

Germany: Special Rapporteur calls for consistent approach to child protection across the country

BERLIN (25 October 2024) – Germany has done significant work towards prevention and protection of children from sale, sexual abuse and exploitation, a UN expert said today, urging the country adopt a national child protection strategy with an oversight mechanism to ensure consistency and harmony of approaches and implementation across the country.

In a [statement](#) at the end of a 12-day visit to the country, Mama Fatima Singhateh, Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, commended Germany’s increased attention and resources to improve policy, legal and institutional frameworks, such as the Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issue, Survivors’ Board, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse as well as National Rapporteur Mechanism for Trafficking in Human Beings.

“Each federal state and municipality in Germany adopts varying approaches and practices on child protection, which impacts the care and services provided to the children. A child anywhere in Germany should receive equal protection of their rights and similar support services and care,” the expert said.

“In order to effectively prevent and combat sale, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, there is a need for sustainable and consistent intersectoral collaboration among relevant stakeholders in the youth welfare office, health services, child psychology, counselling centers, police offices, courts and educational institutions among others,” she said.

Singhateh visited Childhood Houses in Berlin and Dusseldorf where relevant professions involved in responding to child sexual abuse and exploitation come together under one roof in a child-friendly environment to work together in a coordinated and collaborative manner. “This is a good practice that should be replicated in all federal states of Germany,” the expert said.

“There is also a need for mandatory training on the rights of children and their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in all its manifestations, including in the digital environment. These trainings should be designed for professionals who work with or come into contact with children,” Singhateh said.

The Special Rapporteur also travelled to Dusseldorf, Cologne and Wiesbaden and met with representatives of the federal, state and local government, police, judges, members of the civil society and academia, service and care providers, and children.

Singhateh will present a comprehensive report of her findings and recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council in March 2026.

ENDS

Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh (The Gambia) was appointed as [the UN Special Rapporteur on sale and sexual exploitation of children](#) by the UN Human Rights Council in March 2020.

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**Preliminary observations and end of mission statement of the
UN Special Rapporteur on the sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of
children,
Mama Fatima Singhateh**

Berlin, 25 October 2024

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the Government of Germany for the invitation extended to me to undertake this country visit from 14-25 October 2024. I appreciate the full cooperation extended to my mandate prior to and during my visit.

The objective of my visit was to assess the scope of sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children in the country, and the measures adopted by the authorities to prevent and combat the phenomena, and to assist in the care, recovery and reintegration of child victims.

During my visit, I travelled to Berlin, Dusseldorf, Cologne and Wiesbaden. I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the federal, state and local government as well as the police. I also met with judges, The Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues, National Rapporteur Mechanism on trafficking in human beings, members of the civil society and academia, service and care providers, and children.

I also had the opportunity to visit Childhood Houses in Berlin and Dusseldorf, Hilfe für Jungs' Subway project and the shelter for refugees in Berlin.

I am grateful to the Government representatives for their excellent collaboration. I would like to thank all interlocutors for their engagement in constructive dialogue and look forward to receiving additional information requested including data and statistics.

To everyone who met with me, and especially the service providers and representatives of civil society organizations, I would like to express my gratitude for their readiness to engage in an open dialogue on the issue of sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children in the country, and for their dedication and commitment to provide protection and assistance to child victims, including children in vulnerable situations.

I also wish to express my gratitude to UNICEF Berlin, the UN Regional Information Centre, ECPAT Germany and World Vision Germany for their support during the mission.

Positive steps and developments

Germany has devoted increased attention and resources to improve policy, legal and institutional frameworks for adequate prevention and protection of children from sale, sexual abuse and exploitation.

1. Legislation

In terms of legislation relevant to the issues under review, I note that the **German Criminal Code** criminalizes the sexual abuse of children, and harsher penalties for child sexual abuse and the dissemination and possession of child sexual abuse materials were introduced in **2021** under the **Act to Combat Sexual Violence against Children**. The **Youth Protection Act** was amended in 2021 to provide protection to young people in the media.

I also note that the **German Criminal Code** was amended in 2016 to implement the EU Directive on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting its Victims, thereby making provisions for the different manifestations of trafficking, including forced prostitution, forced labour, labour exploitation, forced begging, forced criminality and organ harvesting.

Book 8 of the **German Social Code** regulates many of the services and responsibilities of child and youth services. The **2005 Child and Youth Welfare Advancement Act** extensively revised Book 8 of the Social Code and regulates child protection investigations by local child and youth welfare authorities as well as child and youth welfare service providers.

The **Social Compensation Law** which was enacted and came into force early 2024 provides for eligible victims of violence, including sexual abuse and exploitation, to access support and assistance, including psychosocial and trauma counselling, medical treatment and financial compensation. I look forward to learning about how effective the law will be in responding to the needs of child victims of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.

In terms of policies and guidelines, I learned that in 2023, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs adopted the **Child protection at school guidelines**, applicable to all schools in Germany, and provides guidance on the development and practical implementation of protection concepts and measures against sexual violence in schools.

The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in 2020, issued the **Federal cooperation concept on the protection and help in cases of trafficking in and exploitation of children**, which contains recommendations for collaboration between the youth welfare office, police, specialised counselling centres and other entities involved in the identification and protection of children who are victims of human trafficking.

The National Council on Combatting Sexual Violence Against Children and Young People also in 2021 issued the **Practical guide to the application of child-friendly criteria for criminal and family court proceedings** which contain recommendations to ensure child-centered approaches when dealing with child victims and witnesses.

2. Child Protection structures

In terms of institutional structures, the **Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues**, established in 2010, holds a central role in protecting children from sexual abuse. It serves as a point of contact for survivors, promotes public and political awareness on the issue, and supports the development of preventive and intervention measure.

There is also the **Survivors' Board**, which consists of individuals who have personally experienced sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence, to ensure that survivors' voices and perspectives inform the work of the Independent Commissioner; and the **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse** which investigates sexual violence against children and adolescents in both institutional and family contexts.

I understand that a **Draft Law to strengthen structures against sexual violence against children and young people** is currently under discussion in the Parliament.

It will institutionalize the Independent Commissioner against Sexual Abuse of Children and Adolescents and establish a reporting obligation for the Independent Commissioner on the extent of sexual violence against children and adolescents both online and offline. I commend the Government for the significant steps it has taken to reinforce Germany's commitment to child protection, ensuring that child sexual abuse is met with a comprehensive, coordinated, and child-centered approach. I look forward to the successful enactment of this law, and the sufficient allocation of funding to effectively implement it once it comes into force.

I note also the establishment in 2019 of the **National Council on Combatting Sexual Violence Against Children and Young People** as a platform for exchange as well as the establishment in 2022 of the **National Rapporteur Mechanism for Trafficking in Human Beings** within the German Institute of Human Rights with the core tasks of making trafficking in human beings visible, establishing a solid base of data and monitoring case law and legislation in order to report on the implementation of the relevant regional and international instruments.

These are some of the structures that have been put in place to respond to the different manifestation of sale, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children in Germany, which I shall now discuss.

i. Sexual abuse of minors within the circle of trust and within communities

While there is no comprehensive data on incidence of sexual abuse of children in Germany, it is [estimated](#) that around one to two children in every classroom have already experienced or are experiencing sexual violence.

Information gathered from the interlocutors indicate that the highest number of child sexual abuse cases take place in the family as well as institutional settings, such as churches, schools, sports clubs, etc.

ii. Sale and trafficking of children for the purpose of sexual exploitation and forced labour

In Germany, sexual exploitation appears to be the most prevalent form of trafficking of children. The methods through which children are brought into situations of exploitation vary greatly and range from exploitation by family members to organised structures of violence. While many of the victims are girls, there are reported cases of boys and LGBTQI youth who are also sexually exploited. The lack of data makes it very difficult to ascertain the scope and magnitude of this phenomenon. Discussions with interlocutors however highlight the need for more public awareness campaign on the phenomenon, and capacity building for law enforcement to strengthen their skills in detections of these crimes and identification of victims, as well as equip them with the tools they need to meet their evidential burden during criminal proceedings against alleged perpetrators.

I also learned that there is no functional referral system for child victims of trafficking. A lot of work needs to be done in terms of a systems response to the trafficking of children.

I understand that there is currently a draft National Action Plan against Human Trafficking in progress. I strongly encourage the Government to ensure that draft National Action Plan against Human Trafficking includes a specific focus on trafficking of children, as well as the appropriate measures for child victims.

iii. **Sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism**

I learnt that in Germany, there are no child protection measures in place for commercial travel operators whose services are often used to organize school trips and holiday camps for children. Although Book 8 of the Social Code regulates the exclusion of persons with relevant criminal record from working with children, this law applies only to public child and youth welfare organizations.

I note that the **2023 Supply Chain Act** mandates companies to ensure human rights compliance among their entire supply chain and sets up a grievance mechanism and a requirement to report on their activities. However, the law applies only to large companies with 1,000 employees or more and I understand that none of the commercial travel operators are subject to this law.

iv. **Online child sexual exploitation and abuse and child sexual abuse material**

The digital environment plays an increasingly important role in cases of sexual abuse and exploitation of children. The Federal Criminal Police [reported](#) that the number of cases of production, distribution, acquisition and possession of child sexual abuse material has risen steadily in recent years and reached 45,191 cases in the reporting year of 2023. I learned during my discussions with interlocutors that there is an increasing trend of livestreaming of child sexual abuse, with perpetrators residing in Germany facilitating and instructing the sexual abuse of children abroad.

I also learned with concern the rise in *Sharenting*, where parents share publicly the day-to-day lives of their children. The Government is strongly encouraged to raise awareness on the risks associated with parents posting pictures and videos of their children online. The rising phenomenon of *kidfluencing* is also a cause for concern and must be regulated.

3. Vulnerable groups

Refugee and asylum-seeking children

Refugee children face higher risk of falling victim to sexual abuse and trafficking as they often remain outside the reach of traditional youth welfare programs in Germany. Language barriers and the lack of knowledge about German systems and support services within the refugee community exacerbates their vulnerability. I am pleased to learn that the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and UNICEF, together with many partner organizations, developed **minimum standards for the protection of refugees and migrants in refugee accommodation centres**, last updated in 2021, which contain a differentiated focus on children and youth as a group which is in particular need of protection. I look forward to learning more about how effective it is in reaching and protecting this vulnerable group.

Migrant children

My discussions with the interlocutors reveal that child trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is most prevalent in children, aged 15-17 years old, who come from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Czech Republic. They are often boys who grew up in poverty and are forced into sex work in order to support their families back home. They often do not have their IDs with them, without any registered address nor health insurance. I learn however about the close cooperation between various stakeholders, such as the CSOs, the police and the community itself in organizing public awareness raising campaigns in affected neighbourhoods as well as providing care and counselling

services. I however believe that more can be done in addressing the root causes of this problem including cooperation with the countries of origin of these children.

4. Systems Response

Youth Welfare Office

There are [559 Youth Welfare Offices](#) across Germany to support parents or legal guardians in the upbringing and caring for children. One fundamental task of the Youth Welfare Office is child protection. If a child is neglected or abused, the Youth Welfare Office is mandated to investigate and look after the child in need. The Youth Welfare Office could take over the guardianship of the children and youth without parents or those with parents currently unable to take care of them. In cases of urgent danger affecting a child, the Youth Welfare Office can arrange for emergency placements. The Youth Welfare Office is also mandated to provide a concept for the protection of children's rights and the prevention of any form of maltreatment in residential care facilities and foster care families. These officials play a vital role in the protection of children and must be well trained with the required tools to carry out their responsibilities. They must specifically be exposed to information on the different manifestations of sale, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children to enable them to respond expeditiously and appropriately.

Childhood Houses in Berlin and Dusseldorf

I visited the **Childhood Houses in Berlin and Dusseldorf**, which are outpatient, child-friendly and multidisciplinary points of contact and support for children and young people affected by violence. During my visits, I observed that all professions involved – medical, psychological, youth welfare system and criminal proceedings – come together under one roof in a child-friendly environment to work together in a coordinated and collaborative manner in order to reduce possible re-traumatization of the child. I commend these initiatives and urge that they would be replicated across German in every Federal state, I also encourage the government to ground the Childhood houses in law to ensure its sustainability and authority in child protection.

InVia Counselling and Coordination Centre

The **Specialist Advice and Coordination Centre for Human Trafficking and Exploitation of Minors in Berlin (IN VIA)** was established in early 2024 with the support of the Berlin Senate Department for Education, Youth and Family. I had the opportunity to attend the official launch during my visit. I learned that the centre aims to provide child-centred support by empowering all relevant actors on early detection and identification of affected children and strengthening the collaboration between youth welfare system, criminal investigation and victim protection. This is a good practice that should also be replicated across the country. I encourage the establishment of at least one specialized counselling centre for child victims of trafficking in every federal state and where necessary, the expansion of the mandate of existing counselling centres for adults to provide services also for children, and that they be equipped with the required competence and resources to do so.

HILFE-FUER-JUNGS – Subway project

An initiative worth mentioning is the **HILFE-FUER-JUNGS e.V.**'s project called **Subway**, which aims to provide care and support to boys, young men and non-binary persons affected by sexual abuse and exploitation. I had an opportunity to visit their premises as well as participate in their street outreach at night to learn about the realities and struggles faced by their clients. They provide various services, such as shelter, food, medical care, psychosocial counselling, legal advice and sexuality education, including

information on their sexual and reproductive health and rights. In the case of child victims, HILFE-FUER-JUNGS e.V. works closely with the relevant authorities – primarily the youth welfare office – to ensure their protection and well-being. I learned that as of October this year, they have made 11 child protection reports to the youth welfare office on boys who are suspected to be victims of sexual exploitation. To allow for sustained efforts in the care and support for boys and children of other gender identities, I encourage continued support and allocation of adequate resources to such initiatives.

Trau Dich

I also learned about the **Trau Dich**, an initiative launched in 2013 by the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Federal Centre for Health Education for the prevention of child sexual abuse. Through theatre performance, it aims to educate children between the ages of eight and twelve about their rights and boundaries as well as to sensitize schools, teachers, parents and counselling centres on the matter. It also informs children where to find help and support in the event of sexual abuse. These are all laudable initiatives that can be strengthened and supported.

5. Gaps and recommendations

A child-centered approach

Children are right holders with their own agency. There is a need to shift mindset from parents' rights to protect children to the rights of children as individuals to be protected. To this end, children should be at the centre of every initiative or decision relating to the provision of care and services and should be able to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes that affect them.

I would also encourage the appointment of a National Commissioner for Children's Rights to inter alia ensure that laws and practices relating to children conform with the minimum requirements provided for under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Comprehensive national strategy on child protection

I learned that each of the federal states and municipalities in Germany adopts varying approaches and practices on child protection, this impacts the care and services provided to the children.

In order to effectively prevent and combat sale, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, there is a need for sustainable and consistent intersectoral collaboration among relevant stakeholders in the youth welfare office, health services, child psychology, counselling centers, police offices, courts and educational institutions among others.

A national child protection strategy with an oversight mechanism to ensure consistency and harmony of approaches and implementation across Germany is encouraged. A child anywhere in Germany should receive equal protection of their rights and similar support services and care.

Strengthening the understanding of data protection vis-à-vis child protection

My discussions with interlocutors indicate that there is not a clear understanding among child protection actors on how data protection law is applicable as it relates to their roles as child protection professionals. The fear of violating the data protection law inhibits the exchange of information which is vital in ensuring appropriate care and support.

More training is required for child protection actors and professionals on their mandate to ensure uninhibited multi-stakeholder exchange of information regarding a child in

need of care and protection. The Government is also encouraged to put in place measures that ensure that the protection and best interests of the child should be the paramount consideration of any person or authority dealing with a child protection issue.

Legal framework on online sexual exploitation and abuse and child sexual abuse material

There is a need to move away from terminologies such as "child pornography". These words retraumatize and revictimize victims who have experienced abuse. I learned that provisions in the Criminal Code still use such terminologies. I strongly urge the government to consider reviewing any law that uses these terminologies by replacing all references to 'child pornography' with 'child sexual abuse material' in line with the Luxembourg Guidelines.

Furthermore, I understand that the current Criminal Code lacks specific provisions that directly address the unique and evolving nature of technologies, which may lead to cases being underreported or misclassified, resulting in the underestimation of the problem within national statistics.

At the EU level, I understand that there is currently a recast proposal of the EU Directive on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child sexual abuse materials, which is a major step towards reflecting the reality of technological developments and emerging risks on child sexual abuse and exploitation. I encourage the Government to support the Recast Directive.

Data

There is a need to strengthen and harmonize data collection within the federal government, the Länder and amongst civil society organisations.

The Government is encouraged to support the establishment of a central national system for comprehensive, systematically collected, reliable and disaggregated data on sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and its different manifestations, with emphasis on children in vulnerable situations.

Child victims of trafficking

Germany has no nationally standardised procedure for identification of victims of trafficking. There is also no national referral mechanism that coordinates cooperation among all relevant bodies, which means that victims of trafficking are left to the structures and services available wherever they find them.

I understand that only eight states provide shelters for adult victims of trafficking. There are no shelters for child victims of trafficking. All these point to the need to do more to protect child victims of trafficking in its different forms.

Training, education, and public awareness raising programs

It is clear from interactions with interlocutors that there exist several awareness raising and education campaigns on prevention. There is however a need for a standardised approach and coordination of activities amongst child protection actors to agree on a strategy for how these awareness-raising campaigns should be implemented in schools across the country.

There is a need for mandatory training on the rights of children and their protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in all its manifestations, including in the digital environment. These trainings should be designed for professionals who work with or come in contact with children; these include educators, health and legal professionals,

law enforcement officials, judicial and court officials, child and youth welfare officers as well as employees and volunteers in areas relating to sport, culture and leisure activities.

Specific attention must be given to programs to enhance the early identification of at-risk children for better preventive efforts. There is also a need for the Government to ensure that all children receive age-appropriate sexuality education, including on prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse in both offline and online environments, in order to empower them to know about their rights and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse incidents. Teachers should be equipped with the ability to impart the knowledge through pre-service and regular in-service training.

The government is also urged to incorporate media literacy for all children as a compulsory subject in all schools across the country and at all levels of governance.

Collaboration and Cooperation

More can be done in the sharing of information, and coordination on child protection strategies. This can be done through stronger cooperation, communication and collaboration amongst government institutions at national, federal state and municipal levels, Civil Society Organizations working with and for children; as well as with sister authorities and agencies from other countries, especially countries of origin of victims of trafficking.

Resource allocation

Commitment to combat the sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children must be accompanied with sustainable resources, especially for service providers in this area so that they can provide adequate and necessary care and support for child victims and survivors.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by reiterating that I am very grateful to the Government of Germany for inviting me to visit the country. This invitation – and the cooperation provided during my visit – indicates that there is a strong commitment to address the issues of sale, sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and provide victims with the requisite care and support. I am encouraged by the significant work already done and hope that my visit and my report will contribute to the Government's efforts in strengthening the measures already in place and respond and address the gaps that exist, which will require sustained commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders in child protection.

Thank you for your attention.