

A EUROPEAN RESPONSE: THE EU AND CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Most children who call ChildLine, the UK's child helpline, about sexual abuse, know their abusers. Of those who called in 2007-8, 59 per cent of these abusers were family members, and 29 per cent were acquaintances.¹ So why is this an issue for the EU?

Child sexual abuse increasingly has European and international dimensions. Earlier this month, Spanish police announced the country's 'biggest child pornography raid' ever, revealing a network that disseminated images of child abuse in 75 countries worldwide. However, the international online trade in abuse images and the comparative ease with which these images are circulated fuels the sexual abuse of children. Behind every child abuse image is an abused child.

The effortlessness with which sex offenders can move between EU countries demands the sharing of vital criminal records information. In 2004 it was revealed that Michel Fourniret, who had convictions for a series of murders and sexual assaults against children in France, had moved to Belgium where he got a job working in a school. His new employers knew nothing of his past, and he went on to commit more murders and sexual assaults against children.

On the one hand, the EU has made progress on a variety of fronts. A 2004 framework decision obliges European States to criminalise child pornography and related exploitation offences. On protecting children online the EU has played a leading role, in particular through its Safer Internet Programme. A range of measures to combat human trafficking affect child as well as adult victims. Work to improve the exchange of criminal record information between Member States has acknowledged its particular importance in relation to preventing sexual abuse of children.

Despite this progress, there is still much more that needs to be done. These initiatives are fragmented, with no comprehensive EU approach towards combating child sexual abuse. The main driver is still combating crime rather than protecting children. Arguably this contributed to the failure by Member States last year to adopt legislation to protect children across Europe from sex offenders banned from working with children in one country.

A recent NSPCC report² showed that the reluctance by EU Member States to move from words to action is a symptom of diverging cultural and legal approaches to child protection. States question whether a sex offender's criminal record should be kept for a lifetime, as some countries do, or should it be deleted after ten years? At what age can a child consent to sexual activity? Some Member States say twelve, others seventeen.

This is not an excuse for inaction. The NSPCC wants to see MEPs urging all Member States to fully implement the 2004 framework decision, including in the report on its implementation which is due to be adopted early in 2009 (Angelilli report). The Commission is currently reviewing this legislation. MEPs and governments should support its extension including online 'grooming' of children, as well as measures to underpin improved cooperation to protect children from known sex offenders who move between countries. Linked to this, the EU should support more exchange of expertise between Member States, such as on how to prevent child sexual abuse by people working with children.

The Parliament should also wholeheartedly approve next week the EU's new internet programme. Just one important task for the EU is to engage on a European and global basis with industry, for example social networking sites and mobile handset manufacturers, to ensure they help protect children from online abuse.

¹ Childline data 2007/2008 – unpublished

² "Protecting children from sexual abuse in Europe: Safer recruitment of workers in a border-free Europe" Fitch, Spencer Chapman and Hilton, NSPCC, 2007. Downloadable at www.nspcc.org.uk/europe

All 27 Member States have ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which gives children rights to protection from all forms of violence and abuse. Cooperation between EU countries to implement these rights is essential, based on clear domestic commitment to child protection

Decision-makers owe this to all those children who call child helplines about sexual abuse, and the many who are abused but don't seek help.

