

Speech Text for Marianne Clark-Hattingh, UNICEF Representative to Malaysia and Special Representative to Brunei Darussalam

At the “BRUNEI DARUSSALAM NATIONAL CHILDREN FORUM 2017”

November 2017

Introduction

Good morning,

- Yang Berhormat Pehin Datu Lailaraja Mejar Jeneral Dato Paduka Seri Haji Awang Halbi bin Haji Mohd Yussof – Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports
- Yang Mulia Dato Paduka Awan Hadji Mohamed Juanda bin Arashid, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Culture, Youth & Sports
- Yang Mulia Datin Paduka Dr. Hajah Norlila, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry Of Culture, Youth & Sports
- Members of the Media,
- Distinguished Guests,
- Ladies and Gentlemen,
- Young people of Brunei.

It's such a pleasure for me to be here today and to have the opportunity of addressing young people in Brunei Darussalam – thank you so much for inviting me.

Keynote theme and SOWC 2017

I have been asked to focus this keynote on children living in the digital age.

It coincides directly with the theme of UNICEF's annual flagship report; The State of the World's Children.

This year the global report will have a thematic focus on children in the digital age. Children today are digital natives, growing up with the internet and using it in ways which we adults are hardly able to comprehend or keep up with!

Children in the Digital Age

Challenges in COP - ICT and Brunei children

Access to digital technologies and platforms provide incredible opportunities for education, entertainment, entrepreneurship and innovation.

This is especially true for a country like Brunei. You have embraced digital technology and have become an incredibly connected country with over 122% mobile penetration. There are 320,000 users of the internet which makes up 74% of the total population in Brunei. The

Government of Brunei has also had the foresight to invest B\$230 million in a “Fibre-to-the-Home” broadband project ensuring that you are infrastructure-ready.

With all these opportunities, it is easy to be exuberant about the future. However we should remember that equally, the risks one can be exposed to are real: online harassment, sexual exploitation, targeted advertising, privacy concerns, self-generated sexual content and easy access to inappropriate content.

Cyber bullying

The ease of access to the internet provides a platform for better communication and exchange of information.

Increasingly, social media is being used by children to communicate, share pictures, stories, and chat. It is also on these virtual platforms that cyber bullying and harassment occur and where sexual predators and paedophiles lurk.

Child on child violence is a rising trend. Bullying can affect children in profound ways. The boundary lines of what is virtual and what is real is ever more blurred. What happens online spills over offline and can affect a child’s mental well-being, self-esteem and at times lead to suicide.

Efforts must be taken to stop bullying whether online or offline – as users of these platforms you should be mindful of what you post about others – think before you “Speak”, practice empathy and kindness and when you see it – speak out! Ask yourself “should I really be posting this? Will someone be hurt or offended if I do?” Take those 10 seconds to review your message and ask yourself those questions before you post.

Online Sexual Abuse

Another alarming fact is the proliferation in the rise of online violence and sexual abuse against children.

Brunei has seen an increase in internet mediated sexual assault. Girls in particular report using the internet to chat and meet with strangers, getting sexually assaulted as a consequence. The number of these cases involving children below 16 has also increased. For many of these cases, the perpetrators are children themselves.

Of course, violence against children existed well before the digital age. However, digital technology and the Internet provide new opportunities for abusers and facilitate contact. Those who prey on the vulnerabilities of children and young people can now reach them on a scale that was inconceivable prior to the access provided by the Internet.

Predator in my Phone

If you don’t mind, I would like to share with you an example of a very inspiring group of young people in Malaysia.

There is a team of young journalists who call themselves R.AGE.

Beyond just reporting on issues, this group of young journalists make it their mission to advocate for social justice and change.

R.AGE has championed many human rights issues such as trafficking, racism, migrant workers and sexual abuse.

In 2016, R.AGE launched an online campaign called Predator in My Phone to raise public awareness about internet-related sexual crimes against children in Malaysia; and to call for laws to protect children from cyber-sexual grooming.

The journalists spent 6 months undercover to investigate how Malaysian men were exploiting digital technology to sexually abuse children. Their reporting caused public outrage which they were able to channel to make meaningful change in legislation.

While they may just be young reporters, they make advocacy and social justice their mission.

We have a lot to learn from their example and their leadership. They may be young, but they are punching above their weight to make the change they want to see for their peers, their community, and their country.

They are living proof that young people can be powerful agents of social change.

Other risks

Research has shown that there is delayed speech development when children under the age of 2 are exposed to devices such as tablets and phones. The way they make friends and socialised has changed; there is no longer a difference between what is “real” and what is “virtual”.

Additionally, children expose themselves to unnecessary risks when they share too much on social media. Selfies and geo-tagging may leave you vulnerable to dangerous situations if this information falls into the hands of people with bad intentions.

Photos can be used and shared – and we don’t know by whom or for what purpose. Whatever is posted out there stays in the public domain and can be used or shared by anyone. Not to mention the dark web. So be mindful of what you post on line.

These are just some of the unintended consequences of the high penetration rate of online users in the country. But one which can be mitigated with the right education and guidance.

Commend the Government of Brunei

I would like to commend the Government of Brunei on its proactive measures for making the internet a safer space for its children and young population.

Brunei is the first country in the region to establish a Child Online Protection Framework built upon the International Telecommunications Union - Child Online Protection Initiative. You led the way in 2013, when many countries were still grappling with the situation.

Legislation in Brunei now criminalizes the possession of child pornography, causing a person under 16 to watch a sexual act, commercial sex with a person under 18 in both inside and outside Brunei, and sexual grooming, among others. These provisions are among the most comprehensive and up-to-date in the region.

Also exemplary are the reporting and remedial mechanisms in place for protecting children. The Child Helpline 141 is exemplary for being a full member of Child Helpline International and is listed among emergency telephone numbers provided in national telephone directories. Brunei trained school counsellors, health personnel, and village leaders who consult with relevant government agencies, working together to protect children.

Even so, there is more work to be done in and among the different layers of the internet. Internet Service Providers should be required to report child abuse materials to law enforcement agencies or other relevant authorities when they learn of it on their own networks.

The Government of Brunei Darussalam has also taken the lead in educating children on the importance of practicing safety, security and good ethics while surfing the internet. The 21st Century National Education System (SPN21), truly is a forward looking one which will ensure your students are ready for the future.

It is imperative that the children are equipped with the proper knowledge in order to encourage them to be confident digital citizens.

Technological advancement has ushered in the 4th industrial revolution. 65% of jobs in the future are not known. The education system needs to help children acquire 21st century skills based on capacity for self-learning, adaptation, analytical and problem solving skills.

The state has proven itself long-sighted in their vision and progressive in their actions; equipping the next generation, allowing them to step confidently into the future.

Role of parents/Adults

The pace in which technology is developing may seem overwhelming. In particular to those of us from a “different generation” who may be a bit uncertain about what to make of it.

Digital parenting is an intimidating idea. Many adults lack understanding and confidence to do this because their children are often more technologically savvy than they are. Just when we get used to one new app – oops there’s another. Young people often have several social media accounts too – one for the “parent” or family and one for friends. They are hardly on FB anymore – precisely because their parents are!

But – don’t worry – it need not be so intimidating.

SOWC on Children in the Digital Age

UNICEF, in the State of the World Children’s Report has highlighted five principles which should guide our actions for creating a better digital space for children.

This call to action is aimed at governments; the technology industry; researchers and the media; teachers; parents and caregivers; and children themselves. This is in recognition and in response to children's needs in the digital space. As outlined in this report, five principles hold the promise of a better digital experience for every child:

1. Provide online access so every child can access the many benefits
2. Give every child the skills to use the digital space for learning, play and participation
3. Protect every child from harm online and safeguard their privacy and identity
4. Empower children to keep themselves safe online, build resilience and respect other users
5. Promote technological innovations that are ethically designed and benefit every child

Parents are the first line of protection for their children. Therefore their role in providing guidance to their children about safe access is key.

Parents and elders need to understand that to enjoy the full benefits of the internet while mitigating its risks, there needs to be **mediation** rather than restriction. For example, we should be more concerned about the content of the digital experience rather than a focus on screen time. 'Restrictive' parental mediation, may keep children safer online. But it limits the quality of their online experience and is in any case very hard to enforce! Kids have more than one digital device.

Children, meanwhile would need to understand the risks in addition to the opportunities they would enjoy online so they can make informed decisions and choices and are equipped to safely navigate and interact in the digital space.

We need to engage in more open dialogue about online activity with children. Gaps can be bridged if parents, elders and teachers demonstrate interest, engage in honest discussion, and show a willingness to respect children's exploration of the Internet. This may include the calculated risk that children may encounter inappropriate material.

Our kids' safety while being 'online' is built by the conversations and trust that we have with them. That's how they develop their life skills and grow their resilience in the online world// schools, and private sector companies – such as internet and mobile providers also have a role to play. .

CRC and Conclusion

Brunei as signatory to CRC

Looking at the bigger picture, Brunei has made significant strides in protecting children; ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995 and committing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

In protecting the best interests of children, Brunei has made education compulsory for every child for at least 9 years. In addition, the healthcare provided puts the needs of women and children first.

Despite these advances, there is always more to do in ensuring children are safe from all forms of violence, that they are given opportunities to exercise their right to expression and to be heard; to ensure that the best interest of the child is always paramount in the decisions and policies we make; a juvenile justice system that protects and rehabilitates, changing mind sets on child marriage, and banning all forms of corporal punishment to name but a few.

Challenges to Brunei's children/Youths

I'd like to close by challenging the young people here today by posing you some questions for thought.

First of all, do you feel your opinions matter, and that they are being considered in a genuine and meaningful manner? I would like to encourage you to speak up.

Articulate your concerns, worries, as well as your hopes and dreams for the world you want to live in.

If you don't, speak up, someone else will speak on your behalf. They may not necessarily understand your needs and concerns. You yourselves know best what affects you

Express your views constructively – but don't just be digital warriors – also propose solutions and engage in shaping the world you want to see.

Secondly, are your rights as presented in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, written and incorporated into the laws, policies and programmes of the country? Young people today need to get involved, to be aware, and play an active role in how these laws and policies are shaped. Your leaders and state authorities are obliged to create conditions and mechanisms which enable your voice to be heard. This Children's Forum is their commitment to doing so.

You are here, and this is your opportunity to share your views.

Ask your leaders to allow you to be involved meaningfully. Write letters, petitions and proposals. Do not sit back waiting for change to happen. Rather, seek out avenues to be involved – through youth groups, civil society organisations, and state-led activities.

Children should be actively consulted and involved in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes that affect them – and if none exists, ask that they be developed.

And when you speak up consider those that have no voice - those living with disabilities, children from minority backgrounds, and those marginalised by their circumstances and vulnerable to abuse.

Last but perhaps most importantly, I would like to challenge you to arm yourself with the **knowledge of your rights**. Understand the Convention on the Rights of the Child and know what it provides.

Be involved in social mobilisation. Study the development of rights, gender equality and tolerance for religious and ethnic minorities. That way, you will strengthen the bonds that hold the social fabric together and foster a peaceful, prosperous and tolerant society.

But also remember that rights come with responsibilities. In particular we must remember respecting the rights of others; embrace diversity and tolerate differences.

Conclusion

In the past years, UNICEF has extended its support to civil society organisations and the government of Brunei Darussalam, through consultations, providing expertise and listening to the voice of the youth. We are ready to continue our relationship, providing our support, knowledge and capacities in child rights, wherever necessary.

The state has an obligation to do its part to promote a conducive environment that enables their young to develop to their full potential. With the support and partnership of civil society organisations and the private sector, more can be done. Not leaving behind the children, who are the inheritors of this world we live in, and should have a hand in shaping it.

Brunei Darussalam has proven to be a leader in child rights. You can make a big impact in the region and beyond; inspiring others to follow your lead as you do more for children.

And to the young people here today I say – voice out – engage, enjoy the benefits of the internet, educate yourselves of the risks and become resilient and empowered to navigate safely.

Terima Kasih.