ICMEC advocates, trains and collaborates to eradicate child abduction, sexual abuse and exploitation. ICMEC identifies gaps in the global community’s ability to protect children and assembles the people, resources and tools needed to solve those problems.

Meet Katia Dantas, policy director, The International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC)

ICMEC is a non-governmental, non-profit organization working to make the world a safer place for all children by eradicating child abduction, sexual abuse and exploitation. It is headquartered in the United States, with regional representation in Brazil and Singapore.

Since its inception in 1998, ICMEC has trained over 7,500 law enforcement officers from more than 115 countries; worked with governments in more than 100 countries to refine or implement laws against child pornography; increased global participation in International Missing Children’s Day; and created a 24-member Global Missing Children’s Network.

My role

Since January 2011, I’ve been working as ICMEC’s policy director for Latin America and Caribbean to identify gaps in legislation and policies related to missing and abducted children, as well as on technology-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation, assisting with finding solutions to enhance the protection of children throughout the Latin American and Caribbean region.

Aside from being an integral part of ICMEC’s vision and mission, protecting children online is something I hold dear and near to my heart. One thing that particularly frustrates me is the demonization of technology or the search for simple one-size-fits-all solutions to child online protection. The internet, is a tool that has sadly been abused in some aspects, but banning technology is not the solution.

With that in mind, I’ve worked throughout the years to build upon ICMEC’s expertise and its regional contacts to promote the creation of alliances to enhance child online protection in a comprehensive way, having recently launched the Latin America Coalition Against Technology-Facilitated Child Sexual Abuse (CLAC).

The ICMEC has also supported several other initiatives in the region, and recently partnered with Unicef LACRO on the development of a series of regional events to bring awareness to the risks and benefits of the digital era. For me, it is critical to seek the balance between seizing all the benefits technology brings us, with a safer and responsible use of those tools.

How I imagine my profession in 10 years time

Technology has been advancing in such a way that making any predictions on where we will be is extremely daunting. I still remember when the first mobile phone was launched and how huge and cumbersome it was to carry it around. The smartphones we carry everywhere today are far better and faster than any computer from 10 years ago. And the number of people, especially children, who utilize these technologies is already incredible and will only continue to grow.
Despite the gloomy scenario painted by the current risks children face online today, I believe the future holds a great deal of hope. I believe we will reach a point where digital literacy is more widespread and the current digital divide we see in so many places is reduced. That for me is a key component of child online protection. The more we learn about technology and the more we learn to respect each other online, the more children will be protected in the future.

My views on collaboration

It is paramount that we stop seeking easy, quick-fix solutions. Increasing partnerships and convening stakeholders at the international, regional, and local levels is critical to find targeted and comprehensive solutions for such a complex issue.

One big barrier to effective coordination is the lack of harmonized legislation internationally and the lack of appropriate policies and responses in many countries (particularly developing countries) to properly deal with the use of technology to abuse children. ICMEC has been working on promoting more effective legislation across the world through research-based advocacy and capacity-building and we are glad to see others join our fight.

We have seen efforts from big internet service providers (ISPs) in creating new security features and investigation tools, but there is still a lot other companies can do to protect children.

We still see some companies develop independent solutions for prevention and safety, which may lead to fragmented responses that reach just a few users. If other companies joined the existing global and regional coalitions (Financial Coalition Against Child Pornography, Latin America Coalition Against Technology-Facilitated Child Abuse, Technology Coalition and others) we could maximize the amount of resources as well as the impact on the final user.

Who I consider a leader in this area

ICMEC! Seriously speaking, it is humbling to see on a daily basis that we are not alone in advancing children’s rights in a digital world. Being a complex issue, we need all hands on deck and as many champions as we can to further this cause.

We have been lucky to partner with amazing organizations that have made significant strides in this regard, such as Unicef, the International Association of Internet Hotlines, the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association, the International Telecommunication Union, the International Criminal Police Organization, particularly their regional offices in Buenos Aires and San Salvador, and so many others.

We are particularly glad to see the increased interest and advocacy of the British government towards a protected childhood online (#WeProtect) and to see so many key actors, such as the Office of the UN Special Representative on Violence Against Children – Marta Santos Pais – designating violence online as a key topic to be addressed in 2016.

Regionally, we have gladly seen momentum for child online protection and have welcomed the increased attention from regional bodies (such as the Organization of American States, and the Inter-American Institute of the Child) and
great networks such as Red NATIC. It makes us very hopeful for a better future.

The apps or programs I think would be useful

I think there are great apps and programs already in place. I would love to see a portal of the different initiatives that are available consolidated and translated into different languages and different realities. Most importantly, I hope to see the continued development of new programs, apps, and technologies that can be used as tools to raise awareness and protect children in an online environment.