Online child abuse increases, media urged to join fight

By Issa Sikiti da Silva   24 Nov 2008

Online media outlets have been urged to join the fight against Internet child abuse (mostly child pornography and sex chatrooms), which is on the increase worldwide but goes underreported due to the lack of efficient mechanisms, legislation, funding and national reporting centres, especially in Africa, which faces the challenges of poverty, corruption and conflict.

Joan van Niekerk, Childline SA national coordinator, told Bizcommunity.com last week that online media outlets must constantly monitor instances of child abuse and exploitation online, quickly report these cases and immediately help remove the offending material.

Over the past five years or so, paedophiles and sex addicts (both heterosexual and gay) have been taking advantage of the climax of the digital revolution to prey on the children of the world - some as young as eight and nine - who could be seen surfing the Internet totally unsupervised, thus unknowingly making themselves casualties of the dark side of the 'digital war'.

Takes many forms

According to van Niekerk, online child abuse can take many forms. "Pornography is the well-known form of online child abuse, but contact with children through chatrooms by trying to groom them into sexual relationships is quite problematic," she explained.

The lack of statistics sadly makes it impossible to assess the seriousness of online child abuse in South Africa. But child pornography has become a multibillion dollar industry worldwide and is one of the fastest-growing businesses (16.4% increase in child abuse images online last year), according to Reuters, which quoted a report by the European Commission and the advocacy group Missing Children.

Unathi Peyana, children's rights activist and broadcasting expert, told Bizcommunity.com: "It is not only about reporting on child abuse, but it is about the media going an extra mile to educate and inform society and create awareness about children's rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the adults in order to prevent and eradicate child abuse.

"And this awareness should be an ongoing and uninterrupted process. Furthermore, media needs to report on practical cases and suggest ideas about how to identify and prevent neglect and manage the situation."

Reports have suggested that online child abuse is the most underreported crime in SA. Van Niekerk attributed this trend to multiple causes. "Children - and often their families - feel an intense of shame and embarrassment, lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and sometimes payment and incentives are made not report it."

Poor conviction rate

Asked about the conviction rate of perpetrators of online child abuse in SA, she said: "Our conviction is generally poor across all forms of abuse and online abuse is no exception."

She also said that money and existing legislation to fight online child abuse are not the biggest challenges but the expertise and will to deal with the problems are.

"The Film and Publications Board has made big strides in trying to deal with the problem and needs to be congratulated for their focused work and broad consultation," van Niekerk said.

For more information, go to www.childlinesa.org.za. Crisis line (free call): 0800 055 555.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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