

## UN NGO Committee Considers the Impact of Harmful Social Media on Families

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**United States** -- Commemorating the UN International Day of Families, UPF organized the virtual program "Families and New Technology: The Challenging Impact of Social Media" on May 19, 2021. Two UN ambassadors and three experts examined the prevalence and impact of pornography and other harmful technologies on children and families and then introduced practical approaches for prevention or protection from this encroachment.

The theme for this year's UN International Day of Families was "Families and New Technologies." Certainly, there are many positive uses of technology for families, especially during the shutdowns of Covid-19. However, the considerable increase in internet use has greatly raised the risk of exposure to pernicious social media and pornography.



**H.E. Mohamed Al Hassan**, permanent representative of Oman to the United Nations, recognized that although there are many benefits to new technology that substantially improve lives, but it may be misused in an unsupervised, uncontrolled fashion, clearly not designed for fostering human well-being. He stated that much of today's media is violent and sexualizing, striking destructive blows at the core of family-centered values and traditions. The ambassador said this new technology is a "daily onslaught on the family and family values." The lure of this material can be addictive.

Referring to Kaiser Foundation research, the ambassador reported on the high and increasing use of technology at younger and younger ages, with children from eight to ten years of age using technology over seven hours a day, and 11 hours a day for adolescents. Ambassador Hassan recommended that we

use research to prove the negative impact of sexualized media and make policies accordingly. He warned that it is clear that "in order to destroy society, all that needs to be done is destroy the family, and that is exactly what is being done." With passion, he implored us to "not stand idly by or do nothing" but instead to overcome our differences and collaborate to combat this huge threat. Ambassador Hassan concluded in reminding us, "This is a fight worth fighting, for fighting for the family is fighting for humanity."

**H.E. Mohamed Ibrahim Elbahi**, charge d'affaires, Mission of Sudan to the United Nations, spoke with great appreciation for the family, both his own and as the source for raising the good men and women that all societies need. He argued that as the natural and fundamental base of society, the "family is the means and ends" for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and "the family has a focal role to play" in order to achieve these goals. The family deserves protection from governments, civil society, and the United Nations. However, any existing protection is weak, occasional, and sporadic. H. E. Elbahi warned that the reality is "the required protections still remain a distant dream." Recognizing the widespread weakening of the family, he called for "relentless efforts to persistently support the family by direct and indirect means."



**Andrew Love**, co-founder and content designer, introduced his organization, High Noon, which educates adolescents, young adults, and couples about the harmful effect pornography has on mental and social health. In over 30 countries, High Noon has provided a highly effective support system and educational tools to help individuals become free of porn use and attain greater happiness, sexual integrity and vibrant relationships.

Mr. Love gave alarming statistics of the prevalence of pornography viewing and the younger and younger ages at which children are exposed. He shared an experience in a remote rural area of Mongolia seeing a five-year-old watching porn on his phone. He explained that pornography is not the only problem because, with the popularity of TikTok, "the sexualization of children is becoming the norm." He explained that some claim pornography is not addictive but stated from his years of experience most users find it very hard to stop when they want to, even though they experience the habit as negatively effecting social relations, self-esteem, and work productivity. According to Mr. Love, pornography has "removed the human person, and removed humanity from relationships, and that is why we have gotten in so much trouble." The solution to this problem, as his programs show, is always genuine and healthy heart-to-heart intimacy, as that is what we all want and need.

Referring to a vast amount of data, **Erica Komisar** -- parenting guidance expert, family therapist and author -- stated that 45% of adolescents feel overwhelmed by pressures of social media, leading to hyper-focus on external issues, unrealistic self-evaluation and low self-esteem. She said that 59% of adolescents have experienced cyberbullying, resulting in a dramatic rise in depression and anxiety. The research also shows that sexually explicit content in technology results in preoccupation with sex, aggressive behavior especially toward girls, earlier and earlier sexual debut, unrealistic expectations for sex, and heightened risk taking. She noted that brain maturation, impulse control and moral judgment are not complete until around age 25. The immature adolescent brain and undeveloped emotional regulation, she pointed out, is therefore highly susceptible to addictions such as to pornography, gaming, or eating disorders. She clarified that adolescents that suffer from attachment issues stemming from poor emotional connections in their early childhood are the ones most vulnerable to addictions and that pornography can lead to poor attachment and relationship difficulties in adulthood.

**Kristen Jenson**, founder of Protect Young Minds, addressed the need to equip parents with information,

tools and support in order to protect children or mitigate the harm from pornography. She gave an overview of the wealth of materials, handouts, and two books she created in her determination to help families strengthen their defenses against the invasion of sexualizing materials and media. She stated that it is most important for a child to have at least one adult with whom they feel love and trust. Children also need to learn, ideally early on from their parents, the value of responsible loving relationships and sexual integrity, as well as the difference between sex with love and pornography. She explained that building inner strength from having healthy, loving relationships creates an internal defense or emotional resilience. Teaching tech accountability such as through clear rules and guidance at home is also an important component for protecting children.



**Taj Hamad**, vice president, UPF, introduced our ambassador speakers and later closed the session. Lynn Walsh, director, UPF's Office of the Family, moderated the panel and questions and answers. Approximately, 65 people participated in the webinar. In closing, Dr. Hamad read a fitting quote from Pope Francis: "Every threat to the family is a threat to society. The future of humanity passes through the family. So, protect your family, see in them the country's greatest treasure and nurture them always."

