HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 54th SESSION

Panel discussion on cyberbullying against children

27 September 2023

In her opening remarks, **Ms. Nada Al-Nashif, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights** expressed that in 2022, bullying, including cyberbullying, affected 130 million students globally. The World Health Organization recognized it as a major public health concern, causing academic, physical, and mental health problems. She also expressed concern about online cyberbullying, including threats and exploitation, sometimes involving sexual content. The Committees on the Rights of the Child and Discrimination against Women considered cyberbullying a form of violence, disproportionately affecting girls. While combating cyberbullying, states must safeguard children's privacy and freedom of expression. Over-reaching measures and content censorship should be avoided. She urged that effective prevention requires national programs, such as Finland's successful KiVa program, and responsible online company practices. Ms. Al-Nashif emphasized that, to combat cyberbullying, a holistic approach must prioritize children's rights and interests, considering human rights, digital concerns, and policy development.

Mr. Philip Jaffé, Member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Director of the Centre for Children's Rights Studies at the University of Geneva, emphasized the importance of children living in the digital world, the rapid pace of digital developments, and the abundance of existing resolutions and initiatives. To address cyberbullying effectively, he advocated for a regrouping around human rights and children's rights principles, along with collaborative actions involving all stakeholders. He mentioned that cyberbullying violates many children's rights related to health, education, privacy, and more. The consequences are severe, including self-esteem loss, school dropout, depression, and even self-harm or suicidal behavior, with vulnerable groups disproportionately affected. He said that cyberbullying encompasses various types and media, often occurring remotely and anonymously. Addressing it requires political will, new legislation, law enforcement training, and a regulatory framework involving the private sector. Children should be consulted, provided with child-friendly complaint mechanisms, and empowered through prevention programs in schools. He also emphasized the crucial need to balance child protection with their privacy and rights.

Santa Rose Mary (15 years), a Child rights advocate from Uganda, started by defining cyberbullying as sharing a child's personal information, explicit content, or inappropriate messages that can harm them. She highlighted the severe consequences, including mental health issues, school dropouts, and the risk of suicide. She made four recommendations: urging the Ugandan government to enforce strict laws against cyberbullying, advising schools worldwide to include digital literacy in the syllabus for online safety, requesting parents to educate children about cyberbullying dangers, and encouraging fellow children to report any cyberbullying cases they encounter or witness.

Mr. Yony Tsouna, Founder and Co-Director of Matzmichim, the Israeli Violence Reduction Organization emphasized the need to understand the evolving digital landscape where children are increasingly involved. He stressed that educating children about healthy online behavior is crucial. Mr. Tsouna highlighted the importance of addressing everyday online interactions and not just focusing on extreme cases. He advocated for teaching children digital literacy, social media ethics, and the impact of social media on their well-being. He differentiated between two types of cyberbullying: one resulting from poor social and emotional skills and the other, planned bullying by children with high social and emotional skills seeking popularity. He called for changing norms and providing training to identify manipulation and hate rumors, emphasizing the need for practical tools for teachers and parents. He expressed the urgency of adapting to the changing digital landscape, especially with the advent of virtual reality and AI. Mr. Tsouna concluded by highlighting the importance of addressing online hate tactics, particularly in politics, and urged collaboration in addressing cyberbullying. He

expressed hope in the ongoing efforts against cyberbullying and the opportunity for knowledge exchange and collaboration to enrich children's lives in the digital age.

Ms. Deepali Liberhan, Safety Policy Director, Meta discussed their approach to protecting and supporting young people on their platforms. She outlined the "Best Interest of the Child Framework" inspired by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ms. Liberhan emphasized Meta's five-pillar approach to safety, including partnerships with experts, policy development, user tools for control, resources, and feedback from stakeholders. She discussed their policies against bullying and harassment, enforcement measures, and the tools they offer to empower young users to control their experiences and combat bullying. She also highlighted initiatives like comment warnings, hidden words, parental supervision tools, and educational resources for both users and educators. Ms. Liberhan expressed Meta's commitment to providing safe and age-appropriate online experiences for young people while collaborating with stakeholders.

Interactive dialogue

Most states and state organizations highlighted both the benefits and risks associated with cyberbullying. They also emphasized the importance of protecting children and putting forward concrete measures while providing them with the digital skills and critical thinking necessary for responsible online decision-making. Some countries emphasized the long-term negative effects and the importance of providing psychological support and counseling to victims and their families during the recovery process. Several countries highlighted that education must play an important role in promoting online safety by teaching children to identify online violence and protect themselves from it, whether it originates from peers or adults. Many countries emphasized that children's participation and contributions are key, including their views and recommendations, to efforts to prevent and combat cyberbullying. **Austria** called upon social media companies and platforms to take responsibility for creating a safe online environment that nurtures children's well-being and shields them from harm. **Bulgaria** called for strengthening preventive measures, increasing accountability for online entities, and promoting international cooperation to combat cybercrime. The **US** emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach involving governments, educators, tech companies, civil society, parents, and caregivers to ensure the safety and well-being of young people online and protect their human rights. **Israel** suggested that cyberbullying must be addressed not only through education in schools but also through innovative ways. The **Holy See** emphasized the vital role of parents in protecting children online, advocating for education and awareness campaigns for both children and parents.

The **UAE** highlighted its legal framework, known as the "Wadeema" law, which safeguards children's rights and its efforts to prevent cybercrimes. **Chile** expressed that the establishment of a system of protection and redress in the context of cyberbullying must include consideration of the views and visions of children themselves. The **Republic of Korea** highlighted the importance of not undermining children's freedom of expression while implementing protective measures, citing concerns about AI applications that may block legitimate expressions. **Indonesia** stated that state and private actors must address cyberbullying prevention strategies and the necessity of a youth council. **Turkey** stressed that the business sector and technological companies have a role in protecting the rights of children against cyberbullying and that efforts should be put in place to support victims. The **EU** highlighted the negative impact of cyberbullying on children, especially girls, affecting their mental health, emotional well-being, and academic performance.

Paraguay emphasized the challenges of ensuring equitable and safe access to the digital environment while protecting children from violence and cyberbullying, especially those with disabilities. **Malawi and Israel** also emphasized the importance of protecting children with disabilities. **Paraguay** also called for active participation from children, families, communities, society, and the private sector in cyberbullying discussions. **Malaysia** emphasized the importance of education and awareness of digital

responsibility and self-restraint when using cyberspace, which are necessary for creating a safe digital environment for all, especially for children.

All NGOs were deeply concerned about cyberbullying, both online and offline, and urged the implementation of preventive measures for their protection. One NGO highlighted the importance of protecting children with disabilities from cyberbullying and emphasized the need to involve parents in the fight against it. One NGO highlighted that China actively explores prevention and treatment methods for cyberbullying among children. Another NGO noted that girls, in particular, face various forms of cyberbullying and online harassment, highlighting the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in both online and offline spaces. The existence of a gender digital divide, which impacts girls' digital skills, was also acknowledged. Another NGO emphasized the importance of recognizing that children are not a homogenous group; factors such as age, disability, gender, and other intersectional aspects influence children's diverse online experiences and their levels of vulnerability or resilience. These factors must be carefully considered when addressing cyberbullying and ensuring safe, inclusive internet access.

<u>Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (22 country delegations):</u>

Israel (on behalf of a group of countries), Austria (on behalf of a group of countries), Bulgaria (on behalf of the OIF), Paraguay (on behalf of a group of countries), Indonesia (on behalf of a group of countries), European Union, Türkiye (on behalf of a group of countries), Luxembourg, United States of America, Holy See, Malaysia, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Kazakhstan, Madagascar, France, Costa Rica, Lithuania, Republic of Korea, United Arab Emirates, Germany, Chile, Malawi.

<u>NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (8):</u>

United Nations Children's Fund, National Human Rights Council of Morocco, Make Mothers Matter, Beijing Children's Legal Aid and Research Center, UNESCO, International Planned Parenthood Federation, Catholic International Education Office, Save the Children International.

To watch the full meeting refer to UN Web TV.