



Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders

Organisation: Away from Keyboard Inc. (AFK)

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Public or Confidential: Public

1. What motivates you to uphold, protect or promote human rights? Please give examples.

Away from Keyboard Inc. (AFK) was created from lived experience of harm, exclusion, and systemic gaps in safety. Our motivation stems from the simple but profound belief that human rights must extend to every space where people live, learn, work, and connect, including digital environments.

Digital technology has brought immense opportunities, but it has also exposed children, young people, carers, and vulnerable communities to unprecedented risks. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), online grooming, harassment, and digital manipulation undermine the right to safety, dignity, privacy, and participation. For children, especially in regional and rural areas, exposure to harm is intensified by lack of local services and community supports. For carers, the relentless pressure of navigating unsafe digital environments compounds stress, exhaustion, and isolation.

AFK exists because too many people are being left behind in digital transformation. Our trauma-informed programs help children reconnect to face-to-face play and social engagement, while our workshops for carers give them tools to prevent and respond to online risks. Our advocacy challenges governments and tech companies to embed Safety by Design and human rights due diligence into systems before harm occurs.

What motivates us is both deeply personal and unavoidably systemic. Our founder survived grooming online into a forced marriage and has carried that lived experience into international advocacy. AFK's work is driven by the conviction that the most vulnerable must not be left unprotected in a world increasingly shaped by opaque, profit-driven technology systems.

2. Do you believe your work contributes to a fairer, more just society?

Yes. Justice is not abstract for us; it looks like children being able to play without fear of online exploitation, like carers knowing they are not alone, and like survivors of TFGBV having clear, accessible pathways to safety and recovery.



AFK contributes to fairness in three ways:

- Direct education and relief: Our trauma-informed programs address the distress families face from online harm. For example, our digital safety workshops for carers in Victoria give them not only practical tools but also solidarity and validation, helping them feel less isolated and more capable of protecting their families.
- Systemic advocacy: By bringing lived experience to forums like the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and national inquiries on online safety codes, we ensure that policies and regulations reflect the voices of those most affected.
- Rebalancing digital design: We push for platforms to be accountable for safety at the design stage, challenging the dominant “move fast, break things” ethos. A just society cannot exist if platforms are allowed to externalise harm onto children and vulnerable communities while extracting profit.

This combination of immediate support and long-term advocacy creates tangible improvements in people’s lives while challenging systemic inequities.

3a. If you live in a country where there is some space to engage in human rights work, how would society have developed differently if this work was not permitted?

Australia has civic space, but if organisations like AFK were prevented from operating, the gaps would widen dramatically. Families would be left alone to navigate opaque technologies designed for engagement and profit, not safety. Children would be more exposed to grooming, pornography, and harassment without trusted adults equipped to intervene. Carers, particularly in regional areas, would remain unsupported and at risk of burnout.

Human rights work ensures that government, industry, and communities cannot ignore harm simply because it is digital. Without it, platforms would face little pressure to change harmful algorithms, governments would be less accountable for regulatory inaction, and the public would be deprived of a survivor-informed voice on how digital rights should be upheld.

4. Describe the human rights work you are most proud of over the past five years.

We are proudest of building an organisation that connects the dots between lived experience, frontline relief, and international advocacy. Some highlights include:

- Workshops for children and carers: We created offline, face-to-face programs where children put down their devices and re-learn social play. Carers joined workshops that validated their experiences and equipped them to recognise scams, grooming, and coercive control online.



- Victim support and referrals: AFK developed referral pathways for survivors of TFGBV, particularly women experiencing image-based abuse or coercion. We provide non-judgemental, trauma-informed support that bridges the gap between lived experience and formal services.

- International advocacy: AFK's leadership has presented at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) and parallel events, including sessions on "Unsafe by Design." We have also contributed to inquiries on online safety codes and the Global Digital Compact, ensuring survivors' perspectives shape global commitments.

What makes us most proud is not the accolades but the impact: carers who tell us they finally feel less alone; young people who discover joy in being "away from keyboard"; policymakers who hear survivor voices and commit to action.

5. Has your work been impacted by funding cuts in the past 12 months? What did these cuts prevent you from doing?

Yes. Like many small charities, we operate with limited resources. In the past 12 months, reduced funding opportunities and higher delivery costs have prevented us from:

- Expanding regional workshops for children and carers beyond pilot areas.
- Subsidising travel for rural families to attend offline reconnection events.
- Scaling victim support referrals and providing longer-term follow-up.
- Developing additional educational resources tailored for schools.

These cuts disproportionately affect vulnerable families in rural and regional areas, where digital harm is often greatest and local services are sparse.

6. If impacted, how are you mitigating the effects of cuts?

We are mitigating by:

- Prioritising core delivery (workshops and victim support) while pausing less urgent projects.
- Partnering with other charities and councils to share venues, logistics, and networks.
- Increasing volunteer engagement for awareness campaigns.
- Seeking diversified income, including philanthropy, local grants, and international partnerships.
- Documenting our impact rigorously to strengthen funding proposals.

While these measures sustain us, they are not sustainable in the long term. Consistent, flexible funding is essential for survivor-centred, trauma-informed organisations like AFK.



7. What is the single biggest risk you face in your work?

Our single biggest risk is the mismatch between scale of harm and scale of resources. The technology industry produces risks at global speed and scale, but small charities like AFK are left to respond with limited capacity. As harms evolve, deepfake abuse, AI-driven grooming, algorithmic exploitation, families face more complex challenges than we can address alone.

Another significant risk is policy and regulatory lag. While governments debate, children are being exploited and carers are burning out. Without stronger legal safeguards and corporate accountability, organisations like ours are left on the frontlines without systemic backup.

Finally, we face reputational and emotional risk. Survivors who speak up are often targeted, retraumatised, or discredited. Upholding human rights in digital spaces demands courage, but it also carries personal and organisational cost.

8. Are international human rights standards still relevant? Why?

Yes, they are vital. Frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and CEDAW provide normative anchors that affirm children's right to protection, carers' right to support, and women's right to live free from violence, including digital violence.

However, these standards must be updated and interpreted for the digital age. Privacy, dignity, and safety are all undermined by unsafe digital systems. Embedding Safety by Design and human rights due diligence into global standards ensures that rights are not left behind as technology advances.

9. Are international mechanisms effective in protecting human rights defenders?

They are partially effective. UN Special Procedures, treaty bodies, and council debates can create visibility and diplomatic pressure, but defenders of digital rights often remain unprotected from online harassment, doxxing, and coordinated abuse.

More effective protection would combine:

- Stronger accountability for tech companies whose products enable harassment.
- Resources for small, survivor-informed organisations to continue their work.
- Faster, more flexible responses to online reprisals.
- Integration of digital rights into broader human rights frameworks.

AFK calls for recognition that digital rights defenders are human rights defenders. Protecting those who speak out on online safety is as essential as protecting those working on land, housing, or environmental justice.



10. Are the international mechanisms easy to access?

For small organisations like ours, not always. The procedures are complex, resource-intensive, and often inaccessible for carers and survivors with limited time or digital literacy. Accessibility could be improved by:

- Simplified submission channels.
- Funding for civil society engagement.
- Greater outreach to regional and grassroots organisations.
- Survivor-informed design of reporting mechanisms.

11a. Are communications by the Special Rapporteur to governments an effective protective tool?

They can be, particularly in democratic contexts where governments care about international reputation. Public communications can amplify pressure and protect defenders from retaliation.

In the digital sphere, their effectiveness increases when paired with specific recommendations on Safety by Design, algorithmic transparency, and survivor support.

12. The most important message you would like the Special Rapporteur to bring to the international community

Digital spaces are now human spaces. If rights are not protected online, they are not protected at all.

We call on the international community to:

1. Embed prevention first. Safety must be designed into technology from the start, not retrofitted after harm occurs.
2. Resource community defenders. Small, survivor-informed organisations need stable funding to deliver trauma-informed support.
3. Hold corporations accountable. Tech companies must be required to meet child-safe and rights-respecting standards, with independent oversight.
4. Centre lived experience. Survivors, carers, children, and regional voices must shape digital governance.
5. Recognise digital rights defenders. Protect those advocating for safety in online spaces as essential human rights defenders.



Conclusion

Away from Keyboard Inc. was born out of lived experience of harm, and now stands as a voice for prevention, safety, and connection. Our mission is to ensure that families, children, carers, and vulnerable communities are not left defenceless in the digital age. We believe that international standards, mechanisms, and communities can and must evolve to protect human rights in digital spaces, just as they have in every other space where life unfolds.