform that allows individuals to communicate with one another.¹² That means children that have access to smart phones, tablets, computers, or gaming systems can fall victim to social media grooming, and with the percentage of children who use the internet between the ages of three to eighteen increasing by 6%, the risk of becoming a victim of social media grooming is ever increasing.¹³

Effects of social media grooming

Social media grooming can have both short-term and longer-term effects on children. These effects may manifest in mental health problems, such as anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, or depression, and can manifest in substance abuse issues, such as addiction.¹⁴

⁵ Childline, <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/online-grooming/#10> (last visited Jan. 13, 2020).

⁶ Thorn, Sextortion: Summary findings from a 2017 survey of 2,097 survivors, https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sextortion_Wave2Report_121919.pdf (2017).

⁷ NSPCC, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/grooming/#types> (last visited Jan. 15, 2020.)

⁸ Id.

⁹ University of Toledo EurekAlert, https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2018-10/uot-usd100218.php (last visited Jan 15, 2020).

¹⁰ Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Beech, A., & Collings, G. (2013). A Review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18, 135-146. DOI: 10.1016/j.avb.2012.11.008

¹¹ NSPCC, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/3000-new-grooming-offences/> (last visited Jan. 23, 2020).

¹² Innocent Lives Foundation, <https://www.innocentlivesfoundation.org/everything-you-need-to-know-about-online-grooming/> (last visited Jan. 23, 2020).

¹³ National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cch.pdf (last visited Jan. 22, 2020).

¹⁴ NSPCC, <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/grooming/#types> (last visited Jan. 15, 2020.)

One study found that all discussions regarding the consequences of online abuse on individuals were negative in some manner; half of the victims in that study talked about the negative psychological effects and how those effects will resonate with the victim for a long time.¹⁵

Grooming and the sexual abuse that occurs with it is a matter of public health. Child sexual abuse and child maltreatment were compared in cost of the lifetime burden per victim to be nearly equivalent, if not greater than, in the amount of \$210,012 per victim.¹⁶ This figure is comparable to other major public health concerns such as strokes and Type 2 diabetes.¹⁷ With an increase in this behavior, the growing number of children using social media applications, and the increasing access to the internet, this already massive figure will only continue to increase and further cause this public health concern.

Recommendations

Human Rights Advocates (“HRA”) urges the HRC:

- To hold a panel on social media grooming. This issue involves a vast cross-section of human rights violations, only further amplified and exploited in countries contending with severe poverty and newly developing countries. This issue reaches not only the most vulnerable population, children, but it further concerns those rights for any person(s) that have access to and use social media applications and other networking platforms, thus threats to society at large, and threatening a growing population daily.
- To urge State Parties to the CRC to address the pervasive problems inherent to the sale of children and social media grooming, including:
 - Ensuring unlawful activity of every kind committed against children on social media applications and platforms is criminalized, for this distrustful activity committed against children necessarily feeds into the sale of children.
 - Regulation and enforcement of social media standards and requirements on the verification of accounts and investigations into reports of violations of these standards.
 - Provide safer online regulations to include proper codes and consequences for breaking those codes, as well as accountability and enforcement of those consequences for perpetrators.

¹⁵ Whittle, H. C., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., & Beech, A (2013). Victim’s Voices: The Impact of Online Grooming and Sexual Abuse, 63, 57-71, DOI: 10.13189/ujp.2013.010206

¹⁶ Darkness to Light, Child Sexual Abuse Statistics: Long-Term Consequences, http://www.d2l.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Statistics_5_Consequences.pdf (last visited Jan. 22, 2020).

¹⁷ Id.