



CONCEPT NOTE FOR THE DAY OF GENERAL DISCUSSION 2026

Violence Against Children and Harmful Practices: Navigating the Digital Frontier

I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

1. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC/the Committee) notes the rapid expansion of digital technologies across Africa has fundamentally transformed the lives of children. Internet penetration on the continent reached approximately 43% as of 2024, and children constitute a third of all internet users globally.¹ This growth has opened significant opportunities for children's education, participation, and development. It has, however, simultaneously created new pathways for violence and exploitation. Online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), technology-facilitated gender-based violence, cyberbullying, online grooming, sextortion, and image-based abuse are among the harms confronting African children with increasing frequency and severity.
2. Technology does not generate violence against children (VAC) in isolation, rather it amplifies and accelerates existing forms of harm while enabling new ones. Harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), which are deeply rooted in social and cultural norms, are increasingly being facilitated through digital channels. As legal prohibitions tighten, perpetrators adapt by using digital tools to organize and conceal harmful practices, ranging from encrypted messaging for clandestine FGM operations to online matchmaking, mobile financial transactions, and digital disinformation campaigns that facilitate child marriage. At the same time, technology offers significant potential for countering these harms through awareness-raising, community engagement, survivor support, digital reporting mechanisms, and AI-powered interventions to identify high-risk situations.
3. The economic consequences of violence against children are substantial and underscore the urgency of action. The global annual cost of VAC was estimated at approximately USD 7 trillion, equivalent to around 9% of global GDP and exceeding the combined government expenditure on health, primary, and secondary education worldwide.² Country-level studies have recorded national costs as high as 11% of GDP, with the annual economic burden of VAC exceeding annual government health expenditure in several countries. These figures reflect direct costs to individual children, in the form of injury, illness, reduced educational attainment, and diminished life outcomes, as well as systemic costs to health, education, social welfare, and justice institutions. They also reflect intergenerational costs: children who experience

¹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2025) *The State of Broadband in Africa 2025*. Available at: https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/opb/pol/S-POL-BROADBAND.32-2025-PDF-E.pdf.

² P Pereznieto et al., *The costs and economic impact of violence against children*. London: Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <https://media.odi.org/documents/9177.pdf>



violence are more likely to perpetuate it in later life, embedding cycles of harm that compound across generations.

4. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC/the Charter), has several of provisions that apply directly to these challenges, including Article 3 (non-discrimination), Article 4 (best interests of the child), Article 5 (right to survival and development), Article 10 (privacy), Article 11 (right to education), Article 16 (protection against child abuse and exploitation), Article 21 (protection against harmful social and cultural practices), Article 27 (protection from sexual exploitation), and Article 29 (sale trafficking and abduction). At the African Union level, the Executive Council adopted the African Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy in February 2024, establishing ten policy goals spanning legal and regulatory reform, corporate accountability, and digital literacy. The AU Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection provides a further complementary framework, though its pace of ratification remains a concern. At the international level, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in particular Articles 19, 34, and 36, provides a complementary framework, reinforced by the CRC Committee's General Comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in the digital environment, which affirms that children's rights apply with equal force online and offline and calls on States to ensure child-sensitive legislation, digital literacy, and appropriate safeguards.
5. The Committee has progressively developed a normative and institutional framework to address these issues. General Comment No. 7 on Article 27 of the ACRWC calls on States Parties to take legislative, administrative, and other measures to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse in both offline and online contexts, and stresses that legal and policy frameworks must be reviewed and adapted to the rapidly changing digital landscape. In 2022, the ACERWC's Working Group on Children's Rights and Business adopted Resolution 17/2022 on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights in the Digital Sphere. The Guidelines on Ending Violence against Children also provide measures to be taken by Member States to prevent and remedy online violence against children. Furthermore, the ACERWC has previously engaged with aspects of children's rights in the digital environment through its 2019 Day of General Discussion on Online Child Sexual Exploitation, its 2022 Day of General Discussion on Children's Rights in the Digital World, and the commemoration of the 2023 Day of the African Child under the theme The Rights of the Child in the Digital Environment.
6. This Day of General Discussion does not replicate those efforts. It builds on them by addressing a dimension that has not yet received dedicated, integrated treatment: the specific intersection of the digital environment with violence against children and harmful practices. The DGD will engage with issues that have emerged or intensified since the Committee's last engagement on digital issues: the use of artificial intelligence to generate child sexual abuse material, the role of social media



algorithms in amplifying harmful content, technology-facilitated gender-based violence as a continuum of offline harm, and the documented use of digital tools to organise and conceal harmful practices such as FGM and child marriage. These issues demand dedicated analysis and targeted recommendations.

7. Importantly, this Day of General Discussion convenes at a critical strategic juncture, as the continent advances the Common African Position on Ending Violence Against Children (CAP-EVAC) in preparation for the Second Global Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children.
8. In light of this, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child intends to hold a Day of General Discussion on Violence Against Children and Harmful Practices: Navigating the Digital Frontier on 14 October 2026 during the 48th Ordinary Session of the Committee, to be held from 13-20 October 2026, in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE DAY OF THE GENERAL DISCUSSION

9. The Day of the General Discussion is guided by the following main objectives:
 - To examine the nature, scope, and evolving forms of technology-facilitated VAC and harmful practices in Africa;
 - To assess the adequacy of existing regional and national frameworks in preventing and responding to VAC and harmful practices in the digital environment, and to identify key gaps and implementation challenges;
 - To examine the risks posed by emerging technologies, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material and the algorithmic amplification of harmful content;
 - To explore the obligations and accountability of technology companies, digital platforms, and internet service providers in preventing and responding to VAC and harmful practices, and to identify effective models of corporate responsibility in the African context;
 - To identify and document good practices across Africa in preventing and responding to technology-facilitated VAC and harmful practices, including survivor-centred approaches, cross-border cooperation, and community-based interventions;
 - To discuss the roles of Member States, children, families, communities, civil society organisations, and national human rights institutions in preventing technology-facilitated VAC and harmful practices while promoting children's safe and meaningful participation in the digital environment; and
 - To develop recommendations for Member States and other key stakeholders to strengthen the prevention of and response to VAC and harmful practices in the digital environment

III. STRUCTURE OF THE DISCUSSION



10. To fulfill the objectives mentioned above, there will be four panels/sessions organized below:

- **Session I Exploring the Changing landscape of violence against children in the digital sphere:** This session will examine the evolving forms of violence against children in the digital environment, including online child sexual exploitation and abuse, online grooming, sextortion, cyberbullying, AI-generated image-based abuse, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
- **Session II Digital dimensions of harmful practices:** This session will draw on the ACERWC's Thematic Report on Harmful Practices Affecting Children in Africa to examine how practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation are facilitated, organized, normalized, or concealed through digital technologies.
- **Session III Regulating the digital space for children:** This session will explore current debates surrounding social media restrictions in the African context, the implications of artificial intelligence for children's rights, and the responsibilities of States and technology companies in ensuring children's safety while safeguarding their rights in the digital environment.
- **Session IV Accountability and enforcement:** This session will examine the measures required to ensure effective accountability for technology-facilitated violence against children, including harmful practices. It will consider the roles of law enforcement authorities, prosecutors, courts, national human rights institutions, regulatory bodies and technology companies.
- **Session V Continental commitments and the way forward:** This session will discuss the Common Africa Position on Ending Violence against Children and identify further key issues and recommendations to be raised at the upcoming Second Global Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children.
- **Session VI Outcome statement the way forward**
The draft outcome statement will be presented for discussion and adoption by the participants. This outcome statement will include key recommendations to all stakeholders regarding the protection of children in the digital sphere, as well as a draft common position in preparation for the second ministerial conference on VAC.

IV. EXPECTED OUTCOME

11. Following the discussion, the ACERWC will consider adopting an Outcome Statement reflecting the key discussions and recommendations to strengthen the protection of children from violence and harmful practices in the digital environment across Africa. The Outcome Statement will be shared with AU Member States and key stakeholders, and its findings and recommendations will be reported to the AU Policy Organs to foster enhanced political commitment across the continent.



V. DATE AND TIME

12. The Day of the General Discussion will be held during the 48th Ordinary Session of the ACERWC on 14 October 2026 from 09:00 to 17:00 South African Standard Time.

VI. PARTICIPANTS

13. Participants include:

- Child Representatives
- ACERWC - Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Children, Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage and Other Harmful Practices, and Members of the Working Group on Children's Rights and Business and Implementation of Decisions
- African Union Commission
- Representatives of Member States
- Representatives from National Human Rights Institutions
- Representatives of the Business Sector/ Tech companies
- Representatives from civil society
- AU and UN special mechanisms, such as Special Rapporteur on Women of the ACHPR, African Union Special Envoy on Children Affected by Armed Conflict, UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children

14. Partners include Spotlight Initiative (SIARP 2.0), African Child Policy Forum, Equality Now, Save the Children, and Brave Movement/Together for Girls.

VII. ESTIMATED BUDGET

The ACERWC and its partners will cover the required expenses for the organisation of the DGD including:

- Flight tickets;
- Daily sustenance allowance;
- Conference package;
- Interpretation in English, French, Portuguese and Arabic;
- Participation of technical experts from Member States; and
- Participation of child representatives

VIII. LANGUAGES

15. Simultaneous interpretations in English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic will be provided during the Day of General Discussion.

IX. CONTACT

16. For more information about the Day of General Discussion, contact ACERWC Secretariat (ACERWC-SECRETARIAT@AfricanUnion.org) copying Ms Opal Sibanda (SibandaO@AfricanUnion.org).