ACERWC
African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

ACERWC Secretariat | **E-mail:** acerwc-secretariat@africanunion.org
Tel: +266 52 01 00 18 | **P.O.Box:** 13460 Maseru,
Address: Nala House, Balfour Road, Maseru
Kingdom of Lesotho

OUTCOME STATEMENT OF THE DAY OF GENERAL DISCUSSION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND HARMFUL PRACTICES: NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

14 October 2026, Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho

1. **Guided** by the international and continental legal and policy frameworks on the protection of children from violence and harmful practices, including in the digital environment, in particular the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC); the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and its Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa; the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention); the AU Convention on Ending Violence against Women and Girls; the AU Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy; the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) General Comment No. 7 on Article 27 of the ACRWC; the ACERWC's Resolution 17/2022 on the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights in the Digital Sphere; the ACERWC Guidelines on Ending Violence Against Children; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; and the CRC Committee's General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment;
2. **Welcoming** the adoption of the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on human rights in the context of digital technologies and the rights of women and girls, co-sponsored by African States including Rwanda and Senegal;
3. **Recalling** the ACERWC's previous engagement with children's rights in the digital environment, including 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*, and noting that the present Day of General Discussion builds on these milestones by addressing the intersection of the digital environment with violence against children and harmful practices;
4. **Acknowledging** that the expansion of digital technologies in Africa, where internet penetration has reached over 40% and children make up a significant portion of the online population, reflects the global trend whereby children constitute approximately one-third of all internet users and has created significant opportunities for children's education, participation, development, and civic engagement;
5. **Expressing grave concern** that digital technologies expose children to various forms of online harm, including child sexual exploitation and abuse, online grooming, sextortion, child sexual abuse material, cyberbullying, image-based abuse, harmful content, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, violations of children's privacy, exposure to drug abuse, recruitment into armed groups, and grooming for violent

extremism; and recognizing that digital technologies may enable, facilitate, and exacerbate such violence and harm, amplifying their scale, reach, and severity;

6. **Noting with grave concern** the emergence of artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material, as well as social media algorithms and platform designs that amplify harmful content, thereby increasing children's exposure to harm and creating growing challenges that outpace existing legal, technical and institutional responses in Africa;
7. **Further concerned** that children in Africa are exposed to harm not only as users of digital technologies but also in their production, including mineral extraction, device assembly and data work;
8. **Further recognizing** that digital technologies may facilitate harmful practices and amplify the discriminatory norms that sustain them, while also enabling access to information, support and collective action; and emphasising the need for stronger evidence on these dynamics to inform prevention and response;
9. **Mindful** of the vital role of parents, caregivers, and families in supporting children's safety in digital spaces, while recognising that a lack of technical awareness, intergenerational digital divides, and barriers to open communication often leave caregivers ill-equipped to identify online threats, detect early signs of grooming or distress, and guide children safely in digital spaces;
10. **Further recognizing** that technology-facilitated violence causes enduring mental, emotional, and neurological trauma; affirming, in line with the forthcoming African Union Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Guidelines, that such harms constitute severe violations of children's bodily and mental integrity under Article 16 of the ACRWC;
11. **Acknowledging** the steps taken by AU Member States to strengthen legal, policy and institutional frameworks for the protection of children from violence and harmful practices, including in the digital environment, while noting that gaps remain in addressing the evolving nature, pace and scale of technology-facilitated violence against children, particularly in implementation, enforcement and cross-border cooperation;
12. **Gravely concerned** about gaps in the accountability of technology companies, digital platforms, and internet service providers operating on the continent in preventing and responding to violence against children and harmful practices; ensuring sufficient safety-by-design measures; and in cooperation with national law enforcement and judicial authorities;
13. **Acknowledging** promising good practices and initiatives across Africa in preventing and responding to technology-facilitated violence against children and harmful practices, including survivor-centered approaches, community-based interventions, digital reporting mechanisms, child and youth-led initiatives, and cross-border and multi-stakeholder cooperation;
14. **Taking note** of the 2026 UNICEF and GSMA-supported U-Report poll gathering responses from 50,563 children and youth across 51 African countries, which revealed that while connectivity is valued for learning and expression, 23% of respondents felt their safety and developmental needs are rarely or never considered by digital platforms; and reaffirming the critical role of children and young people as active partners, researchers, and advocates in co-designing digital safety solutions;
15. **Conscious** that this Day of General Discussion convenes at a critical strategic milestone, as Africa advances the Common African Position on Ending Violence

Against Children (CAP-EVAC) and prepares to champion the continental position on this agenda at the Second Global Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children;

We, the participants of the Day of General Discussion on *Violence Against Children and Harmful Practices: Navigating the Digital Frontier,* held during the 48th Ordinary Session of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) on 14 October 2026, in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho, hereby:

16. Urge Member States of the African Union to:

I. Accelerate the ratification and domestication of the Malabo Convention and enact or review comprehensive national child protection and cybercrime legislation to explicitly criminalize, among others, online child sexual exploitation, including AI-generated abuse material, grooming, sextortion, technology-facilitated trafficking, online recruitment in conflict, online sale of drugs, and digital dimensions of harmful practices, in alignment with the ACRWC, the AU Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy, and the Model Law on Child Online Safety;

II. Establish and strengthen institutional mechanisms for the coordinated prevention and response to violence against children and harmful practices in the digital environment, including by strengthening cross-sectoral coordination between child protection, digital regulation, financial oversight authorities and other relevant actors;

III. Develop and finance costed national plans for preventing and responding to violence against children and harmful practices, including in the digital environment; integrate these commitments into national and sectoral budgets and medium-term expenditure frameworks; and track allocations and expenditure;

IV. Undertake or commission research on the nature, scope, and evolving forms of technology-facilitated violence against children and harmful practices within their jurisdictions in consultation with children and young people, to inform evidence-based legal, policy, and programmatic responses;

V. Build the technical and investigative capacity of law enforcement agencies, frontline workers, prosecutors, and the judiciary to detect, investigate, and prosecute technology-facilitated violence against children, including through child-friendly, specialized cybercrime and digital forensics units, and enhancing regional and cross-border cooperation mechanisms;

VI. Strengthen and sustainably finance the social service workforce, including social workers and community-based child protection workers, through competency-based education, continuing professional development, supervision and appropriate deployment; equip this workforce to prevent, identify and respond to technology-facilitated violence and harmful practices, and connect children to coordinated support across online and offline settings;

VII. Establish or strengthen child-friendly, confidential, safe, and accessible reporting and referral mechanisms, including universal national 116 Child Helplines equipped with appropriate digital detection tools, and ensure that child victims of technology-facilitated violence receive immediate, free, and comprehensive survivor-centered medical care, legal aid, and specialized, trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support, without conditioning support on

participation in criminal justice proceedings, and while safeguarding their right to privacy;

VIII. Develop and fund nationwide public awareness campaigns and community-based digital parenting initiatives to inform parents, foster caregivers, and educators about emerging digital risks, online grooming, and trafficking tactics; and equip families with practical tools and guidance to foster open, trust-based, and non-punitive communication with children regarding their online experiences;

IX. Invest in evidence-based programmes that challenge the social norms that enable violence against children, address perpetrator behaviour, and provide help-seeking services for people at risk of offending;

X. Integrate comprehensive and age-appropriate digital literacy and online safety education into school curricula and community-based programs targeting children, parents, caregivers, and educators;

XI. Enact and enforce statutory data privacy protection safeguards that strictly prohibit the unauthorized collection, commercial monetization, algorithmic profiling, or unlawful sharing of children's personal data, location records, and images;

XII. Ensure that measures to protect children in the digital environment uphold their rights to privacy, dignity, freedom of expression, participation and access to information, and are lawful, necessary, proportionate, age-appropriate and assessed for their effects on inclusion;

XIII. Ensure that national justice systems prevent secondary traumatization of child victims during digital evidence collection, and align statutory frameworks with evolving standards to effective remedies, including through a children’s digital ombudsperson, collective and representative actions on behalf of children, and a fund for remedy and redress financed from regulatory penalties;

XIV. Establish or designate an independent regulator for child online safety with powers to audit algorithms and AI systems, require information, impose fines proportionate to global turnover and hold senior executives personally liable for serious failures, and require digital platforms and technology companies to implement safety-by-design, appropriate content moderation, transparency and reporting measures and cooperation with national authorities;

XV. Require technology companies offering services to children within their jurisdiction to appoint a local legal representative, not to use of terms of service, foreign forum or arbitration clauses to avoid national obligations, and guarantee that children in Africa receive the same safety defaults, response times and remedies as children in other regions;

XVI. Require child rights impact assessments before digital products and major features are launched, require engagement-maximizing design features to be switched off by default for children, and impose specific duties on AI companions and AI agents, including a prohibition on simulated romantic or sexual relationships with children, the ability to reverse actions taken by AI agents, and human review of automated decisions affecting children;

XVII. Require digital platforms to apply heightened protection for children at heightened risk, including by detecting and disrupting trafficking and smuggling offers aimed at children on the move, removing content that recruits or glorifies children in armed conflict swiftly while preserving evidence for accountability mechanisms, and detecting grooming for violent extremism in African and referring identified children to child protection services;

XVIII. Ensure the meaningful, safe and age-appropriate participation of children in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of laws, policies, and programs addressing violence against children and harmful practices in the digital environment;

XIX. Implement the CAP-EVAC, including its digital dimensions, and integrate pledges on preventing and addressing violence against children in the digital environment in the Second Global Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children, ensuring that such pledges are specific, time-bound and costed, name a lead institution and include at least one outcome indicator showing whether children are safer.

17. Urge the African Union Commission to:

I. Accelerate efforts to promote the ratification, domestication, and implementation of the ACRWC, and the Malabo Convention by Member States;

II. Support Member States in operationalizing the African Child Online Safety and Empowerment Policy and its Model Law on Child Online Safety, including through technical assistance, guidance, and capacity building;

III. Support regional cooperation on social service workforce development through partnerships among governments, training institutions and professional bodies, including shared learning resources, practice supervision and South–South exchange;

IV. Engage technology companies and digital platforms whose services are accessible to or impact children in Africa, to establish clear expectations and accountability mechanisms regarding child safety, content moderation that is responsive to African languages and contexts, and support the establishment of a continental network of online safety regulators, with a shared technical unit and mutual recognition of enforcement decisions, so that compliance with child safety obligations becomes a condition of access to African markets;

V. Ensure that the digital dimensions of violence against children and harmful practices are integrated into the operationalisation of the CAP-EVAC and in Africa's engagement with the Second Global Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children.

18. Call upon the ACERWC to:

I. Adopt and disseminate the present Outcome Statement to AU Member States, the African Union Commission, technology companies, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders, and report its findings and recommendations to the relevant AU policy organs;

II. Undertake a continental assessment of violence against children and harmful practices in the digital environment, building on existing research and child- and youth-led evidence; identify gaps in prevention, service capacity and accountability, and develop context-specific recommendations without duplicating existing evidence-generation efforts;

III. Initiate the development of a normative standard, such as a General Comment, on children's rights in the digital environment and the prevention of and response to technology-facilitated violence and harmful practices, under Articles 10, 16, 21,

27 and 29 of the ACRWC, covering both children's use of technology and their role in its production, developed with children;

IV. Systematically raise the issue of technology-facilitated violence against children and harmful practices with States Parties through the State Party reporting mechanism, country visits, seminars and other forums with guidance on actions to be undertaken, including a dedicated digital environment section in the State reporting guidelines;

V. Advance its work on a continental benchmark for investment and budgeting for children, with particular attention to child protection, and use this work to support dialogue with States Parties on adequate, equitable and sustainable financing, including for the protection of children in the digital environment;

VI. Strengthen coordination among its Special Rapporteurs, Working Groups, and relevant AU and UN human rights mechanisms, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, the AU Special Envoy on Children Affected by Armed Conflict, and the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, on matters concerning violence against children and harmful practices in the digital environment; and

VII. Foster exchanges among State Parties on best practices in preventing and addressing violence against children and harmful practices in the digital sphere through laws, policies, administrative procedures, court proceedings, among others.

19. Urge technology companies, digital platforms, and internet service providers to:

I. Embed safety-by-design principles, age-appropriate measures, and child-centred risk assessments into the design, development, and deployment of digital products and services used by or likely to be used by children in Africa;

II. Strengthen content moderation systems and capacity to protect children, including proactive detection and removal of all types of child sexual abuse material, harmful content, and content that facilitates or incites violence against children and harmful practices including child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM);

III. Establish and maintain accessible, safe and child-friendly reporting and grievance mechanisms, ensure timely action on reports, provide or facilitate access to effective remedies and redress for affected children, and cooperate with competent national authorities, including law enforcement, in accordance with applicable law;

IV. Designate a high-level officer accountable for child safety, give safety staff the authority to stop the launch of unsafe products, link executive remuneration to child safety outcomes rather than engagement, protect whistleblowers, and publish transparency data for each African country, including government requests to restrict access or remove content;

V. Invest in and support digital literacy, online safety, and prevention initiatives targeting children, parents and caregivers, and educators across the continent, in partnership with governments and other relevant actors;

VI. Strengthen constructive engagement with continental and national regulatory processes, including the operationalization of the African Child Online Safety and

Empowerment Policy, and publish regular, disaggregated reports on child safety incidents and responses in Africa;

20. Call upon National Human Rights Institutions, Civil Society Organizations and Partners to:

I. Through initiatives, programmes and partnerships such as the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme (SIARP 2.0), support the ACERWC, the African Union Commission, Regional Economic Communities, and State Parties in developing and promoting regional standards to prevent and address technology-facilitated violence and related online risks for children, particularly girls;

II. Undertake awareness-raising initiatives and training to educate children, families, educators, and communities about the risks associated with, and the safe use of, digital technologies, and counter misconceptions and narratives that normalise or promote harmful practices through digital platforms;

III. Document, research, and share evidence on technology-facilitated violence against children and harmful practices, including evidence generated through child and youth-led engagements, to inform policy and programmatic responses;

IV. Provide comprehensive support to child victims of online sexual exploitation and other forms of violence, including assistance with reporting, access to legal aid and psychosocial support, and support for content removal;

V. Facilitate the meaningful participation of children in decision-making processes concerning violence against children in the digital sphere;

VI. Strengthen coordination among civil society organizations, National Human Rights Institutions, United Nations agencies, and other partners working on child online protection and harmful practices, to enhance the coherence, reach, and impact of prevention and response efforts;

VII. Bring to the attention of the ACERWC issues of violence against children and harmful practices against children perpetrated through digital platforms to enable the ACERWC to monitor the progress and challenges, including through communications under article 44 of the ACRWC where States Parties fail to regulate digital platforms.

Adopted at the Day of General Discussion on *'Violence Against Children and Harmful Practices: Navigating the Digital Frontier,'* held during the 48th Ordinary Session of the ACERWC, in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho, on the 14th of October 2026.