

# Protection of children from the harmful impacts of pornography

## *Pornographic content can harm children*

Pornographic content can harm children. Exposure to pornography at a young age may lead to poor mental health, sexism and objectification, sexual violence, and other negative outcomes. Among other risks, when children view pornography that portrays abusive and misogynistic acts, they may come to view such behaviour as normal and acceptable.

UNICEF is alarmed by the massive quantity of pornography available online, including increasingly graphic and extreme content that is easily accessible to children of all ages. Efforts to regulate content and restrict children's access to pornography have not kept pace with technological shifts that have profoundly altered the landscape for the consumption of pornography. While many jurisdictions have effectively restricted children's access to pornography in non-digital media, including by making it illegal to distribute pornography to children or knowingly expose them to it, efforts to do the same in digital environments have not been effective.

UNICEF supports the efforts of governments to ensure that children are protected from harmful content in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the authoritative guidance from the Committee on the Rights of the Child.<sup>[1]</sup> UNICEF also recognizes the tremendous opportunities that the digital environment provides for children's learning, play, creativity, participation, and socialization. Children should be able to access and safely engage in the digital environment without being harmed by exposure to pornography. It is also important that the protection of children from



harmful content does not unjustifiably impinge on other rights children have under the Convention.<sup>[2]</sup>

UNICEF calls for comprehensive approaches to promote children's safety online. Governments should introduce and ensure that digital service providers comply with relevant guidelines, standards and codes and enforce lawful, necessary, and proportionate content moderation rules and controls.<sup>[3]</sup> While regulatory and technological initiatives are essential, they are not sufficient on their own. There is also a need to educate and empower children to navigate the digital environment with critical reasoning skills, media literacy, and information on healthy relationships. Parents, careers, teachers, communities, and others who work with children should be trained and supported to assist them in this endeavour. The perspectives of children should be given due weight in matters that affect them, including in the design and implementation of initiatives aimed at fostering online safety.<sup>[4]</sup>

UNICEF works in all regions of the world to support children's online safety. Work with governments to strengthen legislative and policy frameworks, criminal justice response and victim support is central to this goal. It also includes support to education programmes for children through school-based initiatives, peer-to-peer networks, dedicated online platforms, and mass media campaigns; and for parents, carers, teachers and other professionals who work with children, so they are better prepared to keep children safe from harm.

<sup>[1]</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, paras 54-56; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, para 48.

<sup>[2]</sup> Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, paras 54, 56, 59. See also: Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34 (2011) on Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression, CCPR/C/GC/34, para 43; Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, paras 47, 48.



[3] Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, para 56.

[4] Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12. See also: Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, para 17.

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