

INTERNET'S DARKEST SECRET

A few months ago, five boys allegedly raped an eight-year-old girl when her parents were not at home in India. The boys including the brother of the girl all aged between nine and fourteen years told the police they had watched child rape clips on a mobile phone two days before committing the crime.

According to a case study two girls in their early teens were sexually exploited in Madagascar by a 59-year-old European man, whom police believe is part of a larger network of criminals involved in the production and online distribution of child sexual abuse material. One of the survivors testified that the man, who took nude photographs of both girls for online distribution, sexually assaulted her. He is now in prison, awaiting extradition to France.

These are not isolated cases restricted to any one country but the crime of online child sexual abuse and pornography has emerged as internet's darkest secret of contemporary times. Child sexual abuse and pornographic content that is being served over the internet is an 8 Billion USD industry in itself which does not include the exponential profits that data service providers across the globe are booking. Blocking child porn websites may seemingly be a quick-fix solution but checking and curbing the data service providers and individuals from producing, storing and disseminating such content is necessary. Decentralized anonymous networks accessed by means of special algorithms offering security and anonymity to their users through features like extra layers of encryption provide near absolute impunity. To further exacerbate the issue crypto-currencies are being increasingly preferred for making payments for child abuse material online where it is not easy to track the seller and buyer. **Every picture, every scene, every sequence of online child abuse material is a crime scene in itself which not only violates the rights of children now but also remains on the internet forever irreparably devastating the child psychologically.**

Internet is being terribly misused posing serious threat to our children's rights, health, safety and wellbeing. Therefore a unified global response to combat this crime has become absolutely imminent. **It is for this reason I am demanding for a legally binding UN convention against online child sexual abuse and pornography.** Several Nobel Laureates, Heads of States and International Bodies like OECD and Global Leaders including Chancellor Angela Merkel, President of Panama, Her Highness Sheikha Moza of Qatar among others have extended support for the cause. Pope Francis has also strongly supported the endeavor.

In 2017, The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) found 78,589 individual web addresses worldwide showing images of child abuse. Five countries that were responsible for hosting 87% of this material are: Netherlands, United States, Canada, France and Russia. However this does not tell anything about where this material was being produced or viewed. The content may be produced in one part of the world, hosted at other part and viewed in an altogether different location. Such is the complexity of this crime.

This illicit business requires low set up costs, entails easy dissemination; offers ease of payment and increased profit streams. Some studies claim that rape and extreme torture videos of infants as young as eighteen months are being traded on fully encrypted platforms for anywhere between 7000-8000 USD. Ironically this goes on multiplying. Today children are being lured and enticed on popular online chat sites and then taken to virtual private rooms for making sexually explicit performances on the webcam. Worse still, cybersex trafficking of children is proliferating as one of the most brutal forms of modern day slavery. Pedophiles are luring children and their

parents online and striking deals to sexually abuse children whenever they are travelling in that part of the world.

While ILO Convention 182; UNCRC; the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography and a few other legislations do talk about the crime, it is limited to child pornography and they are not legally binding. The proposed legally binding UN Convention that I envisage will focus on the preemption and prevention of all forms of online sexual abuse, and prioritize efforts and resources towards elimination of this crime against children. It will be backed by a new Global Task Force against online child pornography, child sexual abuse and child trafficking to provide victims with holistic support. A dedicated international toll-free helpline for reporting cases under real-time supervision of INTERPOL or any other relevant agency will also be provided for. The convention will also create a Treaty Body with a technical arm which could provide assistance to stakeholders where knowledge and expertise to deal with such cyber-crimes is inadequate. The Treaty Body will also facilitate procedures related to extradition between various countries. The Convention besides providing for a comprehensive universally agreed upon definition of online child sexual abuse and its forms will ensure a convergence of efforts at national, bilateral and international levels along with a multi-disciplinary, multi organizational and sustainable approach. This will lead to a uniformity in legal regime dealing with online sexual abuse of children, as well as uniformity in standards and efficiency of global law enforcement response.

The darkest secret of internet is riding and flaring on the wave of science and technology but we cannot allow it to occult the present and future of our innocent children. Together we have to clear this taint off the internet and make it safer and valuable for our children.

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