



Prostasia Foundation
18 Bartol Street, #995
San Francisco, CA 94133

info@prostasia.org
Ofc:+1 415 650 2557
Mbl:+1 510 480 8449
<https://prostasia.org>

Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh
Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children
OHCHR-UNOG
United Nations at Geneva
8-14 Avenue de la Paix
1211 Geneve 10, Switzerland

October 28, 2021

Dear Ms Singhateh,

Report on a practical approach to addressing the sale and sexual exploitation of children

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your next thematic report to the 49th session of the Human Rights Council, on a practical approach to addressing the sale and sexual exploitation of children.

Prostasia Foundation is a child protection organization dedicated to taking an evidence-based, prevention-focused approach to protecting children, which upholds Internet freedom, sex-positivity, and human rights. Our mission is to ensure that the elimination of child sexual abuse is achieved consistently with the highest values of the society that we would like our children to grow up in.

We focus our remarks on best practices for the prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA).

How and why prevention is overlooked

For too long, states have neglected the prevention of child sexual exploitation and abuse, in favor of allowing abuse to happen and then prosecuting the perpetrators. As the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health points out, "Each year the U.S. spends more than \$6 billion to imprison sex offenders. In contrast, last

year the federal government earmarked \$1 million for child sexual abuse prevention research.”¹

This over-emphasis on enforcement at the expense of prevention subsists because child sexual abuse is viewed, wrongly, as primarily a criminal justice issue. This frame for addressing the problem means that even when prevention is considered at all, it is primarily about the prevention of reoffending. This makes little sense once it is understood that most CSEA occurs within the home, by perpetrators who are known to and trusted by the child, and who don't have any criminal record.

Another reason why prevention is overlooked is because of the stigma associated with public messaging on this issue. Due to decades of misleading rhetoric around this topic—such as the “stranger danger” hypothesis, abstinence-only sex education that neglects the topics of consent and pleasure, and the false message that child sexual abuse is predominantly committed by pedophiles—the public has been conditioned to be suspicious of prevention messaging. Indeed, it is commonly and falsely believed that child sexual abuse is unpreventable.

By contrast, approaching CSEA as a public health problem ensures that prevention is brought to the foreground. Using this approach, prevention is considered at three levels: primary prevention targets the entire community with interventions such as education, mental health support, and social services, to reduce the risk factors that make CSEA more likely, and to increase the protective factors that make it less likely. Secondary prevention does the same but targets sub-populations that are at particular risk for offending, and tertiary prevention is about preventing further harms once offending has occurred.²

Prevention cannot exclude marginalized communities

Although ProStasia Foundation has been highlighting the neglect of CSEA prevention since our formation, in the last few years we have been joined by larger voices from the child protection sector who had been relatively silent on this topic before now. For example, in its latest Global Threat Assessment report, the WeProtect Global Alliance states that “Prevention needs to be prioritised in our response. Too often we are waiting for the abuse to take place before we act.”³

Although laudable, such statements are mere lip service until they are translated into policy and supported by funding. Unfortunately, investment in prevention is still lagging far behind expenditure on enforcement. In particular, interventions that serve marginalized and sexually stigmatized populations, such as sex workers and LGBTQ+ communities, are routinely passed over for funding, especially when they are led by those marginalized groups themselves.

In part this is because historically, many organizations and funders involved in the fight against child sexual abuse have had an agenda that includes the abolition of sex work between consenting adults, and the eradication of 18+ pornography. As such, they have advocated for policies that incentivize Internet platforms to over-remove content about sex. And rather than challenging

¹ The Hub. 2021. *Johns Hopkins Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse receives \$10.3 million grant for global prevention program*. Available at:

<https://hub.jhu.edu/2021/03/03/moore-center-receives-grant-to-prevent-child-sexual-abuse/>

² Knack, N., Winder, B., Murphy, L., & Fedoroff, J. P. (2019). Primary and secondary prevention of child sexual abuse. *International Review of Psychiatry* (Abingdon, England), 31(2), 181–194.

³ WeProtect Global Alliance. 2021. *Global Threat Assessment Report*. Available at: <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

popular stigma-based stereotypes about pedophilia and child sexual abuse, they have reinforced these false beliefs.⁴ These tactics actively interfere with prevention efforts, and disproportionately harm and exclude marginalized communities who are the first to be targeted by surveillance and censorship programs.⁵

In contrast, from the outset, Prostasia Foundation has taken an evidence-based and human rights centered approach, and championed the rights of marginalized communities to be involved as full and valued stakeholders in our society's mission to abolish child sexual abuse. We strongly believe that the traditional exclusion of stigmatized communities from this field has only served to legitimize and give cover to rampant human rights abuses against them, including the deplatforming and censorship of their speech—while doing nothing to keep children safer.

How Prostasia Foundation promotes prevention

Two of Prostasia Foundation's CSEA prevention interventions will be highlighted as examples of how clinical practice and research are neglected in the areas that are most affected by sexual stigma. Although these programs may hold the key to unlocking new advances in the prevention of child sexual abuse, more willingness must be shown by funders to invest in these stigmatized areas in order to make the programs sustainable.

1. Exploring the use of fictional and fantasy sexual outlets

Prostasia Foundation is collaborating with Dr. Gilian Tenbergen from the State University of New York (SUNY-Owego) and Dr. Rebecca Lievesley and Dr. Craig Harper from Nottingham Trent University (UK) on research into the use of fictional or fantasy sexual outlets (e.g., sex dolls, cartoons, fictional stories) among people who have sexual attractions to children.

In simple terms, the research that we are supporting asks about fantasy as a sexual outlet, and the functions it plays in sexual health, wellbeing, and risk. By working on this research, we are hoping to contribute to a more evidence-informed view of the use of fictional and fantasy sexual outlets, to promote greater wellbeing among individuals attracted to children, and to advance efforts to reduce the sexual abuse of children.

Reflecting the pervasiveness of the stigma against this line of research, the WeProtect Global Threat Assessment report cited above includes an assertion, unsupported by any evidence, that fictional outlets are associated with, and perhaps causative of, increased levels of child sexual abuse. The reality of the matter is that no such link has been empirically demonstrated before now, and that our research would help fill this gap.⁶

It is premature to be calling for the regulation of fictional and fantasy outlets before basic scientific research into their effects has been conducted. Whether, on balance, fictional

⁴ For example, by using the term pedophile as if it was synonymous with child molester, and by circulating false or misleading statistics; see eg. <https://childrescuecoalition.org/arrests-mean-300-children-safer/>.

⁵ Amicus Brief of Prostasia Foundation et al in support of Appellants in *Woodhull Freedom Foundation v United States*. February 20, 2019, available at <https://prostasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Freedom-Network-AmicusBrief.pdf>.

⁶ *Supra* note 3 at p.43, stating unequivocally that computer generated imagery “is harmful” despite the only reference being a source that acknowledges “an unfortunate dearth of research on this question.”□

outlets have a negative or a positive impact on rates of real-world child sexual abuse, or whether they make no difference, a solid evidence base is essential so that society can direct its limited child protection responsibly and effectively, rather than squandering them on a possibly misplaced morality campaign.

2. Peer support forum MAP Support Club

Previous research exploring trajectories into sexual offending among individuals attracted to children and minors (minor-attracted person; MAP) has highlighted that many individuals seek support prior to committing an offense. This is typically achieved through online peer support forums, or via health professionals.⁷ The MAP Support Club has over 800 members and operates at the nexus of these two contexts, combining an online support forum with access to professionals trained to deliver support and treatment to this population, with an ultimate goal of preventing CSEA.

One of the unique features of MSC is that it provides support not only for adults but also for teenagers. This is important because the average age at which minor attracted people discover their attractions is 14 years old, and because a large proportion of CSA is committed by adolescents against younger minors. By helping teenagers come to terms with their attractions in a harm-free and law-abiding way, we create a viable pathway for them to avoid ever offending and entering the criminal justice system.

Among the safeguards that Prostasia Foundation introduced when establishing its support for MSC, the most important is a partnership with Stop It Now, a U.S.-based charity. Thanks to this partnership, a trained helpline operator is available in MSC to support their members with specific challenges and to provide a point of referral to external services as needed. This makes MSC the *only* professionally overseen peer support service for young people who identify as minor-attracted.

Because working with minor-attracted persons is highly stigmatized and misunderstood by the public, it has fallen once again to Prostasia Foundation to shoulder this stigma by funding a key online support resource. MSC runs entirely without institutional or government funding. As such, it is in dire need of further support beyond what Prostasia Foundation can provide. One of the projects that would be supported by additional funding is a professional evaluation of its effectiveness.

Conclusion

As a small and underfunded charity, Prostasia Foundation's interventions do not even begin to cover the gamut of the best practices that can be leveraged towards the prevention of CSEA. However, the two examples highlighted above—partial as they are—do illustrate two important points that are also applicable more generally.

First, too often prevention is considered in a context that conceptualizes the perpetrators of child sexual abuse as being evil monsters who cannot be stopped except by being intercepted and incarcerated. As such, too often "prevention" interventions are simply about increasing police

⁷ See eg. Nielsen, M. H., Aaskov, L., & Larsen, J. E. (2020). When virtuous paedophiles meet online: A sociological study of a paedophile community. *Sexualities*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460720979306>

resources, or placing responsibility on children to recognize and avert their own abuse. But the reality is that child sexual abuse is preventable, and that potential perpetrators are receptive to education, social supports, and other interventions that address the underlying causes of offending. Indeed, a third of perpetrators of abuse are children themselves. We must invest more in helping potential perpetrators to make the right choices, and this means challenging the harmful stigma that paints this challenge as impossible.

Second, it is important that anti-pornography and anti-sex work campaigns are detached from the mission of CSEA prevention. Too often child safety is used as a rhetorical device by organizations campaigning for the abolition of pornography or adult sex work, and this rhetoric has had harmful and even fatal consequences for marginalized populations such as sex workers and LGBTQ+ communities. Just one of the effects of the domination of the child protection sector by anti-pornography groups has been the stigmatization of research into the impacts of victimless fictional sexual outlets, as being conducted by Prostasia Foundation.

As you write your report on a practical approach to addressing the sale and sexual exploitation of children, we would invite you to consider whether the best practices being advanced also advance the rights and interests of marginalized groups, whether they are truly evidence-based, and whether they are focused on preventing harm or merely enforcing moral purity. As a society, we will only make progress towards the elimination of CSEA if we are able to adopt a stigma-free approach to the problem that is grounded in sound science and public health principles.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to provide our input to your upcoming report. We would be pleased to put our expert team at your disposal to answer any questions that you may have.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Malcolm', with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Jeremy Malcolm
Executive Director