



**Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary General on
Violence against Children**

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National integrated strategies to eliminate violence against children

Council of Europe

Vienna

May 2010

1. Introduction

I am delighted to join you today and participate in this important Conference on National Integrated Strategies to Eliminate Violence against Children. I want to thank the Austrian Government and the Council of Europe for their invitation and to congratulate you for the excellent organization of this meeting which gathers such a remarkable group of experts.

The Vienna Conference provides an excellent opportunity to take stock of progress achieved in the protection of children from violence, to share good practices and learn from promising experiences. But, more importantly, it is a time to reiterate our commitment to accelerate efforts towards the elimination of this child rights violation. I am confident we will leave re-energized and strongly determined to join hands in moving forward a strong action-oriented agenda.

When we reflect on the dramatic situation of the unacceptably high numbers of child victims of violence, we feel pressed by the urgency of their cause and inspired by the opportunity to make a difference.

Violence impacts the enjoyment of all children's rights. It has serious emotional and health effects, it compromises children's learning abilities and school performance, it inhibits positive relationships, provokes low self-esteem, trauma and depression; and it often leads to risk-taking, aggressive behaviour and at times, self-inflicted harm.

Children experience neglect and trauma when they witness domestic violence, and they further endure ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse, very often behind a curtain of painful silence and social indifference. Violence occurs in all contexts, including where children are expected to be best protected; and it is perpetrated by people children trust, in schools, care institutions and also within the home. As a result, reporting remains rare. Children fear abandonment and reprisals; they worry they will not be believed or will be blamed and bullied. Children lack information about where to go to seek protection and assistance, and in most countries there are no safe and child sensitive institutions to provide counselling and to follow on violence reporting.

Time for action is now! With the understanding and experience we have gained over the years, supported by a strong political will and the wide movement of social mobilisation we can all generate, decisive progress is within reach! More importantly, preventing and eliminating violence against children is an ethical and legal imperative. We cannot afford to ignore it or postpone it any longer.

2. The mandate of SRSG on Violence against Children

In my role as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, I am strongly committed to the protection of children from violence, everywhere and at all times. As you know, my mandate is framed by the UN Study on Violence against Children and its strategic recommendations and it is embedded in the sound human rights normative framework we all share.

The SRSG is a global independent advocate. Promoting good practices and cross fertilisation of experiences between sectors and regions to prevent and combat this child rights violation, the SRSG acts as a bridge builder and a catalyst of actions by a wide range of partners, at the international, regional and national levels.

The SRSG is also a spokesperson on behalf of children's unheard voices. As I have witnessed in my missions across regions and in my discussions with young people, children suffer dramatic levels of violence, and their universe is marked by lonely suffering and fear. Children suffer violence at all ages; they endure intimidation, humiliation, bullying and physical aggression by teachers, care givers, family members and also peers; they suffer sexual violence and abuse; in some countries they are lawfully disciplined with canning and flogging, and can be sentenced to death or life imprisonment; children risk torture and abuse in institutions, are coerced by violence to work and kept in exploitation and servitude; thousands are subject to deprivation of liberty, not as the measure of last resort but as a privileged response, often dictated by uninformed social pressure.

This is a pattern we urgently need to reverse. Guided by this sense of urgency and the need to accelerate progress in key strategic areas, in my work, I am particularly committed to pursue three priority areas:

- The development in each country of a **national comprehensive strategy** to prevent and respond to all forms of violence
- The introduction of an **explicit legal ban on all violence**, and
- The **consolidation of a sound system of data and research** to inform progress in this area.

These three dimensions are critical to achieve progress in violence prevention and response. I am therefore very pleased that they also set the context for our important discussions, here in Vienna. With the strong commitment and expertise you all bring, these are areas where progress is within reach and where the Council of Europe can continue to play an instrumental role.

3. The role of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe's work on the realisation of children's rights is well known and constitutes a strong reference for Europe and for partners across regions.

The standards adopted by the Council – from the European Convention on Human Rights and the Social Charter to the more recent conventions on action against trafficking, on cyber crime and on children's protection from sexual exploitation and abuse - provide a sound foundation for work in this area. Their implementation, together with the enforcement of universal human rights instruments, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols, sets the framework for the protection of children from all forms of violence.

With the **Programme Building a Europe for and with Children** and the adoption of the **Stockholm Strategy for 2009-2011**, the Council has placed high on its agenda the protection of children from all forms of violence.

With its Pan European membership, the Council represents a unique laboratory of experiences and a strategic forum to share information, expertise and lessons from national experiences and initiatives on violence against children.

- The launch, almost a year ago, of **the Children's Rights Platform** marks a critical achievement in this process. As you know, the Platform is composed of national focal points, with expertise and leading responsibilities on the rights of the child and children's protection from violence. It has a unique potential to inform national action and support international cooperation activities, to help gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that prevail and mobilise action to overcome them and accelerate progress. With the active contribution of national focal points, the Council can consolidate its potential to act as a clearing house and support and provide technical advice to States in their efforts. This is why I would like to encourage all countries to appoint a representative to the Platform.
- Last November, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted **Policy Guidelines on Integrated National Strategies for the Protection of Children from Violence**. As you know, the UN Study called on governments to urgently develop a national strategy to prevent and address all forms of violence against children.

The Council's Guidelines provide a sound framework to help countries, in Europe and beyond, to achieve this important goal. The Guidelines are anchored in a sound human rights foundation; they recognise State's accountability, highlight the family's central role and acknowledge civil society's as well as children's decisive contribution to the promotion of a strong child protection system where violence has no place. The Guidelines are generating strong interest amongst States in all regions, as the event recently organised at the time of the Human Rights Council has confirmed.

Dear Friends,

I would like to address in greater detail the three themes of the Vienna Conference – the promotion of a national integrated strategy, the legal prohibition of violence and the consolidation of national data and research on violence against children. I look forward to learning about the many important national experiences that are being promoted in this area. And I am confident that we will feel re-energized in our determination to move faster in this endeavour.

4. Firstly, it is urgent for every country to develop a national integrated strategy to prevent and address violence against children

A national strategy is not simply a document; it is a navigation chart to inform a process of social and behaviour change. It helps to shape a vision for the nation and to mobilize action and resources behind a well publicized plan of action. To be effective, the strategy needs to be mainstreamed in national policy and in the development agenda, rather than perceived as a footnote for the government and the nation. It also needs to be effectively coordinated by a high level focal point with leading responsibilities on children's issues, with authority to articulate activities across departments and to engage relevant stakeholders, and the ability to promote a transparent process to measure change and impact.

Experience shows and data confirms that violence against children can only be addressed through the systematic and effective engagement of all relevant ministries and levels of public administration - from health and education, to social affairs, from justice and home affairs, to planning, economy and finance.

In many countries, in Europe and beyond, significant efforts are being deployed to move in this direction. In some cases, the development of the national strategy on violence has been promoted through a widely participatory process, in which governmental departments, civil society organizations, academics and young people have taken part. In a number of other cases, States have set in place national plans of action and high level coordinating bodies to oversee implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, within which violence against children is one core component.

These significant developments are welcome, but much remains to be done. In too many countries, violence has a low priority, being addressed in a reactive, fragmented and dispersed manner. As a result, it lacks visibility in the public debate, in the policy agenda and in relevant budgetary decisions. To move this process forward, strong political will is vital and wide mobilisation of social support is an asset.

Let us therefore use the Vienna Conference to capture lessons from the rich experience you all bring, to identify ways of promoting the further dissemination and implementation of the Guidelines in law, policy and practice, and to support countries in the development of this important policy and planning tool for the protection of children from all forms of violence.

5. Secondly, it is critical to introduce in every country an explicit legal ban on all forms of violence against children

Legislation is a key component of a comprehensive national strategy. It is an expression of a country's political commitment to work towards the prevention of violence and the protection of children's dignity and physical integrity. It encourages positive discipline and the education of children through non-violent means, and it promotes conflict resolution without resorting to violence. Legislation is critical to protect witnesses and victims, to enable reporting and redress, and to legitimize assistance, recovery and reintegration of child victims.

Law reform has renewed value when used in support of public information, social mobilisation and behaviour change. When harmful practices persist behind deeply entrenched traditions, legal reform can open avenues for mobilizing key actors and institutions and engaging communities in the abandonment of those practices.

Law reform for children's protection from violence is building momentum. Around the globe, 26 countries have introduced a clear ban on all forms of violence; in many others, law reform is being pursued to achieve full prohibition, while in several countries new legislation is under review to introduce a ban on violence in specific settings. In some cases, a monitoring system has also been developed, to support implementation.

This is an area in which the Council of Europe has been actively engaged. Currently, 21 European countries have strong legislation to prohibit all forms of violence against children, and many others are working towards the same aim, including in the context of Constitutional reform. The experience gained in this process, the expertise that has been consolidated over time and the surveys conducted in some countries to assess impact and behaviour change, illustrate well the richness and potential for change.

Europe can become the first region with a clear ban on all forms of violence against children; and, with the Council of Europe's support, accelerated progress can be achieved in other regions.

Let us recall, however, that the gap between the legal prohibition of violence and the prevailing practice remains wide and challenging. Behaviour change does not happen by magic and does not occur as an automatic consequence of the enactment of a law, no matter how perfect the law may be.

This is why it remains critical to raise awareness and enhance understanding, amongst the public at large and children in particular, as to what the law says and aims to achieve, and how it can be used.

Moreover, legislation needs to permeate the work of institutions and shape the training and ethical standards of professionals. And it needs to promote and legitimize the work of easily accessible, child sensitive, confidential and independent counselling and reporting mechanisms. This is an area where further progress is required. Indeed, in many countries accessible and child friendly reporting mechanisms remain unavailable, and professionals working with children tend to feel reluctant to address, report or refer these cases to relevant bodies and institutions.

Recognizing this loophole in children's protection, the Human Rights Council requested, in its most recent session, a report on existing child sensitive counselling, complaint and reporting mechanisms to which children can safely report incidents of violence, including sexual violence and exploitation.

I will be closely involved in the development of the report and am strongly committed to seizing this golden opportunity.

The report will focus on governmental and civil society initiatives, and will give a special attention to the role of national independent human rights institutions.

Independent institutions are uniquely placed to help to achieve change. They link policy advocacy with research, the promotion of policy and legal reform, and at times the consideration of individual complaints. In the area of violence against children, Ombuds national studies on the incidence of violence on children have been critical to break the silence around this phenomenon. They have been instrumental in placing this crucial topic in the public debate, giving visibility to the situation of marginalised children, systematically exposed to discrimination, violence and abuse; promoting gender and child sensitive approaches; capturing children's experiences and understanding child trauma, and giving advice and assistance to those in need.

Independent institutions act as spokespersons of children's voices and concerns. As a result of their role, in a number of countries significant parliamentary debates have been promoted, information campaigns have been developed and new legislation has been introduced to ban all forms of violence against children. Moreover, as they are accessed directly by children and by those witnessing violence against children, national independent institutions offer an important remedy, when violence takes place. I look forward to collaborating closely with you in this important process.

6. Thirdly, research and consolidated data systems on violence against children are indispensable

Violence remains a harsh reality for millions of children around the world. In spite of its serious and long lasting consequences on children, violence remains pervasive and largely hidden.

Information on this phenomenon is scarce and fails to represent the magnitude of this phenomenon across social groups and nations. Yet, without good data, national planning is compromised, effective policy-making and resource mobilization are hampered, and targeted interventions are limited in their ability to prevent and combat violence against children.

This is an area where urgent action is also required. Although there is significant data on children in a number of sectors, they are not integrated around a holistic view of the child and several gaps remain in key child protection areas. Monitoring tools and indicators need to be expanded to include all children – boys and girls of all ages and in all settings; they need to address those children who have remained invisible and unaccounted for, and who are also those at greater risk. Very especially, these efforts need to incorporate children's views and perspectives, and be informed by their experience. This is indispensable in gaining a better understanding of the hidden face of violence and its root causes; learning about the different ways in which boys and girls perceive violence and suffer its impact; and overall, becoming more effective in our action.

Across regions, children express concern at the unacceptable levels of violence affecting their lives. They convey fear, believing they are worthless and abandoned to their suffering. They feel pressed to run away from home and school or care institutions to escape violence and indifference. And yet, they remain actively engaged in raising awareness and informing peers, supporting victims and sensitizing adults, and discussing solutions and influencing change. Children are agents of change and also indispensable partners in this process.

Dear Friends

Violence in all its forms affects the life of millions of children around the world. But, as we have learned from the many successful initiatives promoted across regions, it is not inevitable; violence can be prevented and effectively addressed.

Building upon the Council of Europe conventions and key international standards, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, we have a strong normative foundation to legitimize and guide our actions.

These international standards are complementary and mutually supportive. They stand as a tangible indicator of genuine national commitment to respect the human dignity of the child at all times; to address risk factors that compromise children's development and citizenship; to invest in the social inclusion of the most vulnerable; and to promote actions that build upon the child's best interests and experiences.

In this regard, the Vienna Conference takes place at a very auspicious moment for children's rights. Very soon we will welcome the entry into force of the Lanzarote Convention on child protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. This year we are also commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the tenth anniversary of the adoption of its Optional Protocols, which are also supported by the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

The universal ratification and the effective implementation of these treaties are crucial to accelerate progress in our efforts. For this reason, on 25 May, in a high level event in NY, I will be launching, with key UN partners, **a two year global campaign for the ratification and effective implementation** of the Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the framework of my mandate, I will place a special emphasis on the protection of children from sale, child prostitution and child pornography.

With universal ratification, the protection of children from sale and sexual exploitation will be not simply a moral concern but a normative imperative. Concerted efforts will help address root causes and invest in the protection, recovery and reintegration of child victims. Impunity will be fought within and across borders.

I invite you all to join this important process. Today can mark the start of a new age, an era where violence against children has truly no place. Together we can make it happen. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss!