

Check Against Delivery

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Girl Child Victims of Trafficking
ECOSOC Chamber
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Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to be with you this morning, addressing the crucial matter of girls and child trafficking. UNICEF has long been a partner within the UN system, as well as with governmental and non-governmental organizations engaged in anti-child trafficking initiatives, the protection of children and the realization of their rights – ranging from research, to prevention, to recovery and reintegration. UNICEF firmly believes that female children have particular vulnerabilities that merit attention.

Let me begin this afternoon with a heartfelt acknowledgement of UNICEF's collaboration with the Council of Europe. In January, this year, our Executive Director and the Council of Europe signed a Joint Declaration on the reinforcement of our co-operation. We intend to continue our partnership, contributing to each others strategies, policies, assessments and programme interventions. This is already evidenced in our work together on child trafficking, now on the Council of Europe's

new Convention on the Protection of Children from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. UNICEF is aware that there are challenges to completing this draft, and we urge Member States to reach a conclusion that is squarely in the best interests of children.

Child trafficking is a violation of the human rights of a child, a criminal offence, and a threat to every aspect of child well-being. When we listen to children speak about their experience of being trafficked we are haunted by their words. A girl in Eastern Europe remarked to UNICEF researchers: *‘I contacted the police after six months after I ran away from the traffickers. I was afraid of the foreign country’s police. I did not have identity documents and did not know if they would help me.’*

These are experiences girls should not have to endure.

I would like to do two things in the limited time that I have with you: first, I will briefly describe the risks girls face; and, second, focus on three key dimensions of UNICEF’s approach to child trafficking – prevention, protection, and empowerment. My comments are based on the efforts of UNICEF all over the world.

In their families and home communities, women and girls everywhere are confronted with violence, gender inequality and discrimination. These perpetuate and reinforce the social and economic exclusion of girls. Research in Europe and South Asia suggests that girls suffering from domestic violence and sexual abuse are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of trafficking.

One girl told UNICEF researchers: *‘Even the neighbours in the apartment building noticed and wondered how I could keep house for the entire family. And for nothing, my step father couldn’t stand me, my real father believed all the rubbish about me and was saying that I was not his daughter, and my mother..., maybe I’ve made mistakes too, but I say she is the one to be blamed, because she has taught me nothing, she didn’t take care of me, she wanted to sell me for 500 Euro to a man...’* .

Other risks groups are girls from poor, disadvantaged or dysfunctional families, girls from minority groups, and those growing up in institutions.

Gender discrimination and lack of social status restrict the access of girls to education and income opportunities. Where families have to cope with livelihood insecurity, a

growing reliance of households on women and girls is observed. Girls' lack of access to education and non-exploitative employment seems to get worse under such conditions. At the same time, the undervaluing of female labour, erosion of social capital and transformation of traditional societies may increase the need of girls and young women to migrate for work. This is something abundantly clear to UNICEF in West and Central Africa

Multiple forces of exclusion and disadvantage are leading to situations where girls leave their home communities – or are forced to leave – often taking risks in order to search for opportunities in other places. However, a lack of access to information about safe migration, and to safe migration channels, leaves girls and young women often only with access to unregulated work in the informal sector. These are dangerous situations, where existing safe guards and labour controls are not enforced. Evidence suggests that young persons working in the informal sector are at a particular risk of being exploited and trafficked. I am reminded of UNICEF supported programmes in Southern India, that try to create safe education and livelihood opportunities for adolescent girls, encouraging them to remain in their home communities.

A trafficked girl is vulnerable to abuse and humiliation; poor living conditions; health risks, including contracting HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. However, UNICEF's research has shown that in many countries trafficked girls are not able to access services to help them recover from the harm they experience. For many trafficked girls, access to services is often conditional on being identified as a victim of trafficking according to definitions that vary from one country to another. For many countries, assistance is also conditional on the child's willingness and ability to cooperate with law enforcement authorities.

Initiatives for the protection of trafficked children start with proactive identification of affected children. This is something underscored in the recently developed UNICEF guidelines on child victims of trafficking. Efforts to coordinate information sharing are critical so children are identified and assisted quickly. Standardized methods of recording and retrieving information are needed. Clear and efficient referral mechanisms both national and international are also required.

Actions for prevention, protection and empowerment in the context of child trafficking must find their expression in the Millennium Development Goals. Of course, the

MDGs represent ‘the big picture’, and are long-term goals. In concrete, immediate terms there are so many things that need to be strengthened. I would like to commend a particular piece of ‘hard law’ - the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings. UNICEF participated in the development of this exemplary document, and it incorporates many important aspects of UNICEF guidelines on the protection of child victims of trafficking. Though we know that law alone is not enough to stop trafficking of girls, legislation and its consistent enforcement is an important part of the solution.

Governments also have a key role to play in ensuring that child protection ‘systems’ are robust and effective. Inter-sectoral cooperation is essential for early warning, response and referral measures. Professional capacities need to be strengthened. Services supporting families and children at risk, linking professionals from health, education, social welfare, law enforcement and justice systems is essential. Joint work at the international and regional levels is also of great importance. The strengthening of alliances, such as I mentioned in Europe, but also for example through the African Union, and other bodies provide good examples of regional co-operation. Micro credit

projects, such as those UNICEF has supported in Cameroon and Togo, can go along way to curbing the exploitation of girls, by redressing poverty.

Children must also be empowered in their own ‘self protection’. Life-skills based education, as but one illustration, provides children with knowledge and skills that help them recognize risks and dangers, negotiate threatening situations and make better informed decisions. One young interviewee in a UNICEF Innocenti study in Eastern Europe said *‘What I learned at the shelter (for rescued trafficked victims) all the girls ought to learn. Some are forced to do what they do, because they have no money, but still they should know how to protect themselves. For the rest, what can I say, the police here should take action and protect young girls from gangs’*.

As ever, UNICEF stands ready to support you in your efforts. We live in times of great challenge. With our combined learning and programme experience, we also live in times that make ‘a world fit for children’ a tangible reality. Thank you.